

Poetry Series

**Michael Shepherd**  
**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**  
2009

**Publisher:**  
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

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farmwork; 9-14 teacher; pro-am drama; scholarship to Oxford University to study Anglo-Saxon and English Literature; dropout; backstage Ballets de Paris; industrial journalism; midlife crisis around 25; invoice typist; bookshop assistant; art journalist; book reviewer; small book on Barbara Hepworth,1963; art critic for national newspapers and magazines 20 years; radio and television work; presented to Queen Mother for services to Canadian art; and to Rajeev Gandhi for services to Indian art; Post-graduate Thesis Tutor, Royal Academy of Art 20 years; Selector and Juror Mid-States Art Contest, Indiana; translator and research team for Letters of Marsilio Ficino; obituary writer for The Times; 24/7 carer 7 years; writer/editor of Ficino celebratory volume 1999(see Books page here) now translated into Dutch; political satirist for website, 'Call Me Tony'; proofreader for forthcoming 18-volume Encyclopaedia of Hindu Philosophy; various essays on 50 years of Zimbabwean sculpture; historical context essay for 'Gardens of Philosophy: Ficino on Plato' by Arthur Farndell, Shephard-Walwyn Publishers,2006, £18.95; Godstow Press in Oxford published 136 sonnets under the title 'Awakening to Myself' in December 2004 (£15 postfree in Britain, contact Godstow Press for overseas postage) . For international payment, see info@

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

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

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

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

a vehicle licensed  
to carry passengers

who sometimes have a greater imagination  
than the poet

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

which you must admit  
if with a slight embarrassment

as you read the words of praise  
is a divine joke

and from the divine viewpoint  
very practical since

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! L O N E L Y

l o n e l y

on the paper, on the screen  
all by itself

l o n e l y

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

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

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

next time  
you read it

l o n e l y

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! S I N

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd



# ! 11.11.: To The Fallen

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Grief Ago

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and behold,  
life.

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Novel Situation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I flunked it

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Platonic Reminiscence Of A Great Lady

Someone mentioned your name yesterday  
and I was silent

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Poem For Samuel

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Poet

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

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

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

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

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

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

failed examinations and yet  
was always wrapt up in a book

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

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

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

was secretly loved by some  
who never liked to say so

because what they loved somehow  
didn't have a name

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



Michael Shepherd

# ! A Spiral Scratched Into An Ancient Irish Gravestone

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Wish

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Zimbabwean Asks A Question

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! An Angry Poem About Peace

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

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

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

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

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

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

I wonder why that is.

Michael Shepherd



# ! An Offering Of Bliss To You

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! And Angels

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

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

Angels; and those we call  
spirits of another kind.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! Baby Love, Maybe Love

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! Call That \*\*\*\*ing Poetry?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

it would be \*\*\*\*ing useful  
poetically

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! Daughter

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

Michael Shepherd

# ! E N T H U S I A S M

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

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

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

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

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

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

know us as they, and they as us

and as they stir in us  
we know ourselves as gods

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

enthusiasm.  
the god within

Michael Shepherd

# ! E P I P H A N Y

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! From The Chinese Perhaps

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

only I am listening to the heron's cry

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

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

like this memory

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! Hello Ok Goodbye

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

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

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

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

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

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

or so we wish?

Michael Shepherd



# ! Homage To A Not Unknown Poet

Straightway - it's the tone.

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

As if to family: you're being filled in

on what happened yesterday or last week;

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

so no 'tone' about the tone;

you have a background of a lifetime's love

not to need to talk about;

you're friends even before you are family

if you know what I mean;

no family relationships hovering like ghosts

like your mother never quite stopped

sibling squabbling with your aunt;

it's harmless really - a silly evocation of childhood

and no-one else's concern;

so, good.

The no-tone tone: you're family,

so the voice expects you to be interested

enough to read

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

whom it would concern more.

So no elaborations,

no false sentiment,

but a little dry comment

like a dry white wine perhaps,

they'll have the background for

because you're family.

That even tone - dull? No, not dull -

a quirky, individual voice

that tells a story deadpan

that makes you howl with laughter;

no, never dull..

The details: those events,

those small happinesses, small sweetnesses

(it sounds better in French -

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

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

quietly,

love.

Michael Shepherd

# ' How Can God Allow This...? '

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! In Memoriam: Anna Akhmatova, Poet

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

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

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

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

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

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

Who notices its wisdom,  
obeying every law?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He is like that.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Lines From The Pub

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

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

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

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

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

the miracle of marriage.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Love And Friendship

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd



# ! Love And Poetry; Poetry And Love

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

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

Love said,  
I made you

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

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

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

for I made everywhere

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

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

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

Love said

I made you.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Love's Pledge - From Mechthild Of Magdeburg

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! Love's Young...

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

but no.

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

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

but no.

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

Their order came.

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

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

Minutes later

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd



## ! M O N K (2)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! Makeover Day

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! Metaphor

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! Mind Games

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! Mind My Heart

Oh it's so difficult  
to love the frugal

the heart  
locked in the mind.

Oh it's so difficult  
to praise the modest

the heart  
locked in the mind

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

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

but worth a try

Michael Shepherd

# ! Old Woman

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

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

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

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



in every poem  
that has ever been written

and I salute you

Michael Shepherd

# ! On Not Quite Knowing Kathleen Raine

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

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

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

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

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

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

it's pathetic isn't it

Michael Shepherd

# ! Planet Dearth

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\*

[with acknowledgements to the Blessed Eckhart Tolle]

Michael Shepherd

# ! Pooh Bear And Cr Discuss Truth

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! Pooh Bear And Hindu Philosophy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Silly old Pooh...'

Michael Shepherd



# ! Pooh Bear And The Alarming Rumour

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! Pooh Bear Learns About Enjambment

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

...and is there...

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

...and is there hunny...

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

... and is there hunny still...

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

...and is there hunny still for tea?

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! Saint Nicholas Of Cusa On The Face Of God

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

## ! Something For The Weekend? (2)

Friday mornings:

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

'Something for the weekend, sir? '

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

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

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

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

\* \*

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

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

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

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



our whole life, hanging onto every word...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Sports Day Lament. For Cj.

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

that's Sports Day over for this year.

But Mom and Dad will tell me (again) that

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

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

'they can't take that away from me

no....

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Beloved Stranger

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

'Are we related? '

And I knew not how to answer...

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Eye Of Beauty

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! The First Poem By The First Poet

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

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

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

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

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

the rest is pre-history

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Hallmark Of Poetry

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

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

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

then next morning the sun  
rises on our ultimate sunset poem

and later sets

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Lake, The Fountain

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd



# ! The Ultimate Teenage Love Poem

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

BUT \*\*\*\* IT HURTS

Michael Shepherd

## ! This Poem..

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

yes?

Michael Shepherd

# ! This Rose. After The Sufi.

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

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

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

this rose - so gloriously - is...

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! To A Great Lady

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! 'Tude Lyric

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd



# ! Two-Dimensional Dream

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! Ultimate Teenage Love Poem

\*\*\*\* YOU!

you've wrecked my supposed self-esteem

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

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

but not \*\*\*\*ing yet, OK?

Michael Shepherd

# ! Wanksta!

wanksta

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

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

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

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

wanksta

wanksta, wanksta,  
yo ain't no gangsta

a word that's all front  
and no back

but as a poet  
I enjoy it

this youngsta  
kidstar  
on the block  
of living language

Michael Shepherd

# ! What The \*\*\*\*? !

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Rich Interior Life With Style

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

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

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

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

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

Maybe I'll write a poem,

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

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

for in solitude, all is possible.





# !! DEMENTIA

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Is

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

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

Is.  
Becomes?  
Continues?  
Ends?

Cogitates:  
Is?

Is:  
cogitates.

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

Is.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Just There

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

in the listening  
after wisdom spoken;

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

between two thoughts;  
just before speech;

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

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

between the warm memory  
and the fond association;

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

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

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

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

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

between the listening  
and the hearing;

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Liberation

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

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

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

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

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

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

\*

Michael Shepherd

# !! NAMASTE

To greet you  
as you greet me

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

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

with all the heart may present offer; .

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

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

namaste

Michael Shepherd

## !! Parents (Like, Who Needs Them?)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Michael Shepherd

# !! SIMILE

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

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

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

My eyes shine like your heart.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Stature Of Truth

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Who? From 'Ellam Ondre'

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

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

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

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

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

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

\*

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

Michael Shepherd

# !! ... ZENTIPED E...

a centipede  
must needs proceed  
by synchromeshed advance

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

Michael Shepherd

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

'...means what it does'.

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

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

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

\*

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

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

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

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



Michael Shepherd

## !! 4 Am,11 November 1918

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

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

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

hardly a human difference  
worth fighting over.

[revisited]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Blank Page For The Self

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

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

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

well I'm not satisfied with that..

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

that I'm around..

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Brief Tribute To George Seferis, Poet

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Business Trip. Sonnet For Epiphany.

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Cartesian Life Co-Ordinated

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

for speaking in this holy, hallowed place?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



of tables on the sidewalks of the boulevards;

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# !! A Chinese Takeaway - For David With Thanks

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

gathers his thoughts.

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Comment On Contemporary Poetry

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

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

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

myself, as blissful  
as a stretching cat.

Michael Shepherd

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Compliment Reflected

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Conversation; Or, Dialectic

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Cummingsy Poemish In Praise Of A Poetry Seminar

many ways  
on Sattwadays  
in which to praise

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

be it even  
heartfelt curse  
on mind,  
to find

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! A Fine Morning On The Ivory Coast

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Great Scientist

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

## !! A Humble Poet, Or A Proud?

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

Michael Shepherd

# !! A Kyoto Garden In Spring

How wise  
the cherry trees  
to ignore the cameras!

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! A Little Donne, A Little Yeats

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Measured Beauty: The Japanese Mind

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Metaphysical Prayer

O You Who Are..

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Pencil Sketch Of Mozart

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

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

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

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

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

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

it's Mozart, there beside you



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

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

\*

(revised)

Michael Shepherd

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

Rumi, Haziz and Kabir  
paused from drinking wine together

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

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

that our poems in translation  
are nothing like the original

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

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

here where poetry and wine  
and fragrant roses and love

are One.'

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Poem's Prehistory

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! A Poetic Grammar In Three Persons

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

Michael Shepherd

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# !!ARK

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Sad Tale Of Consumerism

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

## !! A Shared Secret

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

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! A Short One For Mary

Ah, those were golden days...

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

Today's now golden; limitless.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Smile For Meena

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

inside the rebel  
is the revolutionary;

inside the revolutionary  
is the reformer.

Make us all proud.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Sonnet In Soul's Eyes

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

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

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

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

\*

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Stroke Of Insight

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

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

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

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

pauses.

\*

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Thanks For Visiting

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Thief In One's Own House

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! A Thought After Yeats

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Tribute To Philip Levine. For Hanque

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

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

\*

[From his conversations]

Michael Shepherd

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

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

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

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

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

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

The sound says,  
purity sounds like this. Listen.

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

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

Listen.

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! A Writer's Last Block

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Act One Scene One: A Wood Near Athens

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Afghanistan

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

fruiting like sour crabs



on the dead wood of faculty appointments;

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! All Things Bright And Evolutionful

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

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

such is the glory of evolution  
which the righteous kneel before

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

To the godly mind, all things are God.

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! All-American Found Poem

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

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

\*

[unashamedly stolen from a blog..]

Michael Shepherd

# !! An Aside On The Vedanta Paribhasha Of Dharmaraja Adhvarindra

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\*

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

on the internet..]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! An Earthly Miracle

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



# ! ! An Invited Visit To An Uninvited Play

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd



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

All the marvels of creation  
are gathered round laughing,

placing bets on  
which one you'll notice first.

Michael Shepherd

# !! An Unprintable Reflection On The Current Diet Of Spam

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! And For No Reason

and for no reason  
I start to sing;

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

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

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

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

\*

[leaning on Hafiz' poem of this title]

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! And We, Three Kings..

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Annunciation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Another For Hanque

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Antihaiiku

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

Michael Shepherd

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



yesterday or tomorrow, might again be chums..?

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! As Parents To Our Parents

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But they didn't teach that at my school.

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

XXX love you both XXX

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Aunt Jess

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

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

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

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

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

So yes, Aunt Jess:  
please rest in peace.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Autumnal Thought

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

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Barely Rhymed Sonnet: Love And Law

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

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

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

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

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Be Clay

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

You know all about clay –  
be clay.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\*

[leaning on the poems of Hafiz]

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Be, Here, Now

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

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

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

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

and at all of us, and at all of all of us  
as God; in goodwill; Godwill;

looking Lordward to the Lord in you and me.  
Who can value such a photoed shakti..

shower of grace in just one smile  
from one who gives all of himself,

to the camera as the God in us; 'developed', multiplied  
towards infinity, and rolled around a printing press,

flashed in binary upon computer screen.  
We as we look at it become all truth

and like the camera, cannot lie  
about ourself: we are perfection.

Before the camera was,  
I AM. click.

\*

[[www.](#) > [Great Sages](#) > [Saints of Recent Times](#) > [Neem Karoli Baba](#)]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Being The Monna Lisa. Exclusive.

If you think it would be fun to be famous,  
sit in for me for a day. And be cured.

Fame...builds you up  
then drains you.

'Celebrity' – the very word  
has built-in obsolescence..

then you have to appear in  
cheap TV shows to keep it up..

At least back in Milan  
we knew what mattered and what didn't.

So I sit here all day, have my eyes damaged  
by cell-phone flash;

but worst of all - the faces;  
gawping gormless.

At least when you're a film star  
you know what they want from you:

your fame, your handsomeness, your beauty,  
your wealth, your power over men or women;

with me, they don't know what they want:  
who wants a mysterious smile for themselves?

I'm just a package with the Eiffel Tower;  
the Taj Mahal of France.

Faces, idiot faces. All day long.  
I'm drained by evening, long for pasta.

If Len were still around, I'd ask  
to have him paint dark glasses on.

And BTW, I didn't look like this  
when he first painted me..

all the first mothers in Milan  
knew exactly what was on my mind

all those hours in the studio; yes,  
the rest was nice during pregnancy;

you think of how it's going to be;  
your hopes for him.. or her..; how it will turn out;

how stable the Italian state will be;  
who'll be ruling Milan then..

every pregnant girl knows  
exactly what my smile meant;

but after all these years of being stared at, it's gone  
sad; withdrawn; but half-forgiving –

it means – I've had enough...  
steal me, someone! Len, love –

for holy Botox' sake -  
give me a nip-and-tuck..

the price of fame was ever  
far too high; and you may quote me.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Being, Here, Now

First, I gave up asking, Why?  
for I was never told the truth;  
now I live in whylessness;

then I gave up asking, How?  
for they said, best find out for yourself;  
now I live in howlessness;

then I gave up asking, When?  
for they said, who can be sure?  
now I live in whenlessness;

then I gave up asking, Where?  
for they said, where is it not?  
now I live in wherelessness;

then I gave up asking, Who?  
for they said, first know yourself;  
now I live in wholeness;

and now I live without these questions,  
the answers run toward me;

now I am more here and now, and  
elsewhereness near gone;  
for elsewhere's here and now, I find;  
and Other's really One.

\*

[leaning on Rumi]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Belovéd Victims Of Themself

There are those who, for  
the deepest reasons even they forget,

offer themselves upon the altar  
of the three afflictions:

body, mind and heart: suffer  
everything that they can find;

and strangely, yet we love them;  
do what we can; fail; sigh;

and start afresh – as they,  
bruised, self-tortured, in that cause

which we can only hope one day  
that they themselves – if they survive –

may realise in a burst of glory:  
long-awaited, pent-up glory:

dissolve, surrender with a relief  
as great as friendship, as the human race,

into the love we always had for them  
which is as nothing, to the love

which they at last discover that they have  
for their immortal self. Yes, how much we love them

beyond all reason; seeing ourselves in them;  
loving love; as ever love calls us to do.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Bier Is Rest

Friends, in the name of God,  
dig my grave just behind the pub  
next to the sewer pipe;

so I might hear in the morning  
the casks delivered in the yard  
and in the evening  
the waters of contentment.

\*

(Paraphrased from an Arab poem of the 8th century)

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Birthright, Giftright

Look at it this way for a moment,  
if it please you:

those horoscopes (Dad  
called them 'horror-scopes')  
which we may read with mingled  
emotions, hopes, resentments;

seeing fatalism imposed on us,  
rather than a challenge –  
suppose them, not as limitations  
laid on this unwilling innocent...

but rather, that at very moment  
inside, outside, passing time,  
and in that very place,  
the balance of the cosmos – that, so exquisite,  
that we may never know the microscopic detail  
of its – Love's – magnitude;

that balance needed such as, exactly,  
and uniquely, you – yes, you –  
you, beyond any self-imposed  
limits such as guilt, regret,  
duties assumed, reproach or failure,  
roles adopted, status sought; or those  
demands of others to which to comply –

to play that role the cosmos needs of you –  
and as the ancients say, not Fate but glorious Necessity..  
to dance, to sing, to glide, to sail, to fly  
through life; life asking nothing more of you –  
oh bliss beyond belief –  
than that you let your light  
so shine before all men...and... just be...  
just be, and gloriously, yourself..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Business And Busyness

'I'm very busy at the moment; but  
I'll look forward to reading your message  
when I have more time...'

yeah yeah...

oh you 'busy' ones –  
I'm on to you...

tell me that it's not because  
you're 'busily' maintaining  
a self-important picture of yourself–  
(a picture based on fear?):

tell me that it's not because  
it's your deceitful way to 'prioritise'  
what you want to give yourself to,  
and that which you don't...

'Occupied'; 'constantly active' –  
that sounds a little better,  
a little more impersonal -  
there's hope for you...

But don't we all love –  
love them, even before we meet –  
those (you know them?)  
who seem, miraculously, to 'have time'  
for everyone – by appointment; or in emergency;

how do they manage it? Can it be,  
they know the measures of the human heart  
that make of time and space this lovely art?

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Candlelight

So many bees, who know so much  
that only bees can tell,  
gave their life's devotion  
to this single source of light;  
silent whisper for your attention  
to what it has to tell your sight,

before its substance burns, returns  
into the upper air...

gently burns on altar, or scented in the bathroom's grace;  
or here in front of you, gentle hypnotist  
for the wandering mind;  
to which it has so much to tell..

tells of humility; gently burning  
in a stable, before a birth;

tells of loving-kindness; gives itself,  
yet asks for nothing but to be itself;

tells of worship: worship, first, of what the bees are;  
and here in this honey-coloured form  
is their own worship;  
waxing silent in murmured devotion;

warming miraculously, into liquid wax;  
only love can be so liquid;  
only love can reach so far;

liquid, warmed into this present light:  
the candle's flame you know so well  
yet cannot shape or hold;

already, candle hints to you  
that there is that beyond all sense:

for round its light, air's gently warmed:  
drawing the flame itself into the invisible above

like the soul that's yearning for its homeland;

and beyond, within, that air you cannot see  
unless it moves some other thing,  
it lights the space – space which is not  
bathroom, altar; but all space;

candle tells you of all that;  
draws the mind with steady, silent truth  
to all creation in a single flame;

flame that asks for naught of you  
but your attention; which it will reward  
by telling you in stillness,  
what you worship in yourself;

the light of self, that shines before all men  
and glorifies its maker  
like a gentle flame that cannot be put out.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Carol For Advent

'As the sun that shines through glass,  
so Jesus in his mother was; '

as a babe in cot be laid,  
so was He in Mary made;

as ripe fruit in basket laden,  
so He ripened in a maiden;

as the scriptures long foretold,  
so He came at midnight cold;

as the world wakes to warm dawn,  
for the world, was Jesus born;

as God's message comes to earth,  
so He came in human birth;

as the truth has its own sound,  
so His Word is spread around;

as wise men are first to know,  
so tell all men, it is so:

as the smile upon God's face,  
so He brings us heaven's grace;

as our hearts are warmed by love,  
as our minds are stilled by peace,  
so we know the heavens above;  
so we know our own soul's bliss;

as the sun that lights our days,  
cradled in each heart He lays.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! C-Day Minus X

In the days (and who  
dare count them?) before  
The First Day of Creation (Official)

God spent some time (though  
of course, to Him, timeless..)  
allowing for eventualities:

and devised a plan whereby  
the Unbounded should be presented  
in Creation as The Absolute Maximum  
which He planned to be identical to  
The Absolute Minimum...

chuckling to Himself (Who else?) ,  
'That'll keep those atheist scientists  
occupied... though of course  
the philosophers and priests may have  
their work cut out... but then,  
that could be beneficial...'

All that now remained (I'm told)  
for God (who's infinitely generous,  
yet loves the economical)  
to package this in the most practical form...

not – as I'm sure you'll realise –  
an easy task, given His boundless nature...

so – allowing for the inevitable compromise –  
stuffed it all into a Revelation suitcase  
called the cosmos... sighed; anticipated problems;  
but saw that it was – given the circumstances –  
good;

waited for His image, Man, to call it  
The Cosmos; and watches with benevolent smile  
as men explain it all to one another..

[With acknowledgements to Saint Nicholas of Cusa,  
who spotted some of this..]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Celebrating Philip Larkin

He looks out at you from the photograph  
or rather, doesn't: eyes wide but blank,  
thick lenses would place your image  
in a plane you don't inhabit;

like a fish that in an aquarium  
suddenly swims direct toward you  
stopping at the glass to stare a moment:  
was there a meeting? What  
are you to the fish?

So, nothing. Then next day,  
he's propping his bike against the wall,  
bending down to take off his cycle clips;  
caught so close, you exchange  
English noises: the weather,  
a joke or was it, delivered deadpan:  
but the sound of him stays with you:  
melancholy and yet celebrating  
the confidence in being ordinary.

Then next day, the poetry:  
starts matter-of-fact, regretful,  
doesn't miss a thing around him,  
sharp eyes hiding behind pebble lenses: then,  
dives with us into the sea of greatness:  
calls us, reels us in, enslaves the heart  
with voice that speaks beyond all melancholy;  
haunted by the completeness of eternity.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Celebrating Spring

The tiny white violets from the field  
limp and sad in the cut-glass vase -  
good luck or bad luck?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Climate Change

I wrote a poem on the wind  
with raindrops in my hand  
and heard a forest sigh in pain  
in Amazon's deep land.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Clothes Moth

This tiny moth  
eating the jacket I no longer wear  
is my teacher in the Tao

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Cloud Of Unknowing

How strange it is – and yet, why should it be? –  
that all things seem to live most unaware  
of that which gives them life itself to live;  
so see the All as always everywhere?

yet from the jungle, or a city's heart,  
the sound of praise does not unceasing rise;  
and we may tread a springtime's flowered field  
and hear no coloured choir of grateful cries..

why has our Lord Creator set it thus,  
and hid His love from His created things?  
What might He ask from us, in this great game,  
that once again may hear the song He sings?

His are all powers; and yet, He chooses these  
above so many other powers to wield:  
that with one hand, His bounty He conceals;  
yet with the other, all His All reveals...

Children, laughing, play at hide-and-seek;  
act out the semblance of this mighty game  
which some may never play; for some, life's work;

what then, our part? To seek His playful aim?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Commentator Steams Through To Gold In Banality Final

If he really wants to win this title  
he's got to really work at it in this race:  
is he hungry enough?

this is what all those years of training  
have been all about:  
keep to your race plan,  
but remember, on the day,  
anything can happen..

they're off.. he had a good start;  
now he's pumping those legs,  
pushing down with the right leg,  
then the left leg hard into the ground,  
then the right leg again...

He'll know that if he doesn't get the gold medal  
it'll only be a silver..

he's hurting all over now,  
pumping the oxygen through his lungs,  
going all out;

he's coming through the field;  
has he gone too early?  
he's got questions to answer,  
this race is asking big questions of him;

he's ahead now. He'll be pleased with that;  
if he loses now, he won't be pleased with that;

tell the folks out there,  
how pleased are you to have won?

'fantastic - amazing - incredible - over the moon'

tell me, how sorry would you have been

if you hadn't won?

Not a record time, but  
he'll be pleased with that;  
tell me, what are your plans for twenty twelve?

now back to the studio for news of  
other events like failure and stuff.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Consumed By Love

Thanks to the hundreds of you who daily  
are so eager to enhance my life  
and that of my partner  
with pills and extensions  
giving night-long passion -

now, do you have a cure  
for arriving at the office in the morning  
exhausted?

It's a tale of two sacks -  
hit the sack, or get the sack...

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Coo Coo Coo

The lazy cuckoo  
dies after eight thousand calls -  
the gods are counting.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Daphne

She has... had... (which  
is the more appropriate word  
for those who live on so lively  
in one's human memory? ...)

that grace of spirit which you'll know  
from reading, seeing acted out,  
let's say, Jane Austen:  
at once as serious about life  
as any thinker; yet as light-hearted  
as she danced life's play, that  
to meet her, was to dance along  
with her pure spirit..

a golden girl; I remember her  
reading aloud Jane Austen's letters,  
Fanny Burney's diaries, as if  
she and we were living them together;  
Shakespeare surely met her like..

she pretended to the belief  
(eyes laughing, daring you to disagree..)  
that 'humour' derives from 'guna'...  
and, she lived it; her soul, deeply serious;  
her spirit, dancing to a merry tune;  
acting out the play of life; speaking to the heart...

such are the lives that touch our own,  
bless them, light them, lighten them;  
may I share this memory of her? \*

MS

\*[guna: in Hinduism, the three 'qualities' of  
all true goodness; activity; and rest;  
continually swaying and swinging  
the play of Creation with their imbalance  
from first to last]

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Darshana

Who looks to whom?  
And who looked first?

Everything that has direction  
has its contraflow.

The ikon whose golden frame you gently touch  
painted its painter so that it might look within you.

That white-bearded man whose photo  
you just glanced at, was photographed  
by the Ganges' snowy swirling waters  
to be there to bless your eyes, to smile your mind.

For you who arrived, hot, dusty, saddle-sore,  
the saint has waited patiently to see you become him.

For you, the whole world awaits  
with answers to your questions yet to ask.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Delphi, C.430 Bce

She saw them coming, that rainy day;  
popped her head out of the cave,  
saw them trudging sandalled up the hillside;

being an oracle, she knew all the answers;  
but had to guess the questions, or wait  
to see what stupidity or conceit  
framed their speech;

upmarket bunch, this lot; not the usual  
money market slickers whom  
it was a pleasure to turn away..

Chaerophon addressed her:  
was there any man who was wiser  
than Socrates? She sighed inwardly;  
always their leading questions  
gave them away..

tell them what they want to hear..  
she did the smoke thing, but  
the rain spoiled the trick;

a theatrical pause always gives  
better value, a certain weight..  
no, she said at length, no man  
is wiser than Socrates..

swiftly satisfied, they turned away;  
did not hear her add,  
'but his wife is wiser...'

typical men... but she chuckled to herself  
ironically, remembering what  
her father said when she told him  
she wanted to be an oracle when she grew up:

'Men think they know... but women  
think they know better...' Dad

spoke truer than he knew -  
in her case.

She gathered her robe  
around her; checked the time;  
caves are OK, have a certain drama;  
but temples, she thought, are friendlier..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Dem Postal Non-Delivery Blue-Hoos..

Parcel lost in post!  
fortunate to be alive  
and live without it..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Dementia Remembered

Before dementia, with its cruel mercy

freed her from those golden bonds

of obligations and relationships

(the chilling question, and so carefully expressed

during the morning wash and powdering,

`are we... related...?')

she'd carefully destroyed

all the photos of her family;

while leaving all her husband's...

what did that mean, to that so loving daughter...?

What shames can those who love, so cherish

as some further goad?

But she forgot, now that she slept downstairs

the photo of the grandfather whom I never met

(he died too early, of dread 'cotton lung'):

flat, at the bottom of her dressing-table drawer..

he in full Freemason's aproned proud regalia

of Hope Lodge nearby Hope Street; nearby hope...

So now, he, on the wardrobe top

and I flat on the bed

gaze at each other in unshaped relationship

with our two views of her; so totally at odds;

except, except, for love;

she, immortal like that holy Maid herself,

girl-mother in our shared sweet thoughts;

out of mind but never out of mind.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Demonstration Haiku For Mike Who Asked

Dusk on autumn brown -  
where does this sadness come from?  
Freed leaves, dancing home..

\*

[some of the (too many) self-appointed authorities believe that a haiku should contain a 'surprise' element, or as the Germans say, 'the Aha! experience', plus the usual 5-7-5 syllables and season and time of day identified..]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Diamond

OK, be cynical – say,  
why, it's only a piece of dead wood  
that found itself trapped when  
the earth's crust heaved a sigh...

be cynical - say,  
it didn't ask for you to  
dig it up - buried there  
recovering from the shock...

be cynical - say,  
anyway, it looked like a pebble then  
until a man so cleverly polished it..

be cynical – say,  
it's nothing of itself – all it does  
is to reflect the light that's always all around..

be cynical – say,  
we'd only value it as a piece of glass,  
if smart guys didn't fix it for them to seem rare,  
and silly girls say, look, it proves he loves me...

now just look at this diamond..  
what use is your mind  
when your eye and your heart  
get on so well without it?

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Dick Fozard's Wartime Navy Knife

I'm not one for mementoes – Grandma  
in sepia, pie-crust necked and pleated blouse,  
expressionless amidst her dressed-up, mixed-up brood; chic aunt  
with that hundred-watt smile which clicked  
off, the instant the shutter clicked...but now

I'm holding this kitchen knife.  
It's got a triangular blade to allow  
for that quick chop-chop of the trained cook  
or kitchen-hand; black, dulled ebonite handle;  
and although it's made in Sheffield,  
by ,1943, it's not stainless steel  
but stained iron; sharp, but not too dangerous  
when used in the cook's galley of a hungry ship of the unslept  
that's simultaneously zigzagging to avoid torpedoes  
and kamikaze dive-bombers, while buffeting through  
the South China Seas. The ' broad arrow'  
stamped on it – as once used to pattern convicts' clothes –  
here means, that it was wartime issue.

Dick trained as artist and lithographer's apprentice  
just in time not to hone his talents when called up  
to fight the Japs in that nasty, ruthless end-campaign  
when Europe had declared peace, but not Japan.  
He wouldn't talk of it; and when a few years back  
someone saw and remembered him from then, he  
shook hands warmly, said little, left it to the other jacktar  
to tell the story when he'd gone. And went back to find himself again,  
walking the Yorkshire hills and dales with rucksack, pipe, a crust,  
an onion, cheese, cut I guess with this same knife, and  
missing nothing with his artist's vision;  
beyond solitude; content; complete.

He never really used his part-developed skills again  
except to teach, with few words but with superb craftsman's care,  
leaving a trail of devoted pupils: 'He taught me all I know'.

Only those, perhaps, who know war,  
can know peace in this way, asking nothing; to know him

(but careful not to question) was to know a little of that peace  
deep within the sea of himself, the sea  
which holds so many souls.

When he moved on, as he often did,  
he left his knife. I use it every day,  
remembering this man who was just one  
who knew, lived, war, quietly guarding his memories  
of pain with love, of love with pain.

I sharpen it, like a memory  
I do not have. Like one who prays  
devoutly, to that unknown god  
of war; who may, in ways we cannot understand,  
guard such souls.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Donald Rumsfeld Meets William Wordsworth

There's what we remember we remember  
and there's what we forget;  
then there's what we remember  
that we've forgotten;  
and there's what we've forgotten  
that we used to remember;  
and there's what we've forgotten  
that we've forgotten.

There's a poem there somewhere  
now I've got that far.

Dammit, I'll go for a walk  
now the daffodils are out.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Dreaming Reality

In a dream that shone last night  
washed with a clear sweet tenderness  
I walked a paradise I knew  
and I remembered happiness:

in a presence without end  
and in a space where all stays free  
I walked complete as my true self  
and happiness remembered me.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Duet For Heaven And Earth

Cicada at dusk -  
do you know how sweetly sing  
the stars, with your voice?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! East Meets West Where Wisdom Rests

Reason tells us that the One Above  
veils His Creation but from tender love;

His magic all around plays hide-and-seek;  
so shall we praise? or let our silence speak?

our heart is His; the One in Many, He:  
be still, and know all bliss; all constancy.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Easter Saturday

Today is the day after;  
after blackness, what?

yesterday, black present filled the mind;  
today, not even light on blackness..

a day not on the calendar;  
an empty diary entry;

faith smaller than a mustard seed;  
hope an untilled field.

This is what a present with  
no future feels like;

the mercy only  
that there is a present;

among the closest, the rumour  
of a promise so ethereal

it has no shape or form  
to build into new faith, no hope;

not even waiting, when  
there may be nothing for to wait;

a day out of time; wrap around you  
the thin silk of love;

be still; surrender everything  
and find a peace beyond all promises;

today, there is no tomorrow;  
if you have hope, then hope;

if you have prayer, then pray and pray;  
perhaps tomorrow's born today.





**! ! Eh? !**

Going deaf  
is such a curse.  
Yet my listening's better -  
'cos my hearing is worse.

Will it improve  
my writing verse  
if my listening's better  
though my hearing is worse?

But, on the bright side - I'm  
truth's creditor, not debtor:  
my hearing's worse  
but my listening is better...

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Emily Dickinson Takes A Poetry Course

Dear Ms Dickinson: I've just received  
your amusing little trifle,  
'Faith is a fine invention'  
as your first week's homework on this course..

and hope that as your designated docent  
(you may of course request a change..)  
we may establish a relationship  
that's full of 'mellow fruitfulness' – as  
John Keats (1795-1821) would put it..

First, may I say that it's more interesting  
for the reader, not to use the first line  
of your poem –especially one so short –  
as the title...something more intriguing perhaps?  
such as – in this case, 'Natural Science'?

I have a feeling that you have within you  
much more to say on this theme  
(already well covered by the poets, did you know?)  
than this whimsical – if pertinent – short verse...

Thus it's best for the poet as beginner  
not to attempt the succinct 'aperçu'  
(I hope you understand a little French?)  
of such as our more resonant senior 'gentlemen'.....

I do question the use of 'invention'  
in the first line; however,  
I think I detect a hint of emulating  
William Blake's poetic stance here?

Now, in these days of sexual equality  
it would be best, I think,  
not to use 'Gentlemen'... are there not  
lady biologists and preachers? ...  
and we don't now use those capital letters  
so beloved of our German poets...

Your setting-off of science against religion is alas, so easily overdone; especially in the context of so short a verse.. and 'Microscopes are prudent' is, I have to say, not the most evocative of phrases; even though poetic compaction is a worthy aim...

Nor is it clear what 'Emergency' it is, to which you might refer – microscopes are, I feel, an image of less urgent study?

However, Miss Dickinson, I suspect that you have a confident personal voice which we shall hope to bring out?

I shall not discuss the other verse which you include: its punctuation of unseemly dashes reads so breathless that one may hardly bestow the designation 'poesy' upon it..

However I look forward to your next week's homework, Miss Dickinson – may I suggest something a little longer for your next poetic venture? There are many themes out there, even for the single lady? Yrs, E. Doolittle BA (Hons)

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Emily Dickinson Transcends

this - yet, seeing this -  
the knowing, 'not this' - yet -  
this knowing seeing -  
That!

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! English Teacher

bumped into my grandson's English teacher yesterday  
at the football, and in between shouting like teenagers  
I moaned about the state of A's Eng. Lit. not to mention Eng. Lang. -  
you know, you've heard it all before... in my day.....never regretted....  
he agreed, but said go easy on the lad he's only thirteen  
they all want to be fifteen and grown up at that age,  
they can't be seen by their peer-group to be 'for' anything too much  
so they ridicule everything, it's either pretentious crap if it's modern  
or stupid ancient crap if it's more than a generation ago...  
they even call Shakespeare a sad loser until  
someone says he wrote the screenplay for that film  
though they're fascinated by the idea that Marlowe  
was a spy as well as a crap writer not that they've read him anyway

but you know what he said  
put them up on stage in the annual Shakespeare and make them  
speak his lines, and they'll never forget it,  
they'll not say anything about it to me except in private but  
they'll remember it to their dying day it's things like that  
he said that keep me in this bloody job.

(revisited)

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Enthusiasm's Promise

You've heard it said;  
it sounds just great –  
as well it might..

so now there's just the matter  
of our really-truly believing it; of  
living up to it..

The divine world and  
all its beings rest, reside, it's said,  
in each individual, as in the universe;

not remote – unless they remain  
locked beyond forbidding heavy door of ego;

not sternly aloof – but ready  
to offer in abundance, lawfully  
to the lawful, whatever might be necessary;  
it's said they cannot lawfully resist;  
are eager; smiling, running, to our voice...

what might they be thinking,  
murmuring amongst themselves,  
as they await the sound of rusty key  
in rusty lock... to burst out and do  
what the gods shall do; bring,  
along with their vast divine forces,  
that bonus, which is unimaginable  
until it manifests; a glory  
as of rising and of setting suns  
and all that lies beyond..

It's said, that first  
they test our courage  
in daring to pursue their path;  
test our conviction that  
they're there to call upon;  
test our intelligence  
in how we go about it;

then – as Goethe told us  
centuries ago: the gods, as Providence,  
pour upon us means, events,  
assistance past all dreams of human thought:

this, the Good within has vowed to us.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Everyone A Prince Growing Toward A King

To live is to be slowly born' –  
what a simple and refreshing view  
familiar to a born devout Hindu;  
yet spoken by Saint-Exupery,  
who saw his little prince become so great..

how wonderful are common words  
shaking the common out of us;  
growing nobly into our true self; so that  
arguments about rebirth take second place..  
where the future is all full of golden promise  
as we become acquainted with ourself;  
what matter, then, if it be iron age or gold?

Walk around now, in this cornfield of the soul:  
see as a meadow sees: for all around  
are seeds now human growings, watered into life with love,  
growing into themselves, all golden-ripe;  
Traherne's immortal golden wheat: remembered as a child  
into the memory of a man; to immortality;  
the heaven of ourselves, becoming clear within;

and maybe then, some few among that meadow crowd  
may catch your eye; and in that youthful light  
may grow a little in their own true sight.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Execution Before Judgment

The fly wringing its hands on the plate -  
is it anticipation, or cleanliness, or shame?  
Too late..

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Film Clip

She sat alone in the bus shelter  
playing with a rubber band  
between the fingers of each hand

and singing quietly to herself  
everything I do  
I do because of you

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! For Those In Mind

Death

is too late for grief.

If we had celebrated their living

knowing that grief would surely come

then grief would have a place;

death

is too late for grief.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! For Vasant Kothari

Every funeral, cremation, and its rites  
may have its grief; yet too,  
its celebration of a life well lived;  
and call out, too, self-dedication's vow:

as the crowd of living witness  
quietly leave and share their murmured words,  
this vow ever calls to me: to celebrate the living:  
celebrate them just as if it were  
their – our - last day on earth:

celebrate and praise unstintingly;  
encourage and enthuse and aid;  
form their virtues in the mind and  
speak them loud – as if  
these whom we praise, were unaware  
of their own virtues..

celebrate the living, and their life  
shall celebrate the praisers in its life..

Vasant, your sweet, contained humility  
hid from strangers, showed your friends,  
what you were; and, who we are;

I hope your spirit (which, I'd like to think,  
inspired me to the sounds beyond these words)  
approves, accepts – in the eternal present tense –  
these thoughts of you.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! For... They'LI Know Who They Are

If only love were finally, enough –  
then you'd have no more fears:  
look here, and listen: we have love  
enough for you; and more; and more;

but how to prove that love's indeed enough  
beyond all doubts? Bring on the opposites;  
try and test in fire and whirlwind, ice and storm,  
that love alone remains;

for only when the chips are down  
will love reveal, just what love really is:  
containing every opposite that seems to rule the world:  
fierce tenderness; and ruthless mercy; hate that only love creates;  
love like we've never thought it; love, unendingly, enough.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Forgiveness

Running over the morning checklist -  
magnanimity; forgiveness; simplicity of life;  
compassion; contentment; truthfulness...

still, that reluctance, to forgive 'them'...  
however, questions put from heart to self  
call out self-answer:

since we cling to that 'otherness'  
of others, we prohibit the oneness of ourself..

ego lies so close, so close to self,  
as if it hides in self's own shadow;

it is ego that will never quite forgive itself!  
since ego clings with desperation  
to the life it steals from life; so -

for give: for otherness,  
give unity.. oh why  
is something just so simple,  
just so difficult?

Yet with the message,  
warm its smile..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Friends In Disguise - To Rilke

Not the sad face of sadness;  
not its weariness, nor its lack of hope;  
but why sadness visits, and what it intends:  
what the secret blessings that it brings...

not the quick whims of hope or faith,  
that last so briefly, then are gone:  
but where they truly come from;  
where they rest eternal in the heart:  
explain themselves in their own worldly ways;

not even that love that comes and shines and passes;  
no, none of these – and all of these:  
masked, they come and knock upon the door;  
friends, that come to tease, to test, to heal..  
open the door to them;  
now, before they knock..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Gertrude Stein Is Interviewed On American Poetry

and there was the knocking on the door  
that we were expecting  
and it was the man  
that we were expecting  
with the questions we were expecting  
to which answers were expected  
by those who expect answers  
as if life were like that  
which for writers it is not

yes, tea was drunk  
and after tea the tape recorder set up  
so that what I said  
I would continue to say  
somewhere else  
even when I changed my mind  
here and nowhere else

and he said Ms Stein  
what do you think of American poetry  
and we said well it's American  
and it's poetry  
that's as it should be  
and really that's all there is to say  
and the man looked disappointed  
so we asked him did he read poetry  
and he said poetry no I dont read poetry  
but my editor does  
so I said it's really about Americans  
living their lives  
that's what American poetry is really about  
because Americans move around  
and so their words move around and  
words in English have lost their intensity  
but American words are always on the move  
and they are more intense  
yes, Americans living among Americans  
and talking to their neighbours  
if it's not about that



it's not really American poetry at all is it  
if it's not about that  
then why bother writing poetry

and the man was asking about a rose  
being a rose being a rose and we said  
for a hundred years the rose  
has not been red in poetry  
but now for the first time in a hundred years  
the rose is red again

and the man looked at his watch  
and said thank you Ms Stein  
and was switching off his tape recorder

and a month later that  
was what we said  
in a magazine much read  
by Americans who mostly  
are not poets no very few but we said it  
we know that this is so  
because we read it there  
and we think that really  
that was all there was to say  
because that was all we think  
is really important  
about American Poetry  
that the words move like Americans move  
and that is exciting for a writer  
and that is the important thing about  
American Poetry

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Gertrude Stein Met Marilyn Monroe In Tiffany's

a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose  
and a dozen roses ring around a posy -  
but a rose is not as rosy as a ring -  
for diamonds are a man's best bet;

a rose is just a rose but the future could be rosy -  
a diamond is a girl's best bait.  
a rose is a rose but eventually goes off;  
even love can have a nasty end;

but a man who's had his day can always be disposed of...  
while diamonds are a lifetime friend...

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Give Her One This Christmas

How could I not know  
'what she wants for Christmas' –  
when hundreds of emails  
spam it to me every Advent day,  
and right through unsilent night  
in several languages...

a manliness increased in every measure;  
a bulk purchase of blue pills for  
the bedside drawer; and – since it can be  
gift-wrapped more easily than me myself –  
an imitation designer watch: to register  
how late for work we're going to be  
day after day; night after night;

and perhaps, for those still single friends,  
(as these gifts might look inappropriate...)  
a Russian bride? (see airbrushed photo attached..)

And what makes you think  
they won't target children next with these...?  
'Is your boy fit to become  
an alpha male in your community...?  
buy him our Junior SuperMale Set; complete  
with full instructions on DVD...'

Happy Giftmas, one and all...

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Godliness

Riffling through the dictionary  
of the mind - or, as the Anglo-Saxons  
named it, 'word-hoard' -  
for a word that exactly matches  
what needs to be said,

a word may call out from the page  
like that kitten or that puppy  
in the pet-shop, which devastatingly  
looks you straight in the eye and mutely says  
'Master, treasure me...'

so, the other day, 'godly' called to me: as  
abbreviated in former times from 'godlike';

not a word to suit, say, those fine-minded Hindu pundits  
who would want to classify its degrees  
of nearness or of distance from the state  
of god or gods..

rather, a gentle, misty, English-weather, modest-shining word  
which – borrowing a trick from those same  
Hindu grammarians – is neither limited, nor unlimited;  
or alternatively: is both limited, and unlimited;  
allows for small-g god, or big-G God;  
allows for frequent changes in the weather;  
and thus, will halt at all the stations on the line...

so, stopped in the street by  
some presumptuous well-intentioned stranger  
with that piercing eye that stoppeth one of three,  
enquiring 'Have you been saved by Jesus yet? '  
we may reply as if we were Dr Johnson  
of quirky diction and of his own Dictionary fame,

replying, 'Sir, my mind has godly inclinations...'

Yes, I'm comfortable with 'godly': like  
that kitten or that puppy, asking

no more of you than what  
shared nature with a smile  
feeds and loves..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! God's Two-Ness

I prayed to understand  
God's two-ness:  
God within me said,

'I am in you; and you in Me;  
yet when I hear  
the glorious sounds of singing praise,  
the open heart of gratitude,  
the words of wonder and of love,  
and see the shining eyes,

I am the world for you;  
and cast My Two-ness  
like the sweet Spring rain.'

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Goodbye Routemaster

The iconic (damn, I swore I'd never use that word..)  
red London bus  
was designed by the lively minded  
for the active lively – those who  
take a few chances with life,  
look for a little excitement,  
test their limits, enjoy  
– the French have a phrase for it –  
the little happinesses, sweetnesses, or  
good fortunes, it doesn't  
translate quite so well –  
let's say, exhilarating moments?

viz.:

the back platform, a step  
nearer the ground, is open; rubber-floored;  
a central vertical bar,  
wound with a grip-fast plastic,  
midway on the edge of the platform; then  
on the vertical edge of the rear bus-back,  
a substantial holding bar  
which never lets you down;  
another horizontal bar  
the other side  
to steady you either getting on or off

so

you've just missed the bus as  
it begins to pull away?  
Don't worry – you're young to middling,  
the driver's still to change from low gear as  
he pulls away from the kerb and queue;  
you check the platform's clear;  
a short run;  
grab the upright bar with the right hand,  
right foot on platform, then

left hand on vertical bar –and there -  
a small but significant personal achievement,  
a confirmation that life's for the winning;  
the breathing deeper, healthier;  
quicker than the gym or marathon

and correspondingly,

you're on the bus, you'd like to get off soon  
but it's quite a few yards, or chains, or furlong  
to the next bus stop - but eureka! – the bus slows  
towards a red traffic light or a traffic jam:  
stand on the open back of the platform (yes,  
the designer thought of that too) , or holding on the central bar  
(this one requires a quick calculation of which  
you choose according to bus speed and agility)  
and dropp off with some grace,  
hit the ground running...  
another little good fortune, exhilaration  
to liven up your day; even your fellow passengers  
watching, feel a shared lift of spirits  
at this touch of athleticism

though

this bus, though it can cope  
with a young mother with a quickly  
folded push-chair, infant now in left arm,  
wasn't designed for low-income single mothers  
with twins who like to shop at Harrods,  
or for self-drive wheelchairs...  
so in these more socially inclusive times  
where well-stuffed infant-carriers no longer fold to nothing...  
and with labour-intensive costs in mind,  
there's no benevolent conductor watching  
all these minor athletic feats –  
now, fast-shut doors, make the seated driver supervise all this,  
no conductor standing, climbing stairs,  
taking your ticket while the driver – drives; alas,  
it's goodbye Routemaster...

but



maybe you'll understand why, as  
symbol of our more agile years,  
we miss it

(for PoHo, who asked)  
+ PS: you can buy one cheap!

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Haiku For A Globally Warmed Early Spring

Pale yellow primroses  
hiding in the undergrowth  
only seen by a few

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Haiku For Myku

This first plum-blossom in the snow  
delights the bumble-bee  
which has no words for 'Spring' or 'happy'.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Haiku For The Over-Zealous - Possibly Himself

Don't seek to find yourself;  
just be yourself;  
here, there are no exams to pass..

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Haiku-Ukiah

where tears meet laughter  
how elusive is the source  
whence a smile melts tears

whence a smile melts tears  
how elusive is the source  
where tears meet laughter

\*

[haiku-ukiah is a 'mirror-poem' which offers two ways of attaching thought to image - a difficult verse-form to work with, but 'Japanese' in mood]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Haiku-Ukiah For Sunday Morning

in the world of peace  
with the gift: no need to think  
gratitude flows deep

gratitude flows deep  
with the gift: no need to think  
in the world of peace

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Haiku-Ukiah: Night Rain In Kyoto

on the window screen

night whispers secret witness -

the earth loves the rain;

the earth loves the rain;

night whispers secret witness -

on the window screen

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Haiku-Ukiah: On A Beach In Japan

on salt pebble shore  
and many coloured sea stones  
one pair of eyes here

one pair of eyes here  
and many coloured sea stones  
on salt pebble shore

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Hardware Shop

There's nothing so becomes a man  
as a local hardware shop - it expands  
the horizons of his home improvement, and  
brings harmony to his home life as  
those little jobs get done;  
and although these days a car-trip  
would take you to an out-of-town  
with wider variety and lower price,  
there is greater delight in detailed chat  
with that little man around the corner  
who's been there since - oh, you knew his father.  
He's got it; or will get it; you chat; come out feeling good;  
there's order in the world. Things get done.

But they're a dying breed. We had two - didn't know  
just how lucky we were until Mr and Mrs Tidy  
(how many Tidy generations of hardware had there been?)  
with their two shops run together - he in one, she in the other - and  
he identified just what it was you wanted; she  
knew just where they kept it - suddenly they went, still sprightly young, to  
a well-deserved retirement, after a life of virtue.  
They exuded some sort of spiritual strength  
between them; as if your purchase had  
a hint of allegory in some non-conformist book of life.

Which left the other hardware shop. I hoped  
that their departure would encourage his own trade  
but it was not to be. The stage set of his shop is perfect -  
behind the obligatory front-of-shop basics, put out  
each day - camping gas, the bags of dried manure,  
plastic bins of every size -  
the shop is filled in every nook and cranny, leading to  
a further vista of boxed shelves, a hint of aisle on aisle  
to joy the DIY-er's heart - and  
that faintly oily, metallic, woody, dusty, smell - the precious essence  
of a hundred years in that same shop, of visits by  
a century of proud home owners, treasuring their addiction..

but this is a man upon whom no tidy destiny, no spiritual path  
has fallen. Enter his crammed shop with hope, of the friendly chat  
that from the furthest depths, produces just the size  
of split boggle ring of finest brass that you were looking for,  
and what do you get? Twenty minutes of sad-smiled, patient  
explanation of why he hasn't got it; couldn't get it,  
because they'd want an order of two dozen. It's only done  
in industrial sizes anyway. And the supplier's changed hands  
and you'll need to change the whole system to metric.

You should have known - for it was always so:  
for this he exists, as if living out a punishment for past sins  
against the gods of hardware. Or should you (itching to get away)  
join in the sad elegaics for a world in ebb, the small shopkeeper  
who existed only to serve his fellow villagers? To talk to him  
makes you feel that somehow, somewhere, in the back room  
of shared humanity, it just might be - your fault...

At last you get away, empty-handed; and wonder at  
this world of little shops and shopkeepers:  
the joyous absurdity, the hidden tragedy  
of lives you daily knock against, yet never really know.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Harvest Festival

When on a glorious day – one such as this –  
you're overcome with awe and wonder, praise,  
and part-formed gratitude... which seeks some one  
to thank for this, by laying at their feet  
all that the world has brought us unannounced  
as seedcorn turned to golden harvest wheat –

then who would hesitate, to draw in light  
a greater One as whom to kneel before,  
to make of our humility, a 'One'  
as if we were some grateful 'other'; we,  
less worthy, painting pure duality..

..don't hesitate: praise is beyond a 'two';  
what now we praise, becomes our very self;  
in praise, name radiates as kingdom, come;  
and kingdom hallows all, as all its own;  
so, glory in that sound of praise so fine;  
for when you shine with praise – then all things shine.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Has Music Gone From Poetry?

Has music gone from poetry?  
Words and music, still agree?  
Dance and rhythm, song and laughter,  
Do they echo, now, hereafter..?

Has singing gone from poetry?  
Words that sing a listened tune?  
Lullaby and melody,  
Old rhymes that sleepy mothers croon?

Has rhythm gone from poetry?  
Quick as a dance-step, slow as a glide?  
Laughing now; now weeping; now shouting with glee –  
Dancing round you, singing, can't catch me...

Has magic gone from poetry?  
Spells that summon fairy Fates?  
Incantations solemn spoken,  
Heroes, giants, to danger woken?

Have light hearts gone from poetry?  
Hearts that know the tears of life,  
hearts that know the grief of strife,  
yet sing and dance and laugh with glee?  
Who loves, who loves not poetry?

\*

(revisited)

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! He Flew With Angels

At school, the look-up homework  
one day was `mercy'...

and that proved itself  
to be indeed itself

what the dictionary said  
haunted; seemed inadequate;  
haunted again

he smelled his life, as one  
smells Spring in the air  
of a freezing January day

every one of his thoughts  
began and finished  
with the word unsounded

then his actions too grew  
out of it, returned to it

his friends, his wife, his family:  
some heard it, some did not

years passed; in the darkness  
of the quiet evening street,  
the great and famous called on him

what he had to say was  
too great for the public,  
too young yet for the public

but the word, nourished,  
slipped into the courtroom,  
whispered in the palaces,

stood behind the priests  
who did not say it yet  
heard it murmuring in their ear

while for him, the word grew and grew,  
flew with him higher ever higher

so they talked of how to martyr him  
because the word was too big for them

he died before they decided on his fate  
and was that too what it meant

leaving the word in the air like  
a limitless embrace, like  
the warm wish of a departing guest  
said over the shoulder with a smile,  
a wave, a memory

and a sowing and a growing,  
a reaping, a vastness, a light,  
a boundless love

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Heartsong, Heart's Dance

In silence, every song that's sung  
is as a wheatgrain in the hand;  
known in wonder, love and awe;  
its essence more than human sound;

in stillness, every joyful dance  
is summed as if in perfect prayer;  
though every muscle yearns to praise,  
unmoving; more than mind in air;

silence sings and stillness dances  
in the freedom of the heart;  
self, content to be the watcher;  
loving each and every part.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Heaven As Spectrum

Bold March sunlight bounces  
off the yellow-grey-brown London claybricks  
of the house across the gardens;

the next-door neighbour's cut the dead ivy  
and the reflected light hits the artificial flowers  
and their strong delicate colours, glowing  
in their various cobalt vases; blooming joyful  
where living flowers find that corner sad;

the flowers as if washed today with brighter water-colours;  
as if grace itself, wishing to send a message  
to this room today, had chosen the spectrum  
of the flowers' purples, yellows, blues and reds  
as its medium and message; and its smile;

today, the spectrum is for me  
metaphor enough – its rainbow limits  
playing now-you-see-me... with the retina,  
hinting at the formless always beckoning  
there, beyond the form..

metaphor enough  
for heaven's mind itself; and heaven's smile.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Heidegger Meets Shankara

Beyond all being  
is that Being –  
that, whose Being  
is our being.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Heidegger Questions A Japanese On Language

Like the delighted stillness of the silence  
which is an emptiness that is full,

from which come the moments  
graced by the specific; as

the scent of cherry blossom or  
the petals of the plum;

when what endures, is the message  
and needs us as messengers.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Heirs Of The Heart

Those you love. Those  
you have loved. Those  
who love you.

They live. You know  
they live, somehow, somewhere.  
Listen. Hear them. Aren't they calling?

What are they calling?  
What are they wearing, as they call?  
Are they wearing grief, loss;  
your borrowed clothes?

Are they trapped in your memory?  
Be them. Let them shine in you,  
from out of you. They call to live  
where they should live:  
not locked in memory, but  
shining out from you.  
Be them. Be their life.

How you loved them. How they  
loved you. Be that love,  
Live that love. Let them  
shine, so bright that  
people recognise them in you;  
wonder how to tell you without hurt...

Their purity. What they really were.  
What they truly lived for.  
Let it shine. Give them  
the life they sought.

Listen to them.  
How happy they are,  
living in you whom they so love..  
see how they shine..



# ! ! His Smile

He smiled ... it was as if I'd never seen  
a smile before; as if, that moment, God  
invented smiles; as if there'd never been  
a reason for a gift that was so good...

He smiled... as if from every day and year  
of his own life, with each its gratitude  
to give assurance, that we're living here  
to fill our living with that godly good...

Was this how angels smile? Was this as God –  
who has no need to smile – and thus, whose smile  
may be unbounded, when he sees mankind  
now in His image, shining as He shines?

Was this the peace on earth of God's first dawn?  
Mandela smiled.. and mankind was reborn.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Homoeoteuton - For Danny

Greek and Roman poets prosaic

thought consonance was comic - almost, crime;

only the manic Germanic

tribes were not averse to rhyme..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Hope And Light, And Love

You – whose inner strength, I always think  
to be the greater than my fluctuating own –  
ask, only half humorously, as  
business, family support, collapses all around,  
for a poem of hope and light and love...

and I fall still and silent; for to me  
only stillness, silence, are my answer  
to those mighty questions of what within ourselves  
we have, and have not; lose and find again...

and in the stillness of the silence, because  
I am of 'certain' yet uncertain age...  
hear the family voice still sounding in the ear of memory

of that sweet Stoicism of the Victorian working class:  
...'working' indeed; even to the work-house...  
and 'class'; yet class with pride; hope (wasn't the Baptist chapel  
built along with Hope Street?): light; and love...

that Stoicism (would they know the word?)  
that folds its hands onto its tidy lap, when  
all around collapses, and says quietly,  
"It's trying.. as the good Lord knows,  
for he's tried me oftentimes enough..."

and Sunday starts and ends the week,  
the 'day of rest' when God and Man  
work hardest, and together..

that sweet Stoicism... that responds  
to the muted tea-cup whine of others, with  
'We must just count our blessings, dear...'

or break into the mutual relief of song:  
'Count your blessings, one by one'..

and never was the One more to be sought, whose blessings  
are only counted, as sleep's sheep leap

over the stile of thought,  
counted one by one; each one blessing, blest,  
containing All -

All, and as you said yourself,  
Hope; Light; and Love; these three..

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Horses For Courses

See them at the starting-gate:  
impatient horses tossing their bridled heads,  
rearing, backing, snorting;  
silk-bright riders patient;  
how have they attained this race?

they've shared a fortitude, horse and rider together:  
out at dawn in all weathers, focussed, thundering  
down and round the beaten, scuffed-soil track;  
never a slack training session;

they share – without a common language  
save that of the heart – their discipline;  
share that rare sense of unity  
once forged in battle, now in peaceful excellence;

'they're off! ' – the race begun;  
all around, the watchers shouting, jumping, waving race-cards;  
the rider, in the camera's eye,  
so calm; invisibly controlling;

amidst all this excited noise,  
they are the quietest;  
amidst all this galloping,  
they are the stillest in their mind;

yet who knows a horse's mind,  
to say what's patiently endured,  
the daily training, bridle, bit and whip;  
or what's sheer exultation for a horse?  
or where the discipline and freedom meet?

who knows what may be horse's sheer contentment?  
knows what contentment may exceed  
that of horse being horse? ...  
as rider knows, that, win or lose, he's done his best,  
for himself and for the horse..

what do horse and rider share

between themselves, that's  
never spoken? For, see: each,  
a clear and shining eye..

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Housefly

Now that this housefly  
has finished wringing its hands  
over the past - what?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! How To Quarrel

There were two monks who  
shared a cell in perfect amity.

Yet they, concerned to perfect their compassion  
for all humankind, wished to know all  
mankind's troubles.

Mankind, said the one,  
seems always to be quarrelling –  
always too ready to pick some fight –  
how can this be?

It seems, said the other, that in order to  
assert their selfhood and to be 'somebody',  
they must then invent an enemy,  
who seeks to take something from them  
that they deserve to have...

so then, they can allot  
a 'mine' and 'thine', and pick  
a violent quarrel to prove  
their right to be themselves...

they'll find anything so to label –  
'my tribe, your tribe'—even though  
to anyone else, they seem the same –

my religion, your religion – though God is unaware  
of any such division or allegiance; or when they're  
really desperate for something to fight about,

'my postcode public territory,  
your postcode public territory'...

Oh dear Lord, said the other monk,  
how can we have compassion  
for these suffering souls? We've never had  
a quarrel...

Then we must invent one, said  
the first monk: suppose I draw a line  
in chalk along the floor of our cell..  
and then we'll call one side, my space,  
the other yours...

And this he did. Now, he said,  
we can have a quarrel: look,  
I'm standing in your half of the room...

No you're not, said the other,  
it's not my half...yes it is, we've agreed,  
said the one...

Oh very well then, take it ... you win!  
said the other.. But there's  
nothing to take! said the first...

The two monks sat and sighed.  
They would never know how  
human kind could ever own  
anything worth the quarrel over.

How difficult a holy life can be.  
Have compassion, then, for the plight  
of those two monks...

\*

[Based on a story from the  
early days of the Desert Fathers]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Hurried Judgment, Curried Thought

'Animal sacrifice in Kali temples  
and in Durga shrines is a disgrace! –

this is pagan savagery and  
a shame to our pure souls!

\*

(Please excuse the yellow smear  
of chicken tikka on this screen;  
chicken from a factory farm  
that led a miserable life..  
these lines were written in  
righteous anger, and just after  
a delicious Hindu meal.)

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! I Read Your Poem

In olden days we would have said

things like an act of grace,

an endeavour noble in intent,

humanity at its most heroic,

the heart speaking,

the soul's voice

and why not indeed

I read your poem.

I have nothing much to say

and yet everything to say;

writing a poem is all of those

and every real poem is

one great step for humankind in you,

an archaeology of the soul,

a self-exposure,

a challenge

so what I have to offer you

is respect. Pure, real, boundless, known respect;

you'll read your poem back

and your next will take account of that

better than any comment or advice of mine;

we're both poets; we both know

that we're engaged on a cosmic task,

on the kitchen table, and it's

no less than those images from the Hubble

of nebulae, stars exploding and colliding

and being formed; being formed.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Ibrahim's Tale

Ibrahim

Ibrahim was a shoemaker  
in that Persian land afar  
where wisest men practice crafts  
in side-alleys without name  
and teach with stories

One day, Ibrahim was overcome  
by happiness beyond all belief  
while the sun moved from there to here

He told his friend, who said  
you look the same to me

He went to the doctor who said  
we'd better keep an eye on that,  
it might need an X-ray

He went to the priest who said  
the Devil has cunning ways  
to tempt with gifts

He went to the politician who said  
it's just a way to avoid  
your social responsibility

He went to the psychiatrist who said  
such delusions are uncommon but  
not unknown come back next week

Ibrahim walked home  
through the market and stallholders smiled  
even though he bought nothing

a stray dog followed him home  
his wife said you're late for dinner  
how lucky you are to have me for a wife

his children said  
didn't you bring anything home for us?

But here the story of Ibrahim  
splits into many versions;

so you who know that bliss  
which overcame our Ibrahim  
must complete it for yourselves  
to tell to your children and  
your children's children

so that wise men smile, and angels laugh,  
and poets pause, and storytellers  
nod to themselves, while  
they shape and tack their shoes, that  
a storyteller carries on wise shoulders  
a responsibility to human beings  
greater than any king..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Ignorance

Alas, no clear account can I relate  
(as one who knows too well, that sorry state):  
for after all, to know one's ignorance  
would be a wisdom cosmic in its stance;

and so, wise men have brought their focussed minds  
to plumb its nature, to aid human kind:  
does it describe that 'nescience' which stays  
as innocent as babe, of error's ways?

Or do we sense instinctively, all truth,  
but overlay it with acquired untruth?  
And if so, is the fault, (dear Brutus) , ours?  
or is it universal as the stars?

'Innocence' as plea, Hindus refuse:  
we're Brahman, that knows all – so, no excuse!

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Ikon

The door creaks, as she opens it  
and the fall of the heavy iron latch  
echoes through the empty church.

The atmosphere inside, this cold day,  
is heavy, as such holy places are,  
locked now at night; heavy,  
with what? Anticipation? Memory,  
of all the human emotions  
that have passed through them?  
There's still the clinging promise,  
the fragrance of yesterday's incense;  
it could almost be a midnight forest  
in its wood-scented mystery.

She lights a candle, drops a coin  
slowly, as those do to whom  
each coin has a meaning.

She is small, shrunken as the aged are,  
wrapped into roundness against the cold,  
yet neatly; today there's an extra sense of purpose  
about her walk towards the glittering  
gold ikonostasis –

is it the anniversary of the day  
her husband perished in the labour camp?  
Or the day her son died fighting  
so that such as she might live,  
to mourn him, proudly, all her life?

Or was she, is she, that unmarried, famous  
junior lecturer who lost her job  
for speaking truth, whose students  
carried her shoulder-high and placed her  
on the tank outside the university,  
challenging its gun?

She kneels in front of the ancient ikon,

framed in gold; the ikon that tourists  
note with a glance, as 'Christ'...though when painted,  
it was known as 'Son of God'; now they call it  
'Son of Man' – that seems to suit it.

She looks intently into its eyes  
as she has so many times; each time,  
a new day, asking what He has in store for her.  
As intently as its painter, praying as he worked,  
that He might come and fill the painted form  
with His eyes, His heart, His soul; all that He brought to earth  
from That which sent Him...

She looks into the eyes of the ikon –  
or does the ikon look at her?  
In some other world, there is mighty sound,  
perhaps a word; the air is filled with soundlessness;  
there's fire that burns forever; great waters flow  
like grace itself; new earth is watered.

She sees, in some great where between  
herself and all things, love that cannot be measured;  
mercy that can only explain itself with itself;  
grace that's only known; her life  
opens itself to her clearly, soundlessly;  
all is revealed to the seeking heart.

The candles flicker; the door creaks,  
and the heavy iron latch echoes  
once, in the empty church; the Son of Man,  
in the form of an old woman wrapped against the cold,  
steps out into His kingdom. A few snowflakes;  
a pale winter sun. But look into her eyes.

[revised]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Impressionism In Paint, In Music, In Words

To know the impossible to be impossible  
and yet to love the attempt;  
to demonstrate that beauty is eternal, yet  
seen only in that moment now,  
never to be captured, ever changing -  
'evanescent' holds a little of the sound of it -  
this, the heroic failure that betokens love.

Monet was that hero. For perhaps you may  
catch beauty's shadow in a photograph;  
even glimpse its joy, there, in the sound of song;  
but try to catch it - dab by dab of brush -  
when in the time it takes to do this, yet another leaf  
- there, watch it as it drops -  
has fallen from that distant orange-yellow-brown  
blur of an autumn wood - knowing as you render nature's generality  
or catch a church, a haystack, in a sundown glow,  
that all things pass -  
that love's heroic: and when, in irony that surely  
needs no underlining, blindness comes upon you, yet  
you go on painting, as the water-lilies blur  
into the water-weed, into the bridge,  
into the time that runs down to the river, to the sea...

and in turn, Renoir, in his 'Moulin a la Galette' dance-cafe,  
catching the human reflection of this flow, our yearning  
for the perfect moment to remain, frozen, set, fresh-baked,  
forever caught - this is what my life has led to,  
this is what, surely, I deserve - under the lanterns in the trees  
the young girls with their cheeks of peaches, apricots,  
and lips like fruit that's waiting to be pressed,  
dream of forever to be loved; while their tonight's men  
smoke, and drink, and dream of where a young man's lust  
might just be step into another world -

while in that room up there that looks down on this scene,  
Proust, seeing the cafe's dance of fleeting beauty, writes to catch  
those moments lived and lost and yet remembered;  
and Debussy, his tentative composer's piano notes

heard just above the cafe's resident accordionist  
whose sentimental music you too will remember  
to your dying day, and smile a gentle tear - and when  
past midnight, as the silence falls upon the thinning dance, and  
couples, singing, arm-in-arm it home, and  
Monsieur le patron extinguishes the lanterns in the trees,  
and the humble workers' square is suddenly a nowhere place,  
Debussy will hear the moonlight sliding through the window  
onto the piano's keys...

of beauty, we can say not much  
of all that may be said.

(To Michael Gessner, who reminded me about poetry.)

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! In A Greek Amphitheatre: George Seferis, Poet

Noon here in hot summer in this quarter-sphere of stepped stone;  
the smell of herbs rolling down from the mountainside,  
the light so strong that it seems to have bleached away all thought;  
time is taking a siesta.

come sit with me here in this almost deserted amphitheatre  
which has stood for more than two thousand years,  
only the bees are quietly moving,  
searching the flowers which grow between these huge blocks of stone  
which someone quarried, someone brought here,  
someone acted out the world upon, some many sat  
and were moved to fear and tears;  
someone ate olives, spat the pits between the blocks of stone;  
now an olive tree bears witness,  
its bleached roots like an arthritic climber,  
splitting the stone blocks with the insistence of history.

'Memory, wherever you touch it,  
hurts'...

merciful gods might have removed these stones  
with two thousand years of rain, of wind, of searing sun,  
so that the insistence of history might not be  
so painful to a Greek.

The only other figure in this huge amphitheatre -  
you see him down there? In the white hat  
and dark suit of summer cloth? He's a poet;  
but is his mind too, sitting in the audience? Or is he  
on the stage? Is he  
living the play; the hero with a tragic flaw,  
the chorus commenting, the tragedy unfolding?

In Greek, the same word means martyr  
and means witness.

He was born a Greek in a Greek colony;  
at 22, the Turks flung them out;  
he sailed in wine-dark seas of wars and occupations;



and when the sailor sailed into the port to take his place in his immortal court,  
found Greece, not celebrating peace, but Greek fighting Greek;  
the cruellest of wars.

It was not Odysseus but Greece itself  
that wandering, had not yet come home;  
the harbours boatless; silent the shepherd's flute;  
the olive groves untended; hives deserted;  
grapes that never tasted wine; figs that burst uneaten;  
Olympia's grass, all silent and untrodden;  
temples empty, marble columns  
their cool beauty empty-armed without their worshippers.

Here at noon, the summer heat pressing and intense,  
the air still, a bee passing across our laps  
as we sit here on the higher tier;  
a dark-suited poet, witness, martyr,  
like an olive tree between hard stone,  
suffers the playing out, the painful beauty  
like a dark thought at noon,  
the insistence of history.

'Memory, wherever  
you touch it, hurts.'

Michael Shepherd

# !! In Golden Gate Park. For Jim And Thanks To Lawrence

The older couple who've set down  
their folding chairs, a blanket, lunchbox

not too far from the old Lincoln  
inhabit three islands of peace

which by the time we're their age  
we'll know perhaps to envy:

his peace, and hers, and theirs:  
neither got high grades, but

they're wise enough to know  
after all those years together

those three islands; watch them with discretion  
and join them if you can across the years;

in that third island which is won  
from two islands neatly cropped.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! In His Eyes, His Eyes

His open eyes, one catching the sun,  
shining towards me – presumably  
they still function optically:  
recording, unmoved, unmoving, my presence;

this dead soldier, sodden in the ditch,  
half his body peaceful, as if  
welcoming his death; the other half  
unmentionable; animals must eat;

his eyes recording my presence, yet  
the brain now with no need  
to question whether I'm the enemy; or friend;  
the medic; the man who's just shot him several times  
at close range, standing over; or  
the man he shot just now;  
come to greet him as his newest friend.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! In Memory Of George Herbert. For Fay.

I, upon this journey, question me:  
journey, I to God, or God to me?

If I to God: I pray that journey fast;  
if God to me: Thou first; that I may last.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! In Praise Of A Fellow Poet

in praise of a fellow poet

when someone's doing  
quietly  
something which is  
perfect in itself

then  
to praise or to encourage  
seems almost like  
an insult  
to them or  
to perfection

I just wanted to say  
what I've said

and you and I  
share something which is  
beyond the words

which we arrange  
upon the page  
to honour  
'something understood'

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! In Praise Of Ego

In carefree, laughing, joyful mood –  
let's praise the ego, to its face!

Our most faithful mate throughout our life;  
with us longer than our parents or our children are;

at our heels at all times, proud of head and tail,  
saying to the world that 'I belong to him! ';

faithful as a dog; and cunning as a cat;  
between them, running our un-mastered lives;

(and like the cosy purring cat you stroke upon your lap,  
ego's the secret dark night-hunter, out to kill all life..)

ego, more awake than we ourselves,  
never missing a living moment;

every heart-beat an opportunity;  
sharper entrepreneur than any city slicker:

'what's in it for me? ' ; there is no trick,  
no turn, no market swing, that ego can't exploit and profit from;

so let's praise ego to its face; see the Creator's own full force,  
brilliant and magnificent, manifested, used, in ego's skills...

but know, and know we know, its lifetime's bitter secret:  
for all its skills, its energies are stolen fuel...:

moment by moment sapping secretly,  
the consciousness, the wisdom, happiness,

that seem just out of our elusive reach..  
So – as we watch a child, so innocent,

playing its merry games of fantasy,  
running round itself in playground and in park,

we laughing in parental love, sing out those magic words:  
'I'm watching you...! '

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! In Praise Of Ignorance

write in praise of ignorance – that is,  
that state which we so easily mis-name;  
which would be better known by that old term,  
'un-knowing' – free of guilt or sin in one  
who knows the truth and, knowingly, denies..

un-knowing should be celebrated; as  
some youthful minor god in painted scenes:  
adolescent in the goddess Wisdom's  
splendid train; gazing up at her,  
clear-browed; wide-eyed; attention at the leash;

not-knowing – like a runner on the blocks,  
contained; elastic spring of energy;  
yet fingertips so delicately placed  
on starting-line; there's elegance to see  
in our unknowing's race to reach the truth;

unknowing: which spurs every scientist  
so to observe; infer; compare; and test;  
evolve hypothesis; and test again;  
then offer to the world as reason's law  
of Nature's finer detail, which may yield  
a harvest of some golden benefit;

admitting one's unknowing is the key:  
(does this seem far too simple to be said?)  
Poised between two beauties, Innocence,  
and Wisdom, see Unknowing's beauty too;

then in that beauty, all the universe  
shines bright and fresh and new, to be enjoyed;  
none other than myself; who knows no claim  
but witnesses all that may be revealed..

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! In Praise Of Praise

Good dog...! '...

Your faithful hound closes his eyelids  
for a fraction longer - could this be bliss  
so pure that humans rarely know it? –  
rests his head for a few moments  
on your knee; twitches tail, just once,  
to indicate the words received:  
the one phrase which, it's said,  
(quietly; almost, to yourself)  
completely understood and shared  
by man and dog: fulfilment  
of the karma of companionship..

\*

Yesterday, I was praised.. or rather,  
there was praise for something  
that was enacted through me..

Such a moment is too valuable,  
too full of self-knowledge, to be dismissed  
with embarrassed modesty: live it:

for a moment, one is in the presence  
of oneself: here's a giant; here's a hero;  
who is oneself, and yet, is to be worshipped  
as the fulfilment of all one's wished  
oneself to be: being and worthship  
come together in a purity..

so, praise the praisers! – who are all too few;  
cast aside that English fear  
that praising may involve some personal  
commitment that one later may regret...

to be praised, is but self-dedication  
in which praiser, praised, are alike; at one;  
and from that moment on,

live together in that unity  
and grow from it in ways  
that must be lived and known, to be believed..

come now – tell me that you don't  
remember clearly, the very words your teacher said  
the day they praised you from the heart  
so unexpectedly, you even thought them human..

or what your mother's friend (your mother,  
who could never find it in her to so praise you in the words –  
despite her sweetness for some reason –  
with which, your mother's friend later told you  
she boasted of you, out of your own earshot...)

praise the praisers! join their ranks  
and find that magic wand:  
spoken directly, face to face;  
or if you must, discreetly passed,  
its implications hanging golden in the air...  
that magic wand, which grows the soul  
of giver and receiver joined as one in One..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! In The Beginning

In the beginning was the Word...  
what's a beginning, then?

a beginning, perhaps, not in time;  
a beginning, perhaps, with time itself;  
in our time, the recognition's all;

beginning known within our being;  
being that is beyond beginning;

and so, always being; always beginning..  
so, in the beginning – is - the Word..

the Word, a sound? yet heard before the ear;  
a speaking and a listening,  
waiting to be heard...

the Word, finding for itself a time;  
finding for itself a place;  
a waking; a becoming;

for this, we know:  
a beginning; a becoming;  
the word becomes, as things become;  
every word is a becoming;

that, the yogis hear;  
that, poets listen for;  
that spurs all philosophers;

every becoming is the Word;  
every word is a becoming.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! In The Empty Studio

The diffused northern sunlight  
of this studio at dawn  
matches the silence and the stillness

like the speaking silence  
of the retrochoir behind the altar  
of a simple white Greek island church –

that has no ornament; simply walls  
painted in a pale blue wash,  
the space, the air itself, as radiant with heaven;

behind the iconostasis – gold and candle and eternal gaze -  
where praise is prepared; thought surrendered;  
humility the robe; the sacred word awaits  
the moment when it's spoken;

so this studio; and at its centre, calling,  
stands an easel with a white canvas on it;  
what waits in this empty studio  
that's so full of emptiness that calls?

what challenges? This canvas  
waits, as being ever does; full, content,  
needing nothing but itself...

the silence will accept our spoken word,  
then return to stillness;  
the canvas will not be so forgiving;

'make a mark on me that will not diminish  
my completeness...; so let our being  
meet, before a mark is made...'

this holy place: only godself may mark  
this canvas and yet not detract; from space,  
draw space; or may with colour stain transparent  
this white white radiance of eternity:

and in the place whence all arises,  
Nothing and Everything smile together  
in their secret play.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Introduction To Advaita As Non-Duality

How many years after our birth  
before we hear some word or phrase  
that speaks of 'unity'?

And then how many more,  
before we hear such concepts  
as 'non-duality' or 'advaita', as 'not two'?

Yet something in us has now, tucked away,  
the memory of that moment after birth  
when that unbounded birthright, love in us

first sensed that same unbounded love  
in the one who held us close;  
murmured some strange words

whose meaning was all in their sound;  
whose gaze – for did we know? –  
met our unseeing gaze with touch;

that moment at the outset of this life  
when we knew unity could not be two  
and that its name is ever love.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Is Music Mute The Poem's Ripened Fruit?

In a smart burnoose, Khadour looked on, amused;  
it suited him, to pick the choicest fruit  
from market stalls, comparing each with all  
and, smiling, then point out the Eastern style  
allowing customers to choose what must  
be brought to table straightway, and what ought  
to be allowed to ripen a degree;  
and so, politely indicate the sin  
of thinking that the West were always best...

[An experiment in five-stress lines  
internally rhyming the first, second or third foot  
with the last (fifth) foot;  
as an alternative to end-rhymes..

The first line is from Elizabeth Bishop,  
which promoted the experiment..;  
comments on the effect?  
or better, try it yourself? ]

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Is This Just To Say

'Shall I be gone long?  
Forever and a day.  
Where will I go?  
Ask my song.'

The sweet cold plums  
in the ice-box  
were no compensation  
for the note attached there  
by the adulterer.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Japanese Toilet Wall

This Spring, a new name  
among the old graffiti -  
will it be true love?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Japa-Yajna

Carrier wave; sine curve; you see it  
on the heartscan lifescreen  
in the intensive care ward

as if with no regard for you  
it's self-sufficient; sufficient to the self;

the same curve that the flute's note makes onscreen,  
pure as Krishna's smile; his lips  
making breath into sound

hear that, hear that which  
runs day and night; repetition  
that always never does repeat

and only when you're still  
will you know with Krishna

the sound of inner sacrifice  
that never ends and yet  
so pure it's given beyond sought;

flute's sound beyond all sound;  
how still the room is now.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! John Donne Remembers Saint Augustine

This all too heresome world weighs down my soul;  
I need love's sweetnesses oft to be met:  
while yet I pray to God to make me good -  
please god, be it - not quite so soon - not yet...

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Journey In An Underground Kaleidoscope

The Underground is a kaleidoscope:  
at each station, a new shake; and

according to your mood  
every shake's a magnification

of your love of humanity; or  
confirms your worst fears;

shake

I'm sitting with the article  
I wrote at home, hunched  
over the keyboard  
in a smaller world

now I'm revising it in private  
but in this public space  
of this kaleidoscope; it's good this way.

shake

A lad sits down next to me. After a minute  
I feel he's discreetly reading what I'm editing.

I love this game. I tilt the paper imperceptibly  
so he can read it better..  
careful not to give the game away..

shake

He's interested; he's not reading idly; now  
he's not hiding his reading any more;

now, he can't restrain himself at  
the top of the page as I turn over..

his eyes shine. He stubs his finger at a quote  
'Meditation makes me feel more myself...'

'That's it! That's it! ' he says; as if  
I didn't believe my own quote..

shake

He's out the next station; that's  
all he needed. All I needed. All it needed.

How bright the underground kaleidoscope  
shines now.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Juno Watt - Personality Of The Year

Everyone's talking about her  
this last year: on their cellphones to her,  
talking about her on their TV sofas,  
breakfast and evening celeb shows,  
at the hairdresser, in the bus queues..

'Juno Watt? I've been asked to do TV...'

'Juno Watt? I've got tickets to Mariah's tour...'

'Juno Watt? He's proposed to me! ! '

And the columnists are asking,  
'Will she last through to next year?  
Will it be Celebrity Hopscotch for her  
Or Celebrity Snakes and Ladders...?  
Juno Watt.. I hear she's dating...'

She's even been paid to endorse  
the products Tiger left behind:  
'Juno Watt... our balls give your golf  
more drive! '

'Knock knock..'  
'Who's there? '  
'Juno Watt...'  
'Not yet.. but I suppose you're  
going to tell me...'

Juno Watt: Personality of The Year..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Kabir Reading 'Kabir'

See this fine manuscript  
so beautifully illuminated round the picture –

why, it's none other than Kabir!  
reading a book entitled The Poems of Kabir;

he's smiling, laughing, waving his hands –  
how can he be enjoying himself so much?

The manuscript doesn't tell you this;  
only Kabir can tell you, in that other place..

of all the poems, he only recognises two  
as poems that he wrote himself..

but here's Kabir's delight today:  
many of the other poems, he thinks,

could pass for his!  
How wonderful to be so praised in spirit!

As he reads – see, he's circled round with angels;  
they're all laughing too.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Kabir Reads 'Kabir'

See this fine manuscript  
so beautifully illuminated round the picture –

why, it's none other than Kabir!  
reading a book entitled The Poems of Kabir;

he's smiling, laughing, waving his hands –  
how can he be enjoying himself so much?

The manuscript doesn't tell you this;  
only Kabir can tell you, in that other place..

of all the poems, he only recognises two  
as poems that he wrote himself..

but here's Kabir's delight today:  
many of the other poems, he thinks,

are good enough to be his!  
How wonderful to be so praised in spirit!

As he reads – see, he's circled round with angels;  
they're all laughing too.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Light Everywhere.

When I was young  
and had nothing to say  
I thought I was no-one;

when I was still  
I thought myself empty;

Now I am older  
and become silent  
I am everyone;

when I am still,  
I am full.

\*

[leaning on Kabir's `ghar ghar dipak barai']

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Like That

Was it being empty of everything  
or being full of everything,  
when the song came during washing-up?

Was it being empty of everything  
or being full of everything,  
when the tourist outside the school door  
glanced as if expecting nothing but the good?

Was it being empty of everything  
or being full of everything,  
when there was nowhere else but here?

Was it being empty of everything  
or being full of everything  
when there was no when or where  
or why or what or how or who?

Who is to say? It was like that. Like that.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Lonely Winter Afternoon

When the heron's cry  
did not echo in the mist,  
did the cliffs hear it?

Michael Shepherd

# !! Love And Loss And Love Again - A Poem For Jenny And Her Friends

Loss can be good for us,  
researchers say (Nolen-Hoeksema  
and Davis,2002) – it's called  
Post-Traumatic Growth...

When we 'lose' someone  
we seldom see these days,  
yet always love, we are in some strangely beautiful way  
the gainers –

lose someone who, caught a glimpse of  
down a school corridor, is like  
a mirror in which you'll see reflected  
yourself as nothing but pure love...

and when you meet her then, it's just as if  
you meet love – and a modesty almost uncertain:  
as if she had been bestowed the awesome gift  
of a part of sun and sunlight, and told,  
bestow this wisely...

warmth, and light, and beautiful humility –  
even your great talent – I recall  
a rare and radiant press review  
of a concert in the Purcell Room  
where you improvised on, was it, Ravel..?

and when asked why you never built  
upon that boost, you said with typical  
serious thought, well people don't seem  
to be interested in that sort of thing...

so, the occasional concert; and another  
undeveloped gift, for bringing together in opera  
people who would never have dared  
to seek the gift of singing in themselves...

so, we the gainers in this sad yet joyful way:  
we saw you just occasionally; now,  
as often as we remember you,  
you're here again, as love.. just, love...

my only sadness, Jennifer,  
is that one day, when on your face  
(never tell a lady to her face  
about her face – yet I insult you  
by saying that of you...)

on your face I saw the look  
of a little girl who'd done her very best,  
yet feared retribution...what demon,  
small or large, had you to deal with in yourself?

I regretted then, not speaking out  
and asking you about that; yet  
you, with your great talent to bring love  
were better equipped than I; too wise,  
I think, not to know yourself...

for what you brought in your sweet nature –  
taking work where it would offer,  
playing the piano for a celebrated  
but also modest ballet teacher,  
playing a white grand piano next to a fern  
in Heathrow's nerve-strained hall...

what you brought was the essence of  
that Indian 'Perfect Prayer' which so many speak  
but not all live out: that nothing can be 'taken',  
for the remainder is always perfect...

so we will mourn, or celebrate, dear Jenny:  
we who were so fortunate,  
and who shall remain blessed for ever  
that you have lived on earth..

'sweet are the uses of adversity' – for  
there's music in our souls

\*

[Jennifer Bowring Pearce, >2007]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Love As Self: Self As Love

We do not have to seek for love  
nor fear it ever go:  
but simply, rest within ourself;  
then, love perforce must flow:

for who's the sweetest company,  
as parent, sister, brother?  
Those restful ones, always themself;  
as one who knows no other..

\*

[This came after watching 'The Big Sing':  
every seat in the Albert Hall taken  
by those singing their hearts out  
to fine words; while simultaneously and  
in unsought parallel, love flowed..]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Love's Grammar Book

I love you.

That's it, really.  
all there is to say.  
sums it up.  
in a nutshell.  
the long and the short of it.  
the be-all and the end-all.  
I know what I mean;  
you know what I mean.  
more or less.  
we know what I mean.  
most of the time.

But though love's sometimes  
best defined by silence  
it may be good  
to say a few good words

since you, and love, have taught me  
love's grammar-book:

I love 'love'.  
though love as noun is difficult to define.

I love love as an adjective:  
love's.. just lovely, isn't it?

But most of all  
I love love as verb.  
and this I know:  
this my love's active voice:

I love. (you) .  
I loved you. How well I remember.  
I have loved you. I'm so grateful for that.  
I shall love you. That I promise.  
and when all is done, I'll be proud to remember that  
I shall have loved you;



and that  
we shall have loved.

And in love's passive voice,  
I'm so blessed that  
I am loved;  
rejoice in the hope that  
I shall be loved  
and promise that  
you shall be loved.  
I'll always be blessed that  
I have been loved.  
and that I can say  
you shall have been loved (forever) .

Then there are love's moods  
as they're called in grammar:  
the indicative - I love you; do you love me?  
the exciting imperative mood:  
'Love me, do - I promise I'll be true...' or better,  
'Love me! Now! ' ;  
the subjunctive mood  
which is rather subtler in other languages:  
'Don't leave me, please';  
'May we love each other till we die...';  
'If only you were to love me  
as much as I love you..'

And then, those other parts of speech  
that few of us get around to sorting out  
but all lurking there under 'amo'  
in the Latin grammar-book of love:

The perfect infinitive:  
'It is better - to have loved - and lost - than  
not -to have loved -at all';

that great feeling  
called future infinitive:  
to be about to love;  
and that dizzy future infinitive passive:  
to be about to be loved;

the gerund:

'Oh the loving and the kissing  
and the kissing and the loving...';

that cautious supine:

'in order to love...';

the passive imperative -

the parents' wish (with qualifications) :

'let her be loved'...

and that loaded gerundive:

'fit to be loved'...

All of which, I hope, leaves you  
in that state curiously undefined  
by grammar -

a sort of active gerundive:

'fit to love' - to love

love's grammar-book

in full

for love conquers all, it's said,

even a hatred of grammar.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Loving Life To The Death: Robert Capa

Behind the lens, the eye of the photographer;  
behind the eye, the observer;  
behind the observer, the immortal soul:

Robert Capa shot  
(as they say) five major wars  
as mankind's record  
of man's inhumanity to man.  
Finally, was shot himself.

When asked for advice  
by a young photographer, he said,  
"Like people; and let them know it.."

And so he printed out his soul.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Machiavelli's Advice To Princes

Cinderella  
is a shoo-in.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Making Breakfast - A Study In Consciousness

Breakfast. Slick operation. You could  
make it in your sleep..  
you've refined the quantities,  
the cooking and the timing  
like a pro..

and eating it – you're even more  
brilliant at that – you can  
eat breakfast, read the paper,  
listen to the radio or tv,  
half listen to the wife and kids,  
make and take those cellphone calls;  
then bestow a salty bacon,  
sweet marmaladey kiss on several lips  
or cheeks – and off..

But today something gotten to you:  
the sun is shining; all's well with the world;  
this isn't Monday breakfast, this is  
Saturday breakfast...

You find yourself making breakfast  
as if you'd never made it in your life before;  
you hear the cereal on its way  
from the packet to the bowl;  
smell the coffee before drinking it;  
never has the toast been browner, crisper,  
eggs more eggy, tomatoes so.. well, tomatoey;  
sweet meeting salt in tasting mouth..  
the world's made new today; and  
somehow, you feel as if  
you know that much more about yourself;  
some sure sense of direction  
seems to fill your heart and mind;  
you're on good terms with  
the Creation as of now.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Meditation

The wise say, those who wholly dedicate  
their being to the Lord, receive from Him  
the gift of His whole self, forever, now..  
how irresistible this promise sounds!

But irresistible to whom or what?  
The ego hears this promise; makes of it  
what ego shapes; so offers not the whole,  
the being; but what ego's made of it...

And yet, this is a start – to offer Him  
not being, gift-wrapped in entirety,  
but more, a catalogue: of all that mind  
knows of itself; all that it knows it's not..

O Lord, my heart I offer to You, whole;  
my mind, but part by part; in sum, my soul!

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Meeting Brahman On Equal Terms

Posted: Thu Sep 10,2009 11: 52 am Post subject:

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From ah to ha..

Sacred jokes don't travel well.  
They have nowhere they can go...

He told me how as a young seeker  
he went to the guru and asked  
about the nature of the Brahman...

The guru's eyes twinkled as he said,  
That's a very good question...  
not many people ask that...:

here's a pen and paper;  
now write your question carefully;  
fold it neatly;  
now put it in your dhoti kurta pocket there

and when you meet the Brahman,  
ask Him the same question...'

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Metaphor.

Like the unicorn,  
they have to need to be;  
to hear our need for them to be.

Like time,  
they must creep up on the writer,  
on the reader,  
invisible  
yet with inevitability  
which cannot be escaped.

Like thieves,  
they must enter unannounced,  
take what they must.

Like mice,  
they must take up residence  
until there is no longer sustenance for them.

Like bailiffs,  
they must demand entrance;  
be admitted;  
take their just exchange.

Like housekeepers,  
they must earn their keep  
by keeping us in all we ask of them.

Like lovers,  
they must prove themselves  
part of our lives  
until our earthly sentence ends the dream.

Like children,  
they must know their place;  
then be loved for themselves  
beyond life itself.

For they are life,



revealing its boundlessness  
with all the freshness  
of a lettuce cut from the ground,  
the well-prepared, fine ground  
in a landscape that stretches out, is limitless.

Do not deal lightly, or be profligate  
with metaphors; they are our life-blood.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Metaphors

Like the unicorn,  
they have to need to be;  
to hear our need for them to be.

Like time,  
they must creep up on the writer,  
on the reader,  
invisible  
yet with inevitability  
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by keeping us in all we ask of them.

Like lovers,  
they must prove themselves  
part of our lives  
until our earthly sentence ends the dream.

Like children,  
they must know their place;  
then be loved just for themselves  
beyond life itself.

Like life:

revealing its boundlessness  
in a landscape that stretches out, is limitless.

Writer - reader -  
care for a metaphor as for one you love:  
as you love yourself;  
they are our life-blood: for they tell of what  
can only be said quietly, with a touch of hand,  
to those whose heart is listening.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Metaphors, Similes And Stuff - Pooh Bear Explains

Christopher Robin and Pooh walked slowly down the path in the woods, treading on the occasional crackly twig.

'CR...' said Pooh, 'What's a Poeh Tree? Is it the same as a Poem, or a hum? '

'Well, Pooh, the very very best Poeh Tree in the world is your own:

'Isn't it funny  
how bears like hunny?

It's what I call rum-ti-tum-itry. Everyone likes rum-ti-tum-itry. Even grown-ups. Rum-ti-tum-itry is friendly. Rum-ti-tum-itry is like two friends walking together. Like you and me, Pooh. Which makes you the very best rum-ti-tum-iter in the world...'

'That's tum as in...?' asked the Very Stout Bear, cautiously.

'As in a Hum' said Christopher Robin. 'But then there's other things in Poetry such as Truth, and Other People Reading It And Nodding. And Similes. And Metaphors. There's a lot in Poetry.'

'What's a Simile, CR?' asked Pooh. It sounded like what bees said just before they landed on something, like a hunny jar, or Pooh's nose.

'It's when you say something is like something else, to help people imagine it.' said CR.

Pooh had a Think. A Ponderly sort of Think.

'Like perhaps - 'happiness is like hunny'? ' asked Pooh tentatively. He suddenly felt very five-to-four-ish at this Thought.

'That's exactly it, Pooh' said Christopher Robin happily. 'Or even sometimes the other way around! '

Pooh felt warm inside - almost like after eating honey - knowing now that a Simile wasn't a threat any more. 'What's a Metaphor, CR? '

'That's rather more difficult, Pooh. It's when you say something is something

else, and people know what you mean somehow, and say 'Aha! ' and nod their heads...

Pooh had a longer, Pondering sort of Think.

'Like... teatime means honey? ' he offered hesitantly. Though he knew this was Truth and Other People Nodding, anyway.

'Something like that' said Christopher Robin. 'And then...' he said carefully, in case it was a bit too much for Beloved Bear for one day, but wanting to tell him all the same, 'there's the Extended Metaphor - which I think you might like, Pooh...' (he said hastily In Case) - 'like in a poem by Rupert Brooke, where he says 'Is there hunny still for tea? ' but what he really means is, he's a long way from home and can't get back in time for tea, and feels rather sorry about it...'

'I see...' said Pooh, thoughtfully - like people do who Don't Quite, but like to be polite...

Pooh decided there and then that the Poeh Tree was worth finding, now that he knew three things about it or was it four? It called for an Expedishun.

'Can you talk Poeh Tree, CR? Is it like what we are talking now?

'I think that's called a Prose Poem, Pooh' said Christopher Robin.

\*

It was getting near to what Metaphoric Poets like Edward Bear call Time for a Little Something. Christopher Robin and Pooh turned and walked back slowly, the silence broken now and then by a crackly twig just waiting to be trodden on.

Pooh held Christopher's hand tight, as he was doing a lot of Poetic Thinking. He was wondering how anyone could be so far away from home that they couldn't get back home for tea. And worse, not knowing whether there was hunny in the cupboard or not...

But then he had a little five-to-fourish Hum, when he remembered that there was indeed hunny still for tea...

'Rupert Brooke at ten to three  
knew he wouldn't get home for tea;

but now it's nearly five to four;  
time for tea and Something More.'

Poetic Bears, you see, know all about Metaphor.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Mintbright Coinwords

On a sunful, funful, easeful sorta cloudwhite airblue day,  
we sat exchanging coinages  
in a smileful, timepass way;

quickthink and later sad,  
poets know it well:  
mindrich and speakful,  
make each tonguword tell!

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Minutes Of A Day's Work On The Bible

Around 1608; a pleasant day in Cambridge;  
eight men sit round a table. Originally there were nine:  
Dr Lively who presided at their speedy start  
is now departed their distinguished company;  
gave his lively life to this great enterprise, some say.

Among them still, the greatest of divines and  
Hebrew scholars of their day.

This, the seventh version of the Bible  
through its history; 'seven times purified'  
as the Bible says itself,  
through Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Latin,  
and English versions over centuries...

Since 1604, they've worked upon their  
allotted section of the Bible; one sixth;  
now they're on the 'Canticles'; today  
it's Psalm 46: God is our hope and strength,  
a very present help in trouble...

They have arrived now at the final verses:  
God has stilled the warring armies  
of the outer world; and now to still the inner world...

'Lette goe; and knowe thatte I am Godde'..  
that, the learned Hebrew scholars say,  
is how it actually translates...

'Bee stille and knowe..' they find in earlier translation;  
which command should they pass down  
to centuries to come? Which sound tells the soul  
the most, of its true nature? Or which sound will aid the soul  
the quickest to return to its true self?

The scholars and divines, (all 54 of them in sum)  
work at phenomenal, at godly, speed;  
this is the great work of their lives;  
'Let go'; 'Be still' – which has more  
the ring of soul's eternity?



All have done their homework; rolled the words  
around their tongue, their mind; heard them  
uttered from the pulpit of their inner house of God;  
a brief discussion; summary arms then raised in silent vote;

one command, they have agreed,  
is for our present help in trouble, for  
the moment now; the other is for ever;  
the soul's instruction from its peaceful self;  
as God speaks to the angels, who  
speak to the hearts of men:

the room falls silent; while  
the secretary scratches in the wet black ink:

'Be still and know that I Am God'

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Miss Piggy Regrets..

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today, madam..

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today:

That tastelessly named flu's got her

(She forgot to wash her front trotter...) so

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today..

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today, madam..

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today:

It's a swine of a stroke of bad luck:

Her eyelashes, she sneezed them unstuck... so

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today..

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today, madam..

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today:

She's all pink from her snout to her face;

Her mascara's all over the place... so

Miss Piggy regrets she's unable to lunch today..

Why not try the lamb today, madam...?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Monastery

Up the long flight of stairs  
every tread echoes from stone walls  
as if to comment on how stillness  
tells of sound its silent origin.

In the quiet library, the central table  
bears a careful written message:  
'Silence is spoken here'..

and that's truer than  
at first it seems to read;

round the walls, shelves of books  
as silent as the monks  
standing upright in their stalls  
witness words that seek to share;  
yet ultimately, wave fare well, turn back;

speak of silence sought and silence found;  
yet cannot speak of silence;

in the name of silence, take a book,  
well-worn, from off the shelf;  
meet it in the silence of the room,  
read a few words, and lay it down;  
glance at the other readers round the room;  
fall still.

Here, silence speaks of stillness;  
stillness joys in silence.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! My Past And Future Self

It has to be; one day, perhaps,  
we'll know the wisdom absolute of this;

and yet, and yet... I'm just a little sad,  
not to meet my self in previous embodiment

and say, thanks for the baton that you passed  
in this relay race of self to self

through millions of forms of life, they say;  
you played your part; worked through your destiny,

gave cradle-gifts; withheld some too,  
to test me further on the path of life;

I hope you'll look upon me as your godly son;  
smile; say, yes, he's made good use of life..

And I'm a little sad, as well,  
not to meet my self in next embodiment;

and say, here's wishing you the very best;  
sorry, that I could not give you more...

but this; and this; I hope you find these good,  
and helpful; happy; take this love, this joy,

this hope, this trust; this baton's made of gold;  
grasp it firmly; run a goodly race;

we'll watch you proudly from the stands;  
smile; say, he's trained well for this life..

And now, this said, it matters, and it matters not;  
as present melds into eternity.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Nature's Rebuke; Or, What Are Words Worth?

Only recently, you asked me  
for my 'Laws' – as if you asked the Sun  
just where his golden rays shall, in the moment, strike...

and now you rashly ask me, why, then, I create...

you should not have questioned me..  
but understand me as I understand myself:  
keep silent; understand by silence;  
for I am not accustomed to your human talk..

For what is there to understand? What comes to be  
comes as the object of my silent contemplation;  
comes into being naturally; it is myself.

I too was born of such a contemplation;  
and so I have a natural love for that;

as geometers contemplate, and then may draw,  
so my contemplation – in my timeless nature –  
brings out of passing time, the products of myself;

and if you find new lines  
in bodies that come forth from me,  
I did not draw them; though they come from me..

the lines, the frills  
of daffodils  
all shine, not by my planned design  
but from tranquillity;

just contemplate;  
and in that state  
I'll be your village preacher;  
taken, shaken, by surprise,  
you too shall share my nature;

morning, evening,  
here nor there,

earth hath no earthly manmade thing  
to show more naturally fair;

be tranquil, Will, and just be still;  
in silent scents, to taste my will..  
all else is hubris; blasphemy;  
shut up! and have respect for Me..'

\*

[The first part of the poem follows closely  
Plotinus' Ennead III 8,4,1-10;  
the second part, er, followed..]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Never Say It Is Not God

Never say it is not God.  
Hafiz said that, lived it.

And that's all really:  
no need to dress it up,  
make a poem of it,  
claim it, as if  
I thought of it first..

And anyway it's personal:  
you and I could spend days  
discussing what the last word means;  
finish up hating each other.  
It happens. And they have  
a rifle in their hand, a bomb.

It's a divine game,  
the game God plays.

You know the games all lovers play:  
'Where are you darling? '  
'I'm not here.. come and find me...'  
ah yes - the bedroom...

'You only love me for my body...'  
'Yes darling... but I love you for your mind too, , , '  
'But you're always arguing with my mind...'  
'Yes darling - that's why I love you...'

'Will you love me when I'm old and wrinkled and crumbly? '  
'Darling, I'll love you all the more...'

'I love every bit of you...'  
'Ah but do you love me with every bit of you...? '

'I'm a striped tiger come to eat you up every bit...ggrr...'  
'And I'm a lion come to gobble up the tiger...'

Ah yes, the games that lovers play...

What makes you think God does not love  
to play these games with you?

And even when you call Him God,  
and not your Lover, or your Friend,  
as Hafiz does - and many other names beside,  
that could be His best game of all...

when the whole universe  
and all its creatures, run  
toward you, calling out  
'I'm Yours... I'm yours for life...'  
as lovers do.

Never say it is not God.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! New Poetess Laureate For Uk

This is a formal announcement today:  
we have a new Poet Laureate.. hip hip hooray..

'But who is he? Oh.. it's a she-poet Laureate...?  
so (because I don't read poetry, of course..)  
is that something I should shout hooray at?  
or have committees once again, backed the wrong horse? '

Well, she says she's not 'going to write  
for Edward and Sophie'...  
she's Sapphic and butch, and called  
Carol Ann Duffy

and you can guess, from what she says  
that there'll be no Royal seal in wax  
on her democratic classless ways...

(Right now, Supplement sub-editors are trawling her stuff  
to find something printable  
that's 'poetic' enough...)

The story is, 'she'd have got it on the last occasion'  
except for the aforementioned Sapphic persuasion...

But aren't poets supposed to be beyond such trivial pursuits? ...  
and just write poetry and truth; in high heels or in boots?

(And there's always the hope, with or without Royal permission,  
she might say something new about the female condition...)

so, Edward and Sophie with your middle-class morals –  
watch out! We could be in for some hard-hitting quarrels  
re 'The Nature of Poetry' ... and about time too:  
since poetry's subject is the deepest me and you...

so the Forum poets here (in this empty music-hall)  
hope you stir us up, and have a prancing, dancing Artists' Ball;

as with controversial old Ted Crow, Poet Laureate and toughie,

we shan't expect respect – coz you ain't no fluffy Duffy...

Now chaps - gold watch and thanks to Andrew's poetic potion:  
you could call it - for what words are worth - as  
'tranquillity, recollected in emotion'...

...But sadly, already, in these economic downturn times –  
Blackwells offer '3 for 2' on CarolAnn Duffy's rhymes...

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! New Year Irresolution

'So, what do you yourself wish for  
this 2009? ..' the microphone  
is thrust; the videotape awaits...

and perhaps, there's some golden link  
between New Year wish and New Year resolution...  
between the individual will and the universal..

meanwhile, the sceptic stands aside, at the crowd's edge,  
without a wish or resolution; wondering,  
'are things/is the world, a better place,  
at this New Year than at the last? '

But, who then to set some standard  
by which to judge this increment?

Who can measure happiness in bulk,  
or goodwill to all men? How do Goodness,  
Truth, and Beauty fare,  
at this ending of the year?

One criterion is certain: fewer now believe -  
now Christmas is for sale itself, with  
massive reductions in all departments  
of the human store..

yet we manage, thank you, very well  
without the concept God..

But let's suppose - as some wise men have claimed -  
that though man needs no god,  
that God needs Man...

then God is one whole grisly year the wiser now  
about this species, Man, whom He wound up  
with His divine gold clockwork, and set down on garden soil...

now there's a happy thought for 2009...  
a wiser God about His human child..

But how, you ask, the proof?  
the proof, dear reader, of this charming  
whimsy, is entirely yours...  
and only to be made in present moment;  
where God forever dwells.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Noh Poet

The cuckoo's sad song  
says it cannot write high coos -  
always six syllables!

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Non-Dualism In A Nutshell: From The Sanskrit

Who has a child in him so bold, to ask,  
'But is there anything God cannot do? '  
'Yes! One thing – which to know, is your life's task:  
God cannot separate Himself from you! '

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Not Averse To Poetry..

Do you see life  
through prose-coloured spectacles?

or has the squid of poetry  
inked you into its tentacles?

There's much more rubbish writ in prose –  
though soppy verse  
can be much worse;

or tepid epics  
with vapid topics;

or stanzas dull  
and fanciful;

or limericks  
with silly tricks; or

couplets mock-heroic,  
like empty crocks echoic;

lines that would be better for  
their not being stuffed with metaphor;

unkempt attempts at simile  
that register but dimmily;

and 'moanalogues' from broken hearts;  
sad mishap crap; linguistic farts;  
slam-dunk bawls, that mean \*\*\*\* all;

rhymes that over backwards bend  
to cap a couplet at their end;

elegies, whose energies  
not rapt, but sapped; and seldom apt;

dust-dry stuff that vaunts 'tradition';

limp Latinate, like micturition;

or classic odes  
with massive loads  
of sheer incomprehension..

My final word, in fine old words:  
say what you mean... why be absurd?

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! O Best Beloved

In the dark unsleep of restless night,  
in the black heaviness of siesta in the sun,

in the enchantments of the world,  
in a day of future dreams,

the Lord can seem so far away;  
too far to know, too far to call,

in the emptiness of heart; in  
the drowning whirlpool of the head;

is your head already sunk upon your breast?  
O dearest - O beloved of the Lord -

your eyes are nearest to Him now!  
too near even, for your arms to hold;

for His image is already there,  
sketched upon your heart

in gold and silver, emerald and rose,  
fragrant as a garden freshly watered

from the fountain that eternal plays;  
His eyes are shining with the thought of you;

He waits there as a child, impatiently  
awaiting His companion bursting through the gate

to play together in that garden without walls; for,  
remember that He made you so to play with Him;

don't keep Him waiting; it's so short a distance  
from your humbled head, there, to His image in your heart;

open all your senses to His bliss:  
run, run...laugh; go play with Him...

He knows more games to play than any could devise;  
run, run... laugh; go play with Him...

\*

(Sri Vaasudevaananda Saraswati,1999)

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! On Being A Poet

When Hafiz  
sang the poetry in his heart  
in the beautiful gardens of Shiraz

they said his voice was like  
pouring light into a cup  
when the soul is thirsty

so no-one wrote it down; for  
the page does not always sing;  
better now, to seek out an old woman  
who had heard Hafiz when she was young,  
ask her to speak those verses  
as she remembered them

or even to ask her grandchild  
who remembered the light  
of his voice in her grandmother's eyes.

Because Hafiz  
never saw anyone  
who is not God

he called God sometimes Friend,  
sometimes Beloved,  
or Sweet Uncle, Generous Merchant,  
The Immediate One,  
The Problem Giver,  
The Problem Solver, or  
The Clever Rascal.

Because Hafiz  
never saw anywhere  
which is not God

he gave God's address as  
sometimes the holes in the roof,  
or the cracks in the walls,  
or even the back door

of a favourite pub

where God is the dancer,  
the musician, the wine,  
the beautiful companion.

Hafiz knew  
we need poets  
to bring rest and refreshment  
because separation from God  
is the hardest work in the world.

So don't do a thing;  
just rest there, and  
we'll bring you what you need.

\*

[To Daniel Ladinsky, translator of 'Hafiz',  
Shams-ud-din Muhammad,  
c.1320-1389]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! On Looking Into A Cot

For you and you alone,  
Creation has somehow come about..

for a moment, held its breath  
and then, breathed you,  
to demonstrate its awesome powers.

For you and you alone,  
worlds have collided: not  
the planets and the stars  
in their graceful distances  
(though some say, even they colluded) –

but worlds of cause and mind and body;  
for you and you alone,  
miracles have become commonplace.

For you and you alone,  
the gods invented blue:  
painted the windows of your soul  
which have yet to focus,  
with a blue so delicate yet bright,  
so here and yet so far;

eyes that just now for a moment opened,  
remained unimpressed,  
closed into a smile  
at what you still remember deep inside;

For you and you alone,  
a lifetime's been prepared  
(some say you wrote the first draft of the script..)  
but right now, you and we  
live only in the present; may you  
live always in that..

For you and you alone, all one,  
Love is.  
Love that made the world, sustains it; the

infinite electricity of your mother's touch,  
your father's sheer delight;  
for you and you alone, Love is.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! On Not Writing A Poem

and sometimes I'm sitting, quiet,  
wondering whether a poem somewhere  
would like to speak through me  
and it doesn't

but the stillness as I wait -  
that's good.

Then just occasionally, when  
I'm not visited by a poem,  
I visit - without planning - Poetry.

It's a place without a name  
where many things meet:  
there's space, and hope,  
and possibility, and, out of the present,  
a future growing..  
and something that's not less, or  
not less bright, than gold;

where all the poems that have been written  
mix on friendly terms with those  
that are yet to come;

with a sense of company, humanity,  
very undemanding, and what Pooh Bear  
would call, Everybody Listening...

and there's no claim, no need  
to write about I Was There  
and Experienced This, and do you wish  
you had too, and here's my name  
so modestly after a line space

and it's very refreshing, even  
reassuring in its way. Maybe  
if we were back in, oh, Greek times?  
I would wash, put on a white robe,  
take a sweet cake, some oil, some wine, an olive branch,

walk slowly up to the temple,  
tap the road dust off my sandals,  
then between the cool pillars,  
place the offering at the feet  
of the golden goddess; silent  
somewhere between thanks  
and praise and the place called prayer;

and then I'd return home, peaceful  
as if blessed. A more poetic image? Perhaps  
it's the same place: the mind  
was there, the body's here.

It's good. You were there too.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! On The Incredibly Subtle Art Of Walking

You're walking down Princes Street  
or across the market square, or  
in front of the museum, or  
towards the bus or rail station..

and he's there, with his poster on a stick  
and handmedown clothes; and  
despite lowering your eyes, he says to you,  
'Do you have Faith...?' but of course he means  
that other sort... or higher sort...or whatever...  
and smart answers will drip off him  
like the rain that's dripping from his mac...

so, no use pointing out that every step  
you quickly take in passing him..  
is taken in a total faith, unquestioning...

Walking is very, very tricky...if  
you never learned... or have to learn again...  
you want to move forward: shift your centre of balance  
dangerously forward to be off-balance...  
counteract that by extending one leg firmly...  
now, with that leg as lever, return your centre of balance  
through the centre of the body, to your other leg,  
which you then extend, repeating the mirror-image  
(without prior thought...) of your previous action;  
now add to this exquisite balance,  
a swerve to left or right to avoid  
the oncoming pedestrian who believes  
his ego has the right of unswerved way...

Congratulations! You've just managed  
two steps, in one of the most intricate manoeuvres  
a human being has invented, since... since when?  
(Of course, you don't believe in evolution,  
Adam walked upright, right...?)

Yes, you have faith, my son... but  
try not to think too much about this

as you walk...yet, perhaps  
a little wonder, even gratitude  
would do no harm... now,  
where's my walking-stick?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! On The Morning Of Christ's Nativity

This starry dawn - the wise men yet afar -  
the shepherds are abed, their night's task done.  
Is Mary tired? Or, as one untouched?  
All birth's a miracle; not less this one.

The cattle have bestirred at hint of morn,  
the thought of feeding making moist their muzzle;  
straw is rustling, as they, manger-drawn,  
find unfamiliar form- so warm - to nuzzle.

What were the first words Joseph softly said  
to Mary, as dawn broke, this day of days?  
And who, sent from the inn to cattle-shed  
to feed and lay fresh straw, fell still in praise?

How long, this morn, before the murmured sound  
of voices in the street, as Word gets round?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! One For Ramana

The thunder asked  
what is lightning?

The root asked  
why is a flower?

The pupil asked  
who is the teacher?

The space asked  
where is everyone?

The circle asked  
when is the end?

The stillness asked  
whence word?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Oneliness

Sometimes the keyboard  
gets fed up with sausage fingers  
and takes matters into  
it own electric energies,  
its cyber wisdom that knows  
only nought and one..

and who wants to hear a poem  
about `my' loneliness  
as if writing about it will dump it all on you  
and I can get on with my life

but oneliness ah that's something  
I don't even need to write a poem about  
I only need to say it and you know  
exactly what I mean  
now the computer has reminded me:

when you're complete, invulnerable,  
need nothing more; when even dreams  
fall still in awe of oneliness..

oneliness.. it has the sound of authority  
as if medieval mystics like Juliana of Norwich  
or the writer of the Cloud of Unknowing  
are sharing the knowing of it with us;

perhaps the computer, too, switched off at night,  
sighs and knows with a shiver of delight  
that state that knows itself like maybe  
nought and one may know themselves; like  
truth just knows itself;  
so good, so beautiful; warm  
as a shared heart;

oneliness

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Open-Air Concert

How soft the faces  
of listeners to music  
this summer evening!

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Opera Dei- Mozart To The Life

It's a snapshot, except  
before the age of the camera  
yet more of a decisive moment  
than any posed painting

as any photographer,  
lighting director, would see,  
he's next to you, could be  
round about the fifth row back  
of the stalls; looking so straight ahead  
that it doesn't seem to be  
the stage box; and it must surely be  
a grand theatre, the lighting's strong

on his white neck-stock,  
his powdered hair, even catching  
the lower white of his focussed eye;  
he all there, he's all here, and  
attentive as a critic; the opera,  
as it surely is, is playing and engages  
all his faculties; and yet

there's an appreciation  
holding his lips far from the  
childish joke, the poverty, the family deaths,  
or even from the unimaginable creation  
of music that speaks of something  
deep in human hearts, speaks  
of something beyond the human heart.

He's listening to the music  
as if he'd never heard it before yet  
you can see it's all inside him, too -  
whatever 'inside' could mean  
to genius;

it's Mozart, there beside you  
as you sketch him, as the  
music you're not watching

as you watch him and your pencil  
x-rays your very soul and  
finds it wholly good.

So I'd like to thank him  
in his celebration, our celebration,  
for telling me just what it's like  
to be told in music  
what life's about, and  
more.

Michael Shepherd



# !! PRAISE

Whatever that you think you lack – give that! ' –  
this saying, heard, lodged in my mind a space;  
like seed that hides in earth – yet not inert:  
its hidden clock an instrument of grace;

the mind, the soil, that meanwhile, does not know:  
it neither knows what lies in its embrace,  
nor its own precious nutrients which grow  
this seed; nor sees the Sower, nor His grace –

until one day, when in some Spring of light,  
I realised: I, meanly, denied – praise:  
the praise of human beings in my sight;  
and thus, the praise of that One source of praise..

so sought occasion, each and All to praise;  
now Praise, with golden hand, seeds all my days.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Panchadasi Chapter Two

O Lord, You are my own self..  
remind me, now, that my own self is You..

and that's about the measure of it:  
if I were to speak of You, or praise You,  
I would speak verbs, and nouns, and sentences;

remind me, Lord, that every verb  
speaks of, and yet hides,  
Your Creating, here and now;  
that every noun speaks of, and hides  
the single every name of You;  
that every sentence describes, hides,  
Your Creation and its beauty;

so take me, know me, Lord, to be  
Your silent worshipper and friend  
in the stillness of the temple of OurSelf.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Patanjali - For Alison

The boy Patanjali,  
flying his kite in the breezy Thiramurti hills  
one day cut the thread; the kite  
sailed over the hills upon the wind;

asked why he had done that,  
the child had no answer;  
only his future life  
and yoga sutras.

The kite was silent, dancing in its joy;  
we, that joyful kite.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Peak District

Summer sunset lights  
a mountain eagle; circles,  
shares blue sky with stars.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Philanderin' And Phillarkin': How To Be A Modern Poet We All Love

Just two things. Write so that we can understand you while lurching in public transport book in hand and understand you because you're like us but imaginative and funny with it and make us think; but no fancy stuff: we want to be sure you've been there, done it, got it down on paper and that it's the same there as we've been;

and the other thing but it's not essential: the better you write, the more we are reassured by a colourful life well OK scandalous: a rich and very varied sex life would be good: a day with Paris, a week with Princess X then three weeks with some anonymous scrubber (no gender discrimination here by the way) would play well. And if 50% of your liaisons refused to talk (e.g. it was brief but profound) we could read avidly and then hate the other 50% who told all.. but that doesn't mean that a vigorous sex life permits you to say all women are hoes or call your very private wife ma bitch..

and drink to excess of course, mixing your drinks and company: though remember, dying young is no longer a career move in these times of trivial pursuits and careless raptures; as for drugs, OK if you must in which case a ho-hum public attitude from you indicating you don't either approve or disapprove (suggesting that the relationship between chemicals and creativity is too subtle for the tabloid headlines) would be better than some extreme stance.

So, Ruth, Derek, and that abstemious Hindu guy – tell your idiot supporters that more scandal, not less would well befit a poet who's to stand for all of us

as Poet Laureate, Prof of Po, Director of Arts Council Poetry;  
to assure us that Dionysius is still alive and well and living  
somewhere beyond sin and writing great poetry.

\*Come to think of it, a rumour that Ruth and Derek  
once had a stormy relationship with mutual recriminations  
could make this one run and run.  
Now that's what we expect of poets – a bit of phillarkin' on the side..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Platonic Theology

No wheres or whens  
or theres or thens  
in meeting angels  
unaware

but oh! and wow!  
and here and now  
may shine angelic  
anywhere.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Playing Leapfrog With Isso

The huge toad and I,  
staring at one another -  
who will think first, and what?

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Poem For John Around The Camp-Fire

Arthur with all his knights around  
sleep the sweet sleep of time  
under the green hills of Avalon;

this we believe; this comforts us.  
We'll call them when we need them..

unless, the sharp cold dark night-mists of time  
make men forget to spell their children's minds.

And not only knights, they say,  
but all his court, to rise at time of need;

poets, singers, clowns and wise men too;  
all sleep the sweet sleep of those  
who know what waking is.

Tread the green hills of Avalon  
on a balmy summer night

and the faintest sound of horse  
snorting in its sweet-hay sleep

should send you back to tell the tale  
to those who must one day know

just when to wake the sleeping court  
before it's then too late: wake,  
golden; spurred; invincible like truth.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Poem For Mothers' Day

Oh we never know our parents...  
isn't that the cruellest thing?

we were never old enough  
to know them as they were;

how I wish I had been just as old  
as she and he were; to sit  
across the rug from them and say

now tell me the story of your life,  
don't miss out anything..

how could I then not love you more,  
you strangers whom I fought to be  
myself; where were yourselves the while?

\*

I'm crumpling this poem in  
my salty hand and throwing it  
into the wind whose wisdom  
may drop it at your feet;  
your feet I never washed;  
would wash now with my tears;

and then, perhaps, wash history  
clean, with touched hands, shared laughter;  
as clean now as ever after.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Poetic Sandwich

On a crowded commuter train  
pressed between two poets;

caught too for words:  
bystanders pretending not to listen;

but today riding shotgun  
on Poemhunter between

two poems by Hanque O  
full of fresh air and new day. No problems.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Pooh Bear Defines Haiku

Haiku are Poohsticks -  
plop! - then mind must cross the bridge  
for a nice surprise.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Portrait Of An Unknown Woman To Herself

Bland determination sat upon her public face  
where once a smile was;  
so busy doing good  
she had no time for people.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Prayer Beyond Praying For

Sometimes, perhaps, the question,  
what is prayer? Am I missing  
something too precious, not to know of?

Don't ask. Instead,  
peel a potato; scrub a carrot;  
find there, prayer –

all your senses, all your faculties,  
seeking the very source of things;  
finding their own source;

focussed to a fine fine point  
on knowledge; consciousness; and bliss;  
and love; let's not forget the love;

that's prayer. Standing very still by  
the childbed, the marriage bed, or the deathbed –  
your whole being concentrated in a fine fine point;

so many perfections found to be  
in so many perfect places,  
in so many moments out of passing time.

And in the stillness after action,  
prayer was there before you sought.  
You were always prayer.

\*

[after a thought from Plotinus]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Praying Hands

When the whole church kneels to pray  
- though some of us just pretend to kneel:  
leaning forward uncomfortably,  
our ungainly bums only observed  
by the row in the pew behind –

the lady next to me does it in style,  
yet with observable humility:  
she was taught to kneel, I guess, in  
Sunday School when she was five or less,  
and about seventy years later,  
here's devotion's lifetime posture still:

erect, elbows on the pew's bookshelf,  
so that her hands together point straight,  
let's say, to heaven; counterpointed  
by the head a little lowered in humility;

and I study, discreetly, these praying hands,  
subtly shaded by a lifetime  
in rose, white, grey, yellow, brown, red, blue;  
here smooth, here barely covering bone,  
here worn, here wrinkled;

the rest of her, devout; an innerness  
which I can only guess at  
in her lifetime stance; but these hands  
with their lifetime of a woman's work  
have, this Sunday morning, offered up  
their mighty selves unto their maker God..

When my mother's dressed for Sunday  
she's a stranger to the child in me:  
dressed in matching hat, gloves, handbag, shoes;  
not for the public eye or anyone's approval,  
but as the public dresses for its God;

and I glance at these hands, which speak to me  
of prayer, of life, that's way beyond my childish mind;

these stranger hands, with more things yet untold  
than I would know or dare to ask of her.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Premadarshana, Or, A Short Course In Love

To be is to love.

To love is to be.

Roll these life sentences  
around the space  
where your thoughts were

now pretend you never read this.

just be;

pretend you never read this.

\*

[from a thought by Mira]

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Quest And Question

To ask a question beyond answering  
may seem to some to be a waste of mind..  
and yet it may advance some reasoning,  
thus, other questions, real answers find:

for instance: if a soul remains itself  
and yet is re-embodied many times  
until it is returned to perfect health,  
no longer grimy with our human crimes –

how can we guess, in this life's noble aim,  
what hideous past so slowly drags `our' feet?  
And – if we knew – would then some devilish claim,  
the aim, to free our self, somehow defeat?

No answer comes; the question hangs in air;  
but now it has been asked, truth may appear.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Reaching For The Dictionary

That efficient movement of the arm –  
let it be without impatience,  
watched, aware, even graceful –

does not feature in a ballet,  
or a film; although it could;  
unlikely to be described in a novel;

and as for poetry... no poem yet,  
no ode yet owed, to that word-hoard  
with which, indirectly, poets live and breathe  
and share their being...

but when the moment comes, is seen to come –  
how beautiful that movement, full  
of assurance, of anticipation  
of what this may yield...

for lovely though the world  
of that poetic imprecision  
which teases the reading, writing mind,  
plays with the emotions,  
releases the imagination like a glorious balloon...

it's now the moment to look down  
from the basket of the balloon  
soaring so gently over green fields and earth,  
and look for landmarks for a clear descent..

sometimes, it's those geeky, Greeky words  
like metempsychosis or synecdoche,  
ontological, epistemological...

sometimes, those simple words  
like soul, or self...

the pages thumbed over – the choice of paper,  
so thin, so strong, just right, itself  
brings an intelligent respect –

aah, that's what it really means...  
a moment of treasured satisfaction;  
the mind a little clearer now;  
the heart perhaps, may know its warmth  
in later, wiser ways; actions, too,  
may (if we ever notice) be subtly altered,

as the flutter of the butterfly's frail, strong wings  
in some Amazonian rain-forest,  
is sometimes said to be felt  
throughout the world...

universal mind may breathe a gentle sigh;  
language itself, allow a passing smile;

there's order in the world; harmony  
is heard in music beyond words;

the arm and hand, now so graceful,  
reassured; the beauty of the mind  
so quickly registered that it may  
escape; a gratitude perhaps  
as quick as eye-blink, and as unobserved -

the arm and hand replace  
the dictionary there upon the shelf.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Reading The Poems Of Billy Collins

When did you last turn the pages  
of a book of poems as if it were a novel?

and how could a Poet Laureate 'rejoice'-  
as they say in flowery poetic language  
in the name of Billy?

and it's not so much reading  
as being with: as if you're in the same  
room with him: he's over there in the recliner,  
self-contained but friendly; he may  
say nothing; or make an inconsequent remark;  
or launch into a fantasy; or say  
something unpretentiously profound..

it doesn't matter now. You're in the same room  
with him, just being.. he's not making a poem  
like you hold a glass up to the light  
and polish it; he's not even selling 'being'  
like some New Age guru; he's not asking  
anything of you.

And thousands who view poetry with suspicion  
sigh with relief; take up his latest book  
and glance at him there across the room  
with a half-smile that somehow reflects his  
just being Billy Collins. No, not even that;  
just being.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Rembrandt's Darkness, Rembrandt's Light

Here's a painting by Rembrandt van Rijn –  
mark how he bestows the light...

the light of Rembrandt's conscious painted scenes  
falls where consciousness itself shines strongest:

here on a thinking head, deep  
in contemplation of the truth invisible;

here on a melting heart; there,  
on a pregnant belly full of life;

on this marriage bed, her body  
dissolves into the light of love;

here, the golden helmet and the breastplate  
say, heroism has descended on mere man.

But mark, too, that other miracle:  
see in this corner, the area of black paint:

this is not darkness; not negation of the light;  
this is what cannot comprehend the light;

this is the darkness of the unmanifest,  
from which all miracles shall in time arise:

this is the black paint stroked on the canvas  
by the same dazzling intelligence  
which was Rembrandt; the light  
yet stored in darkness; what would that light  
of things seen, be, without the mind  
that understood and marked the not yet lit?

The secret of that darkness fills  
with a brightness that's more beautiful than beauty,  
the mind that knows to shut its mortal eyes.



# ! ! Restaurant

Restaurant; trattoria; tapas-bar;  
weinstuben; sushi; cafeteria; eaterie; drive-by; gastro-pub...  
what's in a name? A meal by any other name  
would smell as good...

In 1765, M. Boulanger (well named) , a humble  
soup-vendor, opened an establishment,  
whose soups and broths he rightly called  
'restaurant', for they were restorative...

Watch this old French film: its very flickering  
and jerking seems to give it life: waiters  
in their long aprons, whisk in and out  
to serve these terrace tables which we're watching  
as that accordeon wheezes, or  
the barrel-organ evocatively, endlessly,  
rolls out its sentiments..

black berets; scarves; thoughtful Gauloise smoke;  
the girls, neat hair; that simple chic  
that rich and poor Parisiennes seem alike to share;

this contented man, almost a stereotype  
(and yet, he lives a life..) , rather overweight,  
has evidently just emptied his plate,  
lights his cigar; complacent? Or,  
in so civilised a measure,  
restored to his former self?

This pair of lovers, evidently  
having had a tiff, their coffees yet undrunk,  
talk into each other's pleadfire eyes,  
reaching in them for a heart;  
ah, now she stretches out her hand  
across the table to seek his;  
the accordeon plays its triumphant banality:  
their love, restored..

See there, at the furthest table,



that heavy, bereted, pipe-smoking man  
who writes intensely; looks up briefly;  
curtly indicates to that young girl  
to sit with him, but not to interrupt:  
isn't that face familiar, at this Left Bank table?

Is he restoring a familiar world  
to sing the barrel-organ's tune;  
or looking into a nothingness,  
a being, a becoming, which will  
in time, shatter all café-table minds,  
steal waiters from their life of service,  
yield Calais's burghers to Hamburg's faster food? ...  
or will the world read; worship for a space;  
and then, from black-clad existentialness,  
restore itself to brighter mental dress?

Café tables, open to the warm Spring air:  
so old a tune, perhaps; but love is there..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Riddle Rap

Didn't seek it; didn't choose it;  
didn't want it; can't refuse it;  
so it's up to you to use it;  
you must suffer if you lose it;  
give account if you abuse it...

what is it?

Now...

\*

[Courtesy Hindu Association of West Texas 'Religious blog' initiative..]

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Rilke In Rome

The chance remains of another time  
and a life that is not ours...  
no, there is not 'more' beauty here than elsewhere -  
but there is much beauty here,  
for there is much beauty everywhere.

Waters unendingly full of life move along the old aqueducts  
into the great city  
and dance in the many squares over white stone basins  
and spread out in wide spacious pools  
and murmur by day  
and lift up their murmuring to the night  
that is large and starry here and soft with winds.

And gardens are here, unforgettable avenues  
and flights of stairs, stairs designed by Michelangelo,  
stairs that are built after the pattern  
of downward-gliding waters - broadly bringing forth  
step out of step in their descent  
like wave after wave.

Through such impressions one collects oneself,  
wins oneself back again,  
and learns slowly to recognize the very few things  
in which the eternal endures  
that one can love.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Rumi's Never Far Away

There's a tavern where  
Prayer, Praise and Self-Discovery  
meet to drink wine together.

They never tire of each other's company.

Sit at the next table and listen  
to their conversation. How  
could they not invite you  
to join them?

Michael Shepherd

# !!SELF'S GRACE

It's said that we are graced  
specifically, in three ways:  
(though we might add,  
but what is human life but grace?)

those three, firstly the divine grace  
which we may turn to, any time,  
in the scriptures as set down  
(which we must bring to life ourselves..)

and then, the grace which flows  
through the good fortune to find  
(or does he or she find us?)  
a teacher who may steer our course  
through life, through teachings, and  
through the understanding which we bring;

and third and last – and most mysterious,  
most powerful, most firmly set;  
and most of all, which all our living life  
partakes of: grace of self.

But what is that? So darkly set  
by our past thoughts, and words, and acts;  
so darkly, lightly, made each moment's presence  
by our present life; and which, darkly again,  
must influence our future life in ways  
or even in our future bodies, if  
such teachings as the Hindus hold  
may energize our ways...

Can we, should we, attempt a gratitude  
to our mysterious former self – that thus  
we are, and to our present moment, brought?

So should we, in some novel, inner way,  
dedicate our present self – to... self?  
Fall silent, still; and in that place beyond  
all thought, all word, all act, all sense, all seeing,

dissolve into ourself; know only, being?

Michael Shepherd

# !! SPLENDOUR

The splendour in the elephant..  
the splendour in a king;

the splendour in the human race;  
the splendour of the rain, the seas;

the splendour which is God in gods;  
with that same splendour, make me splendid, Lord..

\*

from the RgVeda

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Saying The Unspeakable

Such as President Obama  
may not say it; but I  
who am nobody, may speak it:

the God of many names and One  
does not wish division;  
you and I (there are no others?)  
do not wish division;  
who makes division?

Why do all seek an 'enemy'?  
The dispossessed invent an enemy  
on whom to blame their plight;

the rich invent an enemy  
to excuse their greed;

those who worship God under one name  
make enemy of those who worship God  
under another name;

even those who worship God under the same name  
make sects in order to invent an enemy;

is it because it is easier  
to make an enemy than a friend?

is it easier to fear  
than to love?

is it easier to hate  
than to love?

is it easier to count to two  
than think of three or one?

do we feel more powerful  
if we have an enemy?



and now we fire at enemies  
invisible beyond the horizon..

are enemies more attractive  
to our life than friends?

Tell me, poets, tell me, sages;  
tell me, saints; oh tell me God;

tell me, arithmeticians:  
when division multiplies

our enemies, why do we  
so love division?

The God of many names and One  
makes division in Himself  
with love and without hate;

you and I (there are no others?)  
love each other all the more  
in the sameness of our differences;

does human kind  
now hate itself so much?

who thinks division, loves division?  
makes an enemy of otherness?  
forgets that God is One?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Science Rewarded

As children, who have made  
their first discovery of the natural world  
by their own curiosity, rush into the room,  
their eyes shining – so that their parents  
love them all the more, even before  
they tell them of this magic fact –

so scientists; rewarded for their humility  
at the end of a long life, heaped  
with honours; initials after their name  
that no one understands;  
the respect of colleagues;  
loved by their students;

blessed above all by that golden thing –  
the continuance of delight.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Screen Credits

Hollywood, Bollywood –  
what's in a name?  
illusions film illusions;  
reality's the frame...

But Hindus have the best seats  
in real life's picture-house:  
resting in eternity,  
watching all else pass..

\*

(occasioned by reading the 'Hindupedia' website on Dharma, Ayurveda, and  
much else..)

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Screensaver

It's night. Across the Hudson River,  
the New York skyline at its most  
romantic: sprinkled in its wide white way  
with office and apartment lights;  
wispy night clouds add their movement,  
setting off this jewelled velvet;  
in the mid-ground, a fire-launch  
throws a high and spotlit fountain  
to assert that manmade beauty's not forgotten,  
and citizens may share this high-rise paradise..

The French, who have a knack for the poetic phrase,  
might pin down in words this strange emotion  
of a city seen at night – something  
like 'nostalgie de l'inconnu' –  
a nostalgia for the unknown...  
paradoxical sweet yearning in  
a thousand lighted windows behind which  
humans like ourselves whom we will never meet  
share our lives; in this still night scene  
(the distant sounds but faintly heard,  
though not on our saved screens)  
elevated to the holy mystery of life;  
the soundless magic of a nightclub  
saxophone and wistful clarinet;  
a rhapsody in moods of blue.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Scrooge Does Valentine

If your partner doesn't know by now  
how much you love them  
without all that obligatory stuff today  
which they'll know you're doing  
because everybody else's doing it, and they  
will have to pretend it's a big deal -  
they don't deserve you.  
Ditch them. Today.

If you don't celebrate your love  
every day and not just this one  
in some way or other, and  
let them know just how much you care,  
love, respect, need, thank -  
you don't deserve them.  
Start a new relationship with them  
today, and every day..  
Today. Or else.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Seasonal Jangle Jingle

Mirthful and merry,  
jovial and jolly,  
in-laws for Christmas,  
prickly as the holly.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Self Liberation

A noun, a name, a concept perhaps,  
sitting on the page..  
asset-optimization; thought-structure; self-realization...

suddenly, from something you've never heard of,  
it becomes a consumer desirable...  
it's on your shopping list...

better approach it with a laugh; with joy:  
I sat there with her, drinking tea  
and complaining ever so politely  
about the difficulty of being me;  
the air in the room grew heavy and even seemed to yawn..

suddenly she sprang to her feet,  
opened her arms (I see her now) spread wide  
and said (she almost sang) : 'Be like me! Throw yourself  
on the mercy of the Absolute! '

The whole of the dance of life  
in a single movement:  
how could I not believe her?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Selfe's Grammar: A Sonnet In The Style Of George Herbert

O Lord: my dearest Selfe – why need I name Thee?  
Whom I need not call - forever near;  
O Lord: my wholest Selfe – what grammar speak Thee,  
who art Word and Speech, and Mouth and Ear;

Thou art not circumscribed by any Noun,  
that any but Thyself hath speech to say;  
nor Pronoun Thou – who art both I and Thee  
and He and She and every It and They;

All Verbs Thou art; and every verb, Thy act;  
and yet, Thy Stillness knows no verb that moves;  
no Adjective may praise Thee as Thou art;  
no Adverb tell how Thy Love constant proves;

O Lord, my whole dear Selfe: my silent prayer  
may speak the louder; Thy sweet Stillness share.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Self-Knowledge

Show me a wrong conclusion  
and I'll jump to it.

Show me a wrong tree  
and I'll bark up it.

Show me a wild goose  
and I'll chase it.

Show me a hare  
and I'll hare after it.

Show me a conspiracy theory  
and I thought of it first.

Tell me I'm too passive  
and I'll punch your face in for saying it.

Tell me I'm too aggressive  
and I'll break your bloody neck for even suggesting it.

Call me iggerant  
an I'll teach yer...

Who you lookin' at?  
Saw yer lookin'...

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Senryu To A Curry In A Hurry

The throat smiled, that warm Spring evening;  
the stomach sang it to its heart;  
but the guts soon shouted farewell.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Shakti

It's even simpler than that:

give yourself to the oneness  
in one thing, one activity:

and if it's that, in purity,  
they'll come to aid you with  
wonders yet unknown:

it's said, they have no choice;  
they too love oneness above all.

\*

[shakti = the powers of the self]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Sharing Eternity - For The Sorrowing

It should be so obvious:  
all the 'eternal values' which we may see  
as worthwhile in our life –  
these, we share with those who've gone before..  
what else more worth the sharing?

and share, more closely than we know to seek:  
those whose 'loss' to us we mourn –  
especially those so recently thought 'lost' to us –  
they are the ones still closest to us:

they delight to hear from us, chatting in our heart;  
in their eternity, so willing to forgive if we but ask;  
need no medium, planchette or ectoplasm  
to be contacted; if we but wish;

and in the wisdom of eternity which they share  
with us within our inmost heart,  
so eager now to give, and to forgive, and give again:

beloved teachers, to continue so to teach;  
beloved ones, to continue so to feed, draw out our heart with love..

then share eternity, and live!  
it should be so obvious..

\*

[from the Shaivite teachings]

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Shaving Mirror Haiku

Does this mirrored face  
have the same thoughts about me  
as I have of it?

Michael Shepherd

# !! She Thought Of Plum-Blossom; Touched The Strings

Posted: Mon Mar 02,2009 1: 34 pm Post subject:

-----  
She thought of plum blossom, touched the strings

Smiling gently in her mind  
this mid-winter morning  
at the thought of Spring

she wraps herself in padded cotton kimono,  
tiptoes through the snow  
to the plum tree;

touches so gently tips of twigs  
where the buds, too,  
warm at the thought of spring;

then bends down, parts the snow  
so carefully,  
where the shoots of crocus  
will soon pull aside the snowy duvet;  
stretch; look coyly at the sun;

returns in her own footsteps in the snow;  
takes up the shamisen,  
touches the strings; is about to sing;  
instead she smiles; almost sighs, like a lover,  
black almonds in the corner of her eyes;

sounds of shamisen  
can be heard in the garden  
this winter morning.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Silence At The River Bank

This winter dusk, the wild goose's cry  
disappears into the stone cliff:  
stillness.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Singing

If the words are good and true,  
it's as if the centre of all things  
fires and fills; informs the heart;  
the heart, the chest and lungs;  
the lungs, the unhesitating throat;  
space fills the head and voice:

and then, no longer pupil,  
but the teacher of the world;  
hearing from the centre of that sound  
that sound itself may bring about all things.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Singing The Bruised Blues

Poetry

needs listeners to  
reflect love's bright  
refulgence

otherwise

it dries and dies  
a personal  
indulgence

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Some Musings On Journalism

On the scale of public aspiration,  
'journalist' comes second bottom to 'politician'  
- in Britain; whereas in France, it  
comes second top after 'author'...

to be interested in everything, by this calling;  
to be interested in everyone, by this calling;  
now that's a calling worth responding to:

to 'interview' by asking a first question;  
to listen to the very end of answer  
until in the silence after the last word,  
the next question emerges in the mind; thus

to question so that enthusiasm's touched;  
and in the person who confronts you,  
the glow of heart's true love brings all the light of self  
to make the room a timeless temple of humanity;

to have an interview end as such a blessing; and so,  
as one exchange of heart returns to being two people,  
switch off the recorder, close the notebook;  
with glory-lit and humble, slightly moist eye.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Sonnet On The Morning Of Christ's Birth

This starry dawn – the wise men yet afar –  
the shepherds are abed, their night's task done.  
Is Mary tired? Or, as one untouched?  
All birth's a miracle; no less this one.

The cattle have bestirred at hint of morn,  
the thought of feeding making moist their muzzle;  
straw is rustling as they, manger-drawn,  
find unfamiliar form – so warm – to nuzzle.

What were the first words Joseph softly said  
to Mary, as dawn broke, this day of days?  
And who, sent from the inn to cattle-shed,  
to feed and lay fresh straw, fell still in praise?

How long, this morn, before the murmured sound  
of voices in the street, as Word gets round?

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Sonnet: On His Deafness

'Speak up! No need to shout – I'm not that deaf..! '  
-do I have any real right to complain  
if years of partial listening have brought  
now partial hearing in their fateful train?

O Milton – isn't it curious: the blind  
evoke our instant feelings of compassion;  
while deafness calls some idiot state to mind –  
evoking, far from pity – irritation!

Those saintly mystics would just praise their God  
that He, to speed their simple saintliness,  
brings outer deafness, so that inner Word  
in cloistered silence brings a greater bliss..

So may I bear affliction in good part:  
and hear a greater, louder word in heart.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Soul Song: Is This Farewell, Or Simply Au Revoir?

'Soul' – you've stood your ground now  
for many thousand years; even when  
they said God's dead – and lightning did not strike..

you've held our hopes of heaven; even when  
we ceased to know just where they were  
no longer sky and blue and white and grey,  
in thunder and in innocence;

and kept our thoughts of death and life,  
filed 'To Whom It May Concern';

you have two lodgings still: within  
church doors; at graveside; and at prayer;

more of a signpost: 'Keep to  
the public path', than certain destination;

and still living in that music's ecstasy  
that stirs the feet and lets the heart burst forth...

but now? as God and heaven hide their face  
because we cease to look their way,

have you drawn up that lovely silken veil  
across your face; that Indian face  
that knows its 'soul' as servant of the Self;  
has known it now for full ten thousand years?

or do you lurk now in laboratories  
of cranial research, brain-scan; and  
consulting rooms of cognitive research;

to walk in, smile and laugh and say  
oh did you miss me? ...

or do you whisper in the present ear  
of writers on The Power of Now?

Or one day soon, will you reveal  
you were, before the Holy Spirit was?

Tomorrow, Soul, how shall I say your name  
in silent prayer? in mind beyond all words?

Love needs no name in presence evermore; so,  
'Soul' – is this farewell? or simply, au revoir?

\*

[out of a conversation with a Doctor of Theology]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Sounds In Mind

This mind is full of sounds...  
like Shakespeare's island; though  
no mind is like an island...

where are all those sounds stored,  
indexed, waiting tidy on their shelves?

Only when a sound returns  
do you realise that it's been missing..  
hasn't deprivation always been  
the Creator's pointed message to us?

just now, sitting with a teacup,  
after a 'testing' week...  
a gentle, sweet and reasonable  
woman's mother voice returns  
to mind's uncatalogued fine inner ear;  
reminds me it's been absent for awhile..

and the world that seemed so alien last week  
surrounds me with its mellow sound of care.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Spiderthread

Spiderthread

This cool early morning  
when summer is remembering autumn

a spider hangs busy  
off the end of a twig;

it has plans: a thread  
stronger than steel, it's said

which runs out and out,  
back and back

beyond the horizon,  
beyond the creation of the world

into the mind of God.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Spring Cleaning

O Sun,  
you speak in metaphors

shining with a wintry discontent  
grey-yellow on this dust

that dodged your view  
until today

or perhaps, you are yourself  
the brightest fiery metaphor of all

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Spring In Yoshino

The cherry blossoms  
heard the temple bell and bowed;  
fell gentle as snow.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Stevie Smith Reading Her Poems

She was not yet really 'known' -  
but asked to read by this small group  
of older Jewish refugees and eager youngsters,  
talent destined for a fame,  
at the tiny Gaberbocchus Press

which did not affect at all  
the self-contained aloneness  
that walked up the aisle from door to barely stage

and in a clear dry voice neither apology nor hope  
read her poems that gave a meaning  
to the new word 'throwaway' - they were her,  
she read them, threw the invisible sheets away,  
and if you caught them as you laughed  
which was easier than crying tears,  
so be it.

Her voice at the poems' end  
was herself: as if, not waving, no, but drowning, neatly,  
with a certain acceptance,  
in the incomprehensibility of life; she read  
as if when the poem ended  
you might quickly but quietly rise from your seat  
and leave, not rudely but because  
there was nothing more to say

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Stillness: A Poem For The International Day Of Stillness, November 28

'Stillness is my beloved teacher.  
From her, I learn new things every day.'

I said to Stillness,  
how can you teach me so well?

Stillness said,  
By being with you always.

I said to Stillness,  
How can you teach me so much?

Stillness said,  
Because you have much within you;  
I, but a mirror for your mind;  
I, but a mirror for your heart.

I said to Stillness,  
O my beloved teacher, will you  
promise me you will never leave me?

Stillness said,  
I cannot leave you;  
though you can leave me..  
but what is stillness without a companion?

I said to Stillness,  
Is your work hard?

Stillness said,  
I have the most wonderful task that I could wish for:

I sit with babies while they smile;

I sit with children in the classroom  
as they delight to learn;

I sit with the angry and disturbed,  
And watch them grow to peace;

I sit with the sad and lonely and bereaved  
and watch them rediscover happiness and joy;

I sit with kings and queens and rulers  
while they find wisdom and mercy;

I sit with governments and committees  
while they find reason and justice;

I sit with artists and scientists,  
and watch them find new things outside themselves,  
and find new things within themselves;

I sit with those who pray or meditate,  
and watch them find God in themselves;

I sit at the feet of saints  
while they become perfection;

I fly with birds, in the silence of the air;  
I watch the animals as they explore the earth;  
I hear the growing of the trees and plants;  
I listen to the opening of the flowers;

I walk in the gardens of the dawn;  
I walk in the gardens of the dusk;  
in the deep of the night, I watch.

Said Stillness,  
I am the friend and the companion of all;  
who would not love to share my life with me?

I said to Stillness,  
may I never leave you.

And Stillness looked me in the eye,  
and Stillness smiled at me:

'I am born with every creature born

to be their friend for life.'

\*

(With acknowledgements to Iain Trousdell of New Zealand, whose poem quoted from in the first two lines inspired this extension..)

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Studio Visit

Feet slightly apart, firm  
as at stable ease, yet  
ready for the glorious unexpected;

left thumb, pressured  
white to pink under the nail,  
hooked through wooden palette,

its organic shape summoning  
some internal organ – heart,  
lungs, kidneys, liver –

squeezed dabs of pure pigment,  
waiting, vivid, muted, or in  
a cosmic swirl of some new sight;

looked me in the eye and said,  
ordinary is so beautiful... the studio silenced,  
paint brush poised,

and the whole singing world, given  
now a blessing, to be its ever  
miracle of light and life and space,

of the ordained, of ordered  
breath of life shaped as a palette,  
shaped as an eye, sheds inner light

on outer, mind that knows only  
present here and now; his gaze,  
still on mine; waiting for the sight

of the miraculous in pupil of my eye,  
mind as his canvas, waiting too  
for the world made ever new;

'only watch, and all else happens;  
ordinary is so beautiful.'





## ! ! Sufi

A broken reed. No longer  
its feet in earth, its stalk in water;  
what will become of it?

Taken by grace; cut; shaped  
into new name, new form;  
breathed into it, the breath of life;

the breath, heard by a song  
unmanifest, that waits to be born  
from cause to mind to sound:

how can this sound be described,  
the joy of broken reed now flute?

Now the reed can sing; speaks  
of how it cried its loss;  
yearned to find itself again;  
knowing in its heart  
that wholeness waits, somewhere, for ever;

now it sings for joy, so purely that  
no ears, no heart, can resist its call;  
nevermore to part the reed, the flute, the song.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Sunlight On White Paint. For The New Year.

The house across the way is newly painted white.  
Right now, that's all my being seems to need:

this winter morning, sharp, cold, bright and clear,  
the morning sunlight pours across white paint;

contains a thousand messages, in me  
interpreted.. or simply left to be..

this moment, that's as much as being craves:  
this morning's glory; and I, born for praise..

even as I write, I watch the sun's  
white paint brush move across the house's front

and tell the eye of reason that this world  
is turning, basking, in this morning sun;

already sparkling on the Bondi waves  
as if the world had just been washed anew;

cast early dawn's pearl light on Taj Mahal  
as if the sun itself could never tire of beauty;

Italian villa forecourts just hosed down,  
the air all fresh to meet the warming day;

the gardens of Carmel, eight hours from now,  
will paint their flowers fresh with mist and dew;

as every carefree holiday yourself  
recall, as proof eternal of pure soul..

and here - the witness of my silent mind  
needs nothing, need go nowhere else to find  
its very self, this moment without taint:  
immortal sunlight shining on white paint.



# ! ! Surgery

Just back from the surgery

(at least it's 'the' surgery, not

cold-steel 'surgery'...)

Surgery. Well-named.

Surges of fear, apprehension,

remorse, injustice, you name it.

On second thoughts, don't bother.

The reception room's OK though.

The counter staff are always ready for

a laugh, a smile, a bit of banter.

Today, it's 'Do you mind being video'd?

It's a training video. If that's OK, would you sign

now, and again afterwards? '

Cue for joker: you should have warned me,

I'd have gone to Make-Up first, and I only give my signature

for charity these days...send the fee to my agent

and next time my people will talk to your people  
about the Pers. App....

but they stopped listening halfway.

Then the surgery... it's like a scene

From Malice in Blunderland: as I enter,

I shrink, am diminished to

a slithery list on her computer screen;

judgment day records, and doomful events of personal life

now mere one-liners..

a case-history with the added social disadvantage,

sorry, negatively endowed, of

having a face and body..

Look for the camera, natch -

always ready to falsify my life

for no-one who might care.

Damn, it's behind me;

looks like truthday here.

Spare you the details

in case you tell me worse.. so

Exit Dwarf, as Shakespeare would have penned it.

You could have surfboarded on the final surge

of peripheral dismissed humanity;

too mean now, to say goodbye

to the deception staff.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Swan Song

Is evolution wiser than we know?  
Are we to believe it nothing more  
nor less, than threats, in holy or unholy  
alliance with blind chance;  
survival of the fittest, its whole aim?

And swans, but upside-down giraffes?

Once upon a time... when food became too short  
for the short-necked to reach the last top leaves,  
the ones with longer necks, survived;  
female giraffes, noting this,  
sought partners for their progeny among the longer-necked;  
and so, nature stretched her expanding world  
to – giraffes...

And when the short-necked ducks  
ran short of food,  
the longer-necked reached down in shallow water..  
the females noted this.. and finally... the swan  
emerged.. its feathers waterproof,  
its bird-feet, larger; claws now webbed...

And thus, we sentimental human beings –  
who cannot add such cubits to our stature –  
stand and marvel; as those graceful swans  
make life seem easy... little do we see  
of where their work is done.

Mother Evolution, so it seems,  
is liberal with her gifts –  
here, an ungainly visual joke;  
there, an elegant white curve of beauty.

Hindus name their holy men  
as 'hamsa', swan: gliding over life;  
their work, in inner realms we would not know;  
giraffes –camelopards, as they were called  
by puzzled Europeans; splay-legged,

with ears that look surprised;  
walking periscopes; waiting  
for a poet to join them in a question:  
does Evolution need now, to evolve?

Michael Shepherd



# !!THIS...

This...thing... which visits me,  
torturer so intimate  
which knows me better than I know myself:  
calls out all my resources  
to transcend its pains;  
changes always its approach  
as if it's quite determined to  
leave no corner unexplored...  
plays on my fears, my hopes, my dreams...:

what can I do but see it as  
the hurdle (which I built myself?)  
but failed to clear, the last time round;

have another try...see it from  
the helicopter hovering overhead  
which photographs, but does not feel  
the rider or the horse; the going, or the race..

have another try...it is the way  
to develop and refine your skills;  
another day, another race; and

after it, serenity; detachment; laid-back day..  
some hidden deal's been struck  
and time has witnessed it.

You too? You've met this thing  
emerging from unreason to the light?  
Join me in the stillness; for that  
which this affliction plays with in disguise,

this must be love; this must be grace;  
this must know its own origin;  
all else shall pass; meanwhile,  
the joke is this: it's bearable...  
if not, it wouldn't work...

This poem a knowing smile;

black demon with an angel's eyes.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Taking Coffee 'With' Jean-Paul Sartre.

It was 1952. We had a limited travel currency.  
In Paris, I went one morning to  
the Dome Café. There  
sat Jean-Paul Sartre, smoking  
a large meerschaum pipe  
such as Kierkegaard or Nietzsche might have smoked;  
he had his morning coffee in front of him.  
Simone had not yet joined him.

A circle of young admirers sat at a  
discreet distance; most wore black  
but the young women could not avoid  
a certain Parisian chic in their sombreness,  
their existential frown and turned-down lips  
around bright eyes.

It was the chance of what we call  
a lifetime. Dare I speak to him?  
Nothing ventured, nothing gained:  
a human being must live his words,  
act out his own chosen life in honesty  
like Ché Guevara..

I moved to his table. The circle of admirers  
were all attention. I saw two of them  
surreptitiously take out small notebooks.

'Is this seat free, Monsieur? ' He knew me for  
a stranger in that theatre of the absurd  
we call life, where all are strangers.

His arm was a signifier. His hand  
indicated an empty seat (not the closest,  
which awaited Simone) : his shoulder  
gave the slightest Gallic shrug. We make  
our own decisions, live by them.

An awed waiter, affecting nonchalance,  
brought my coffee. Should I speak to Sartre

of teenage mountaineering in Canada  
and the discovery of philosophy?

No. We would then be  
to each other, The Other.

We sat there silent: two beings without meaning  
whose meeting was prefigured, whom  
only a Creator could have put there;  
a Creator whom we must deny.

I spoke through the dry lips of one  
who had not yet attained an authentic  
aloneness:  
'This coffee is good, n'est-ce pas, Monsieur? '  
Two students took up their pencils.

'Ca, c'est.. vy I com heere.'

We sat, two human beings magnificent in the  
heroism of their aloneness, enjoying,  
if that's the word, a shared appreciation of the coffee  
carefully watched by the intellect..

The coffee drunk, I stood up, with a  
slight bow – 'Monsieur..'  
He glanced up, but not at me;  
Simone had appeared.

I walked away, glorying in  
the heroism of those who know they have no heroes,  
writing the words of their life,  
living by them. The students, awed,  
watched my body language for clues  
to existence, which might then reveal  
essence. Or not.

.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Talking Hawking Meeting Dawkins

Suppose that 'Evolution' were throned God,  
with all the praise and power accorded That?  
Where would that path then lead the human race?  
And what new thoughts would fill our mind and heart?  
Evolution would then rule three worlds:  
As Spirit's cause, and Mind, and world of Form;  
would then be seen in Beauty, Goodness, Truth;  
no longer mere Survival's tooth and claw,  
but Lord of evolution of our minds;  
of spirit, too, in seeking its true self;  
new Age of Reason, calling all our powers  
to seek ideals as real; rightfully ours  
from genesis to paradise above;  
no longer as survival... but... as Love?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Teacher As Healer: An Observation

Even before the question put,  
they're full of quiet attention; something  
is already being listened to.. makes  
that space, in which a question  
may be floated on the air..

tentatively perhaps, or self-concerned,  
the question's put; and listened to;  
perhaps with gentle nod of head;  
a keen attention; even a half-smile:

you and they are meeting now  
in the fullness of the heart, in  
a place that's fully shared:

the teacher, almost eager, so it seems,  
to hear more of your truth;  
to hear the truth of you.

And as the question nears its end,  
the answer floats upon the air  
as if it and the question are but one;

the answer gently given, as if  
already shared; not given,  
not received; but already shared;

(and I saw: each time they said  
the words 'it is', their spine  
relaxed into a greater straightness..)

Who can describe that unity of mind -  
as joy in stillness; or the bliss of peace?  
Somewhere in the world of name and form,  
something has been healed;  
wholeness has returned to wholeness;  
perfection taken, and returned;

the teacher, too, is still;

gifts of grace have been exchanged.

Michael Shepherd

# !! Technology - A Thumbnail Tribute To Martin Heidegger

Tekne', to the Greeks  
was the art of bringing-forth  
from the true (and, it's hoped, the good)  
into the beautiful:

poetry; sculpture; machinery of wood and metal  
such as that which raised the Parthenon;  
raised Apollo, Venus, out of stone;  
raised myth out of poetry.

And I, we, too have technology  
forever at our finger-tips..

Did it happen through chance,  
through procrastination,  
or through attention given  
to a task and needs,  
this 'beautiful' solution  
that mathematicians talk about?

it happened on one godgiven day,  
scrubbing those shining new potatoes:  
the right-hand thumbnail now grown long  
suddenly a more efficient tool  
for removing 'eyes' and hollowed dirt..

so now, this intimate and valued tool  
carefully shaped between a v and u;  
and from the fingertip to heart  
arises wonder, awe: the gentle curve  
of nail gives added strength.. how magnificent  
the humblest, least worshipped fingerends  
of these so precious hands...

Do I mimic man called 'primitive'  
as I depend on nature's tools  
to alert the inventive mind



by the attention which, taken so for granted  
links us to the gods themselves...?

Tools first, then machines, then 'technology'  
have no limits under divine law:  
call them, the exteriorisation  
of our brain, our mind:

thumbnail, bridge, interstellar rocket  
are thus one in wonder; every action  
now to mind and heart, a sacrament;  
the bringing-forth, the showing-forth  
of Man – the tekne of the gods;  
the gods who live, who wake from sleep,  
only when Man rounds the circle with his praise.

"Questioning is the piety of thought."

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Telling The Bees

It was the year before last that  
I started to notice it.

Bees wandered into the house  
then didn't remember the way back

Bees. Whose sense of direction used to be  
great than any Indian scout;

as if mankind had lost its most valuable gift  
-what might that be?

Scientists are still working on the reasons.  
There were more lost bees last year;

when they're half exhausted and quieten down,  
staying on the window pane for a few second more,

I take a jam jar and a piece of paper  
and take them to the door

talking to them as I did when  
I buried that baby swallow when I was four;

indecipherable words that I would use  
to a cat run over in the road,

a child in pain; some sort of sounds  
of consolation for what's beyond words anyway

that only music could express.  
It's ancient: you should talk to bees;

tell them of all that affects the house, the family;  
when there's a death, you put a piece of black cloth

on the hive. In return, they do things for you  
that are beyond your notice or their explanation.

How can I tell them, we're so sorry for you, we don't know,  
when we do we'll tell you; it's probably our fault,

chemicals and stuff. So far this year, only one  
huge bumble-bee, I couldn't catch it;

it hid from me. Perhaps they've learned  
whatever it is they had forgotten;

perhaps they risked their lives  
to warn us: you too have forgotten

something that could kill your species:  
you too, have forgotten the way back...

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! That Couple

We love them dearly,  
Individually – always will –

but together – lawdy lawd...  
they've exhausted our sympathy,  
our advice, our sympathy again...

they love 'making up'  
more than rowing, separating – don't we all?

but they love making up, even  
more than loving...

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! That Thou Art (For Arthur And Phyllis)

Was this first yellow primrose  
waiting for me here  
to join it in wordless praise?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! That Ugly Man..

Who can forget- if and when you've seen him -  
that student whose whole face and body language  
shout at you the demand,  
'Hate my ugliness! Tell me that I'm right  
to hate myself! '

That man, of whom it's said  
that once a lady saw, as standing right beside him,  
golden Apollo alive himself? ..

Who can know what tricks gods play on us;  
or who, of humans, devotes their whole life  
to play out this charade?  
And how deeply does this 'ugly' man  
believe this to be his own self?

A living human parable perhaps:  
here to remind us just how much  
we yearn for, know of, that eternal truth  
whose face is beauty; is, ourself.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! That Word - From A Poem By Kabir

What is there to say  
about that word?

Nothing. It is itself enough.

Everything. For everything springs from it;  
whatever you speak, is praise of it.

Seek it. But where to seek it?

On a clear night, go outside;  
see the stars of the Milky Way shimmering there.

Somewhere inside yourself, you will be near  
that word.

When you have found that place  
near it, guard it:

love its mystery – always beyond;  
love its reality – all that springs from it;

writers write from it;  
musicians sing it, play from it;  
dancers dance from it;

renunciates owning nothing in their snowy caves  
are full of it;

even the greedy seek it everywhere;  
even disbelievers have to say it, to deny it;

we live in it, move in it, owe our being to it;  
yet it means nothing to you until you seek it;

for inside that word,  
everything is full of light;

there is enough of that light in one human heart

to light the whole world.

Breathe in that word;  
breathe out that word.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! The Aged Poet. For Kealan If

When he was young  
and life was poetry  
and poetry was life  
and girls made poetry  
in his heart

he'd showed his poems to  
an aged poet who  
was quiet a while then  
nodded his head and  
smiled and  
said 'keep writing'

and he swore that day  
as long as he could hold a pen  
he'd write some sort of poetry

and so he did and so he did

and when he was  
too old to hold a pen  
he spoke his poetry  
some say in an Irish pub

and people came from miles around  
and said sure it was a t'ousand times  
better than to read his poems on the page  
which was itself worth –  
and that last phrase was poetry  
for who is not Irish and a poet

and when he was too old  
to walk down to the pub

they came and listened  
at his door and at his window

and when he was too old to speak  
they came to see his silence

and left as poets  
for their head  
had joined their heart

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Algebra Of Poetry. For Jim As If.

OK you've written 2000 crap poems you say.  
Now pack up this arithmetical stuff:

there's an algebra to poetry:  
equations full of unknowns:

for a start, the 2001th poem that you write  
will contain 2000 times the...

well it's a complicated equation:  
it starts with the familiar

x for the expression which has improved  
a thousandfold since you began;

y stands for the hundreds of times more wise  
you've since become, by just writing poetry;

zzz is the way, that half-asleep,  
an unforgettable word or line can slip into your head;

z too, for zeal and zest, that Muses love  
and fly a little closer while you write..

then, it wouldn't be a real equation without  
'squares': for all that's squared within your mind as poetry takes shape;

and brackets: for that intrusive, brilliant phrase  
that slips between the wagons of your train of thought,

sometimes so surprising that you're not too sure  
it's true; but trust it; tomorrow, know it's right;

and oh so much more to this equation  
of knowns equalling unknowns, spelling out a poem;

mass, energy, and the speed of light  
writing themselves into some new formula

which only humility may harness;  
a light to light the world with words.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The American Declaration Of Co-Dependence

The rich need the less rich  
to oil their lives like soundless hinges  
and do the jobs they would not want to do.

The poor need the less poor  
to make the jobs for them to do

While those in the middle  
have aspirations; work hard;  
love their kids; and sometimes  
feel warm glow of gratitude  
for being safe and middling.

Then when times are tough...  
perhaps it's time for charity  
and co-dependence  
and some noble human impulse  
that's social without the 'ism  
that scares the hell out of some folks

so don't take it out  
on the President;  
America is you.

Co-dependence.  
Like when they first  
came off the boat  
that passed the Statue  
with a cry of hope  
in many colours.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Caliph, The Craftsman And The Imam (An Ancient Tale Just Brought To Light)

He was the pride,  
sometimes the envy, of the village:

no wealth of jewels, but  
a set of gleaming tools.

When asked, he would tell:  
I go to the Caliph,  
explain what I need and why:

I seek precious things  
from the One who does not withhold...

and those around the Caliph  
said to him, why are you so generous  
to that humble craftsman of fine things?  
And why do you listen for so long, to his talk of work?

The Caliph said,  
I seek precious things  
From the One who does not withhold...

And would you ask me  
what the Imam said when asked?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Coincidence Of Contraries

It's said that when the One eternal mind  
bursts into glorious multiplicity,  
its first divisions enter human kind  
as dualism and polarity:

dualism may be met by mind;  
by reason, thus returned to unity;  
polarity – that tool to stretch our mind –  
may bring emotion's instability:

hate and love, close-twinning, may torture hearts;  
joy and sadness dance our strength away;  
whate'er we think ourselves, its twin still lurks:  
conceit and worthlessness, each others' prey;

beware these contradictions in the mind;  
yet, boldly brought together, One to find.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Conversation

You know, since you've played that game too:

Sometimes, consumed by glowing, burning love  
of treasured child, or husband, wife,

it is one further bound of love  
to speak of them with a detachment;

casually; offhand; as if it were  
of no great current consequence;

you look into their eyes; see there what you see:  
love's incoherent boundlessness;

are lost to love yourself;  
smile; and play their game.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! The Dawn Of Christ's Nativity [sonnet]

This starry dawn – the wise men yet afar –  
the shepherds are abed, their night's task done.  
Is Mary tired? Or, as one untouched?  
All birth's a miracle; no less this one.

The cattle have bestirred at hint of morn,  
the thought of feeding making moist their muzzle;  
straw is rustling as they, manger-drawn,  
find unfamiliar form – so warm – to nuzzle.

What were the first words Joseph softly said  
to Mary, as dawn broke, this day of days?  
And who, sent from the inn to cattle-shed,  
to feed and lay fresh straw, fell still in praise?

How long, this morn, before the murmured sound  
of voices in the street, as Word gets round?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Day When 'They' Killed 'Them'

It was the bloodiest day  
in those long long years;  
that day when 'they' killed 'us'  
who were the 'they' to them.

The next day we buried ours;  
fearing as we turned the bodies  
to see a known face: friend, relation.

But it was the boy.  
His pockets, stuffed with leafy olive twigs;  
as he went out to fight for freedom  
freedom which did not ask his life.

I did not know that tears  
could be so salty on the lips  
beyond all bitterness.

\*

[taken from a described true incident]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Desert Fathers

As far from men, as near  
to God, as they could achieve, living  
where the desert met the mountains;

their sustenance  
beyond our supermart imaginings,  
alone or with a few devoted  
kindred spirits, they lived a life  
of hard work, asceticism, prayer –

with all the urban wit of the best  
gentlemen's clubs, all the perception  
of consultant psychiatrists:  
observing in themselves in solitude  
all the ills of man, before, then, since:

'We have rejected the light burden  
of condemning ourselves, and  
we have chosen the heavy burden  
of justifying ourselves, and condemning others...'

touché, Abba John!

They, a little lower than the angels,  
between the desert and the mountains,  
between the hard place and the rock,  
between human tragedy and  
the divine comedy;

on their face,  
above rough cloth, rough hands,  
humility; bright eyes; compassion's smile.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Early Blackbird

A blackbird has been sitting outside the window  
for some time this morning, and  
I'm trying to tune in to its blackbird thoughts,  
if indeed it's burdened with such tiresome  
delaying tactics to action...

it seems indecisive, though; evidently, plumply,  
having well breakfasted; does  
the head switching left, right,  
a little slower than with alarm,  
signify some Hamlet thought?

it could be wondering, if,  
in view of what a blackbird would call  
global warming rather than  
an early summer,

it should sing?

since the early bird, it must have been  
taught, or intuited, catches the first mate..

I try looking at it severe of mind,  
as mindless tool of Evolution  
(and yes, me too...)  
only concerned with food and sex  
and sex and food,  
and other internet concerns  
in cyber blackbird space...

but that goes nowhere in the mind..  
I open the front door a crack,  
whistle a poor imitation of a blackbird's song;  
it twists its head for a moment  
as of impatience at some irrelevant comment;  
flies off; returns; like I do, when  
I've lost the train of thought  
that sent me somewhere in the house  
but have forgotten what it was...

I'll keep an eye out for it tomorrow...  
and turn back to the computer,  
remembering Nicholas of Cusa  
who says, there is no other:  
always, we are looking  
at the face of God...

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The English Teacher

I bumped into my grandson's English teacher yesterday  
at the football, and in between shouting like teenagers  
I moaned about the state of A's Eng. Lit. not to mention Eng. Lang. -  
you know, you've heard it all before... in my day.....never regretted....  
he agreed, but said go easy on the lad he's only thirteen  
they all want to be fifteen and grown up at that age,  
they can't be seen by their peer-group to be 'for' anything too much  
so they ridicule everything, it's either pretentious crap if it's modern  
or stupid ancient crap if it's more than a generation ago...  
they even call Shakespeare a sad loser until  
someone says he wrote the screenplay for that film  
though they're fascinated by the idea that Marlowe  
was a spy as well as a crap writer not that they've read him anyway

but you know what he said  
put them up on stage in the annual Shakespeare and make them  
speak his lines, and they'll never forget it,  
they'll not say anything about it to me except in private but  
they'll remember it to their dying day it's things like that  
he said that keep me in this bloody job.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Fish And I Will Chat

Sometime it swims right up to the glass  
as if it would talk with me –  
opens its mouth, fixes me with a watery eye;

a moment when we can exchange silent thoughts,  
about whether it's better to be confined  
in a tank, but free of all possessions,  
compared with the freedom to acquire  
so many possessions; or which of us  
dislikes the more, a dentist's waiting room..

nod and smile to know we both share  
that joke about the fish in the water  
never being thirsty; swimming in what  
we take for granted; like, say, grace, or God..

so the fish flips its tail, is off; both of us  
in agreement about freedom, meditation.

\*

[leaning on Hafiz' poem of that title]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Five Of Pentecost - To Marsilio Ficino

Sometimes you spell it out for us:

God's earth – the matter of the universe,  
holding without form at first,  
all God's love, grace, mercy, pardon,  
as our earth which was yet to nourish;

God's water – as His love,  
flowing now; now binding hearts together;  
baptizing with His grace;

God's fire – that warms, consumes,  
shines as the beauty of His blessing;  
a light so bright, we cannot see His form..

What then, would you say  
of God's own air? That holy spirit,  
that blows His grace as blow it will;  
breathes through His boundless space  
upon the souls in their own upper air;

And what then of God's fifth element –  
the ether, humming His vibrations?  
what of the sound of God?  
what may we listen to, or sound, of Him?

The upper room  
of house, of soul;  
a rushing, mighty wind  
whose sound blew through their lives  
with many voices; tongues of flame  
around their heads;  
and as much spirit, love, and grace,  
and as much nourishment and daily bread  
as man to man;  
as soul to soul;  
as godself to godself;

perhaps, as John said,  
remembering that Pentecost -



one word.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The God Who Talks To Children

Every child has known God:  
not a God of names, or shapes;  
not a God of do's and don'ts;  
not a God of alarming things;

but God who's with you all the time,  
can be talked with, silently,  
because He understands all that you do,  
knows just why you do it,  
knows that you're really always good,  
but somehow do these other things;  
you know that you and He are just so close,  
that He's always on your side;

And if He doesn't explain to you  
why He seems to go away somewhere  
when you are seven or so –  
maybe He thinks that it's the time  
for a game of hide-and-seek  
between friends?

\*

(extrapolated from Hafiz' 'The God who only knows four words')

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Good

Even before she held you tight to her  
and murmured softly, isn't that just good? —

before you learned to hear, and speak, and spell  
and comprehend the concept of the Good —

your soul already hungered for the Good it loves,  
never to be quenched in its desire;

as your beloved cat, who in the day  
manipulates affection, but at night

becomes a ruthless predator to feed its catness;  
so your clever, cunning, hungry, godly soul;

even when your adolescent heart falls flat  
at beauty's vision in a human form

soul whispers (unattended to) : now here's the truth:  
that even beauty's borrowed and must be refreshed..

so soul may take a lifetime, till the mind  
whose aid it seeks to find itself the Good

arrives; and sighs a lifetime's sigh; and rests;  
and soul, which knows no failure, place, or time,  
shines out to prove it never went away;  
nor shall, nor can; her elsewhere light, our day.

\*

[From Plotinus, Ennead VI 7,31,17-31]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Guru Is Not Other: A Metaphysical Proposition

It was his distance, that at first brought awe:  
so great, so perfect, so ideal.. so far...  
so distance humbles, brings humility;  
the beauty of his feet, on earth we share;

and then, as if upon a flat-race turf,  
the barriers built.. as if there long ago;  
he, further over hedge and gate and brook;  
and I, but wilful weakness, wailing `woe'..

until at last I sought him as a friend;  
to meet within the heart we truly share;  
surrendered distance, consciousness, and time:  
asked nothing; difference thrown into the air;

I care not now, for pronouns `he' and `me';  
his eye, my I; ourselves one self to be.

\*

Dedicated to the one who asked.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Guy In The Photograph

Out of the old tin frame  
the 1944, I guess, photo, shines  
a carefree smile from the 15-year-old  
caught on a hillside in the summer air  
in pure happiness..or so it images..

It's the only photo from the album  
that I like to have around; I look at it  
and marvel that I ever looked like that  
for more than one unguarded moment..

Is the story of my childhood that I tell myself,  
the agonies of growing up, the uncertainties,  
the discovery that parents are not perfect...  
the not knowing who one really is...or might be...  
all that, a fiction, or a fraction of the truth?

From time to time, I glance at it,  
(as my parents must have done,  
with all the thoughts that I'll now never know) :  
accept its mute challenge of beauty, goodness, truth...  
he's expecting all that life may offer;  
this is the guy I must keep faith with...  
what else is there to say?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Harvest Of The Mind

Consider for a while,  
deeper mind as agriculture:

garnered seeds at rightful time –  
deeds as seeds –  
surrendered to the wisdom of the earth  
which contains the wisdom  
of all other elements:

surrendered to the faith in nature,  
hope of harvest;

in the meantime, nought to do  
but pray and praise and cultivate  
that inner earth; care  
for next year's seeding field;

repair the fences of discrimination; trim  
the hedges, spinneys, copses,  
where free nature of herself displays  
so beautifully, that which is.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Heart's Light

Somehow, the words of Hesychius  
have reached us after more than a thousand years  
and from a desert place, Mount Sinai;  
where he was famed for 'breathing Jesus'  
(there's something in me says,  
that's quieter than the pulpit..)  
and thus, talked little..

but he said (and this they wrote down,  
preserved, passed on, quoted, marvelled,  
sought to practise; succeeded.. or ever, failed? ...

'One who watches carefully over the heart  
will quickly see, how the heart  
of its own nature, is emitting light'...

and I'm sad; with that sweet sadness  
when you hear of a beauty that  
you didn't know existed;  
wondering, if one day...  
or every day.. and how long  
it would take, and whether  
you, or I, would ever have  
the strengths, whatever they might be,  
to attain that state...

and how it must have been,  
when word got round, and others watched  
their heart, his monastery glowed  
like a family of fireflies in the dusk,  
as cool, as bright, as love bestowed  
without the asking..

Tomorrow, you may see me in the street,  
walking a little more slowly than the usual;  
rapt in a wordless thought,  
discreetly glancing at the passers-by;  
beyond the judging failure or success,  
treasuring a sweet silver gift,

a cool, new beauty promised.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! The Hinterland

Poems have a hinterland.

They come from a mind  
that's left behind, a family,  
a tribe, a nation,  
in the dense equatorial forests of the human heart;  
yet in its backpack, precious souvenirs..

has trekked through swamps and uplands,  
dangers, adventures, pleasures,  
then the scorching arid desert sands,  
and there in front one day,  
the matter-of-fact sea, lapping  
with the lazy always-there...

and leaning down, place nonchalantly  
the poem now a paper boat,  
into that glittering, faithless blue,  
launched to tide and wind;  
should you have put it in some green bottle,  
you who think it's precious,  
with a name, address, so that they know  
how far it's travelled...?  
Somehow, that matters little in this present moment,  
as the poem's past prepares to meet its future self;

Yet, you watch it, silent, 'til it disappears;  
how close, to children, is horizon's curve.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Human Comedy

They laughed and smiled  
when they conceived you -

and maybe God did too;

you laughed and smiled  
when you were born -

what happened?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Inner Magnet Sings Like Flower To Bee, Like Bee To Flower

The inner magnet sings  
like flower to bee; like bee to flower -

Some traditions say, that  
we all have an inner sound; which  
we can train; or can leave it be..  
as gold for Midas; Midas, so, for gold;

and this, it's said, calls pupil to their teacher;  
teacher to their pupil; it is  
that yearning to know more  
that draws the two to unity;

anmd so the holy men  
show no surprise to see you there  
(unsure, nonplussed, and wondering..)  
at their holy feet which are not theirs..  
holy chicken, holy egg...

so here I sit, pen down, and silent, still,  
loving this idea; asking nothing;  
treasuring, now, this sound  
I cannot hear as yet;  
and yet, may be as loud  
as pindropp silence in the heart:  
the lovely sound  
of listening itself.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Lake Of Metaphor

and perhaps I came to poetry too late  
to dive, a slimmish youth,  
innocent as youth was or is  
into the rich waters of the lake of metaphor  
fed distantly by mountain springs,  
welcoming in its wateriness,  
chilling too like a demand for respect,  
welcoming and chilling as a life;  
a few strokes and already the green bank  
and pile of crumpled clothes discarded  
quickly distant, and here  
in the middle of the lake, the sky  
has opened out as if it were  
some rival to a mountain-top

and the hands press against  
the resistances of language, the palms  
flat as between praise and surrender,  
cleaving a passage to the depth  
and then the shore of metaphor; and  
emerging, the sunlight  
catching the sparkling water droplets,  
the skin shivering but invigorated,  
the mind full of life  
like a poem rich in metaphor.

Older now,  
waiting as in the paintings of Saint Jerome  
at his desk walled in by books,  
pen poised, eyes uplifted,  
spirit, rich, yet  
mind not full, but waiting  
for the grace of metaphor  
like the brushing of a white dove's wing

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Listening One

The Listening One

Does he, did he, know, what he contributed  
to the truth of what was spoken?

Towards the back seats of the lecture room,  
this tidy, slim, quiet, dark-complexioned youth  
listened with unwavering attention;

so much in the moment, his mind, so visibly,  
claiming nothing; receiving all that there was to receive;  
contributing, all that an audience can:

under his so steady listening,  
I could not lie, blur, dodge; be anything  
but dedicated to the truth;  
from his attention, through my own,  
he gave the audience more than I prepared.

I wonder if he knows the gift he's shaped.  
How many others has he blessed thus, with himself?

The Hindus have a name for him:  
the Southward Facing, and the Formless One;  
the Self as youth who teaches elders by his silence.

You may have met him, mortal, once or twice;  
I wonder if he knows his priceless gift?

\*

[A long-delayed debt of gratitude never since forgotten.]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Lotus In The Heart

How many centuries of centuries and trust  
did it take the lotus  
to take that crazy jump  
from the known earth to unknown laws of water –

to learn how to feed itself, to blossom,  
to float on the water  
without the water dampening its trusting, open petals?

That same love that taught it all these things  
may teach that lotus in my heart  
over centuries of centuries  
or in one crazy, trusting jump.

\*

[leaning on Kabir's 'jis se rahani apar jagat men']

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! The Mind's Polarities

It's said – and so it seems to be –  
that when the individual mind  
emerges from that place where mind  
rests, perfect, and in unity with all things to be known –  
in that place, which is; within us, and without us:

that in that moment, as the mind expands,  
and as its sphere within expands to match that sphere without,  
polarities arise; such axis as may join them  
to lie hidden and forgot; instead we see  
all as remotenesses, that grow ever more the farther;

and then – the awful nature of the human lie –  
name them 'opposites'... and in that step,  
a further one, 'duality'...

and so, condemn ourselves to fruitless life  
where, across the vast mind's sphere,  
sadness – let's say – sees, far off, that pure happiness -  
too far, too far, to be within its reach...  
and happiness, seeing far off, sadness, seeks in pleasure  
to keep its distance...and so, the balance swings,  
the world wags, and the mind knows only restlessness...

and knows, desire... how we forget,  
we could not know desire, but that we knew  
what desire desires; what's missing in our world;  
sadness, knowing the happiness; what would sadness be  
without its knowing, in full, its happiness? ..

if we but saw desire as grace; looked at it with clear eye;  
we might see, lurking there within,  
beyond the warnings of its waywardness,  
that holy thing that yearns always for onefulness...

and as we have departed,  
then by grace, so we return;  
find by that third perfect point;  
that eye that sees, from its eternal home,

duality to resolve in unity..  
and all absolved, we're absolute..

\*

this, by mine own hand... writ  
in a deep yearning sadness;  
sadness that would fain convince itself  
that happiness, this morning, is too distant; so, then,  
to abide in sorrowed sadness...

and yet, there are strange joys,  
where sadness meets all other things, in duty and in law;  
speaks of all things in some strange disguise;  
finds its heart, where heart it never sought;

and so, if words may do  
what words should do, I name this poem's end  
its true beginning: name it now,  
dedicating it, to truth and joy, and to myself:  
A Poem in Praise of Happiness.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! The Moral Rights

'The moral rights of the author  
have been asserted'... that, I'm told,  
is what I should say when I write  
anything for publication here; even before  
I say anything..

It means, I guess, the more, the less..  
than 'Copyright' which normally  
gets printed just above it;  
which just means, don't copy this;

whereas 'moral rights' convey  
so much more...  
suggesting that I even possess morality;  
which, considering my wild, undisciplined  
former life, you might well question..

but note, I merely 'assert' them;  
feel free to challenge them (you note that 'rights'  
are plural; plenty lawyer's fees there  
to say, well maybe this, not that...

and you're free (your defending counsel may assert)  
to copy my poem and put your own name to it;  
since truth can be in no man's sole possession,  
and my poem, bless its metered tropes,  
speaks naught but the truth..

though now I mention 'truth', I don't recall  
that phrase about the moral rights  
upon the title-page of, let's say,  
the Gospels; Books of Moses; Qu'ran; Upanishads;  
those guys on whom we've so long depended  
to tell us what morality should be..

so please understand, that when I 'assert',  
it's more for my self-image than for yours;  
makes me feel good; I must be  
a serious author, if (in the subtext, scholars footnote)

the moral underpinning may be detected..

and that said – now to the poem.. Except  
now I've forgotten what I was going to say..

Perhaps that, too, is a moral issue; but  
I have the right to remain silent..  
even if I'm up on this morality charge..

my defence is, that my Muse,  
hearing the word 'morality',  
flees my company. 'Twas ever so.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Morning Scent Of Rosemary

'Rosemary – that's for remembrance..'

Can you smell it now?  
that tough yet choosy herb,  
giving of itself;

remembrance, perhaps, for Northern Europeans,  
of that package tour to Crete:  
rising early, that first morning,  
the body clock not quite adjusted,

the sun already warming mountain-sides  
before it reaches down into the valley;

already, the intoxicating scent of wild herbs  
rolling slowly down the hillside, telling you,  
this, this, could be paradise..

below you, blue morning sea  
beyond white walls of huddled houses..  
still in the air, the hint of night-time's blessed dew..

rosemary: did you think it named  
after the fragrance of Mary's own humility,  
mingling with the scent of manger hay?  
mingling with the sweetness of that day?

no – 'ros marinus', dew of the ocean,  
is the meaning of its name..  
though, how well it suits her memory..

suits, too, that remembered Cretan morning;  
for before the Romans, Indians used those words;  
the dew, humidity, rather than humility;  
marine, cognate with the words  
for the clear, pure light of sun on sea...

that Cretan morning:  
the rosemaried fragrance of remembrance;

sunshine and white walls adoring one another;  
sky and sea, two shades of Maryblue.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Necessity Of Luxury

and what at some other time  
I'd call a luxury – or others would –

it's not, it's – oh – rightness -  
used rightly...

like now, aslant in the reclining chair,  
the patio door open just enough  
to bring air into the room,

March air which feels like the most  
precious commodity, substance, gift, grace,  
where, how, could I say;

and the book of poetry held loosely,  
glanced at occasionally;

some phrases, some words, of Tom's  
growing timelessly, flowering,  
seeding a generosity of new poems  
too formless to call mine

but the warmth of his heart  
makes mine to expand, and

boundless now; the mind too, boundless;  
a boundlessness of poetry;  
then, now, always; so that

in this moment, heart, mind, poetry, boundless,  
there's complete liberation;  
beyond luxury, beyond necessity

and poems may or may not be,  
for being's all...

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Otherness

Oh the dark, dark otherness of others!  
that brings on, such sadness, such despair...  
deep, vast chasm in the heart...

Ah the shining otherness of others!  
that brings on, such loving to be one...  
the heart heals what the heart divides.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Place Between

Where and how to find immortal soul;  
or self; eternal witness; eye of God;  
or place, or space, within the eager heart  
where All, or One, may hide – or may await?  
So where to find first clue; or some frayed end  
of golden thread that leads to golden light?

Not in the wrinkled brow... but in the simplest things  
the greatest secrets wait, as we are told;  
in the magic land that's called Between:

Between the end of one thought, and the next,  
as it is formed within the mind – the briefest space  
where nothing but the witness of our self  
rests, perfect, pure, complete, within itself;  
inviting us to join that rest for just as long  
as we enjoy this satisfaction  
of the presence of ourself;

And if that taste of presence pleases -  
then, between each word we hear or speak,  
we'll find the silence of ourself; and find  
how each word comes from silence, and returns;  
and as we relish and besport in that great space,  
from greater silence, greater words may come..

There is no limit to that world, Between:  
we'll find it more and more, within all things,  
beyond all things; it is the music of our life  
which sings its song through thought and speech and act;  
a music in a boundless space, so vast  
that we may meet our greater self – at last!

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Place Beyond Between

Not named as joy;  
not named as happiness..

at the end of a thought  
the eyes lifted; then,

only the senses;  
only the senses' action seen;

only the endless beauty  
of the beautiful unnamed;

only the glory of the food  
of the senses unattached;

where is the mind  
in this perfect satisfaction?

who needs to name this blessing,  
blithe? or to name it, bliss?

beyond a name;  
yet known.

\*

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! The Poet

Favourite pencil  
warm  
from waiting

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Poet's Significant Other - For Mary And Todd

On the shelf above the crackling fire,  
the day's work over, shadows swaying and flickering  
across the room, in the firelight's glow;  
here is love abiding

On the shelf above the crackling fire  
a few slim books, some of them poetry, some of them signed;  
open them and the world spills out  
tumbles laughing and crying, shouting  
like children home from school with stories;  
like grandparents reminiscing over photos with a smile;  
like the last of the night's pillow talk  
one already eyes closed, the other treasuring thought

On the shelf above the crackling fire  
two bookends hold the books in place  
pressing lightly against each other  
as two lovers walking through a door, a gate, from here to there  
one bookend's image we know well  
familiar to us from the books

How little we know, of that other bookend  
without which, without whom,  
there might not be these books, lightly pressing  
on the shelf above love's glow

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! The Praisers

You might not spot them in a crowd –  
but for that certain stillness of the self-contained:

in conversation, not until some detail  
of an action, person, or a deed  
sparks their mind; then from their heart -  
not, pours – but rather, in a fine, fine stream  
of exquisite precision, flows - their praise:

as if their whole self gives itself to you  
in some new form of thought, in which  
there is no longer, they and you –  
you are united in exalted praise;

and their eye shines – inviting you to join  
a world above: perhaps they sum the virtue  
of a person, action, deed; and yet,  
while they are speaking, praise is seated there  
above the virtues; they are prophets, seers,  
visionaries of that which in our praise, we are..

and perhaps, you try to join them in your speech –  
how awkwardly praise sits upon your tongue!  
you, who prided so yourself, a balanced judge  
of all your fellow humans...find yourself  
now at some sad and puny tongue-tied loss..

so, practise, in ourselves, a year or two –  
(there's silent praise – the eye gives that away...)  
and praise the praiseful in their mighty work:  
another world awaits: where we become  
the prophets of ourselves in timeless life.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Presence Of The Truly Great

Yes yes.. I've not forgotten that:  
the presence of the great –

when destiny has brought you  
to their presence; destiny  
brought them, here, now, to you;

how in their presence, duality itself  
is magnified: do your palms slightly sweat?

while unity is merely apprehended  
as the world grows before your eyes?

Great crooks too – who believe  
that the world, the oystered pearl, is theirs;

and those great souls: whose gift  
it is, to know the world, and tell;

they show themselves; and you know that  
you're graced – but by the grace which, as they show,

is always there; is always here; and humbled by this show,  
in surfeit of this taste of grace, then quietly you leave..

And they recede – or do they? – to  
the sternest test: the memory:  
a photograph, or record of their voice..

Now: look upon their image, but without regret;  
for this, your sternest test; the duty of true unity:

they come to life again; again in you;  
you carry them to show the world anew.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Quality Of Mercy (Conditions Apply)

The quality of mercy,  
Portia declared,

the quality of mercy is  
suspended during the present conflict

the quality of mercy is  
not the business of a Minister of Justice

the quality of mercy is  
not a matter of individual conscience

the quality of mercy is  
too subtle for public discussion  
or law

the quality of mercy is  
only for Shakespeare and stuff

the quality of mercy is  
less stimulating than revenge

the quality of mercy is  
no business of yours

the quality of mercy is  
no concern of religious authorities  
who should stay silent

the quality of mercy is  
an outdated concept

the quality of mercy is  
nothing to do with forgiveness  
or circumstantial evidence  
or the remission of sins

the quality of mercy is  
no longer a matter of pride

the quality of mercy is  
no longer a mark of humanity

the quality of mercy  
would be OK if Obama said so

the quality of mercy  
is one hell of a hot potato  
cooked in oil

the quality of mercy  
droppeth as the gentle  
dew from heaven  
upon a broken fuselage

and it is too much  
or too little  
for our understanding.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Riches Of The Self

Strange, to think that each of us  
is filled to overflowing  
with a treasure house of jewels;  
sparkling when they're known;  
beyond price, beyond touch,  
beyond sight – yet not beyond  
the sensing in one other self..

filled, and yet doubting, towards, even, denying..  
awaiting - perhaps not ardently enough? -  
the moment when they're called  
to show themselves; the almost  
(but not quite...) unimaginable

riches of the self..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Salesman

The salesman – blue eyes  
helped him get the job I guess;  
what's behind them?

I'm no longer host in my own house:  
he's cast me as opponent, victim

whom he will bully into gratitude.  
He spreads his brochures on the table.

When he's gone, I feel dirty,  
battle-worn; better phone

the man around the corner for a so-so job;  
at least we know each other.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! The Searchlight

How George Herbert would have loved this word  
for all the images it lights in mind!

The gloried sun of soul, no added light  
needs, in unshadowed light of reason's day;

but in the murky night of ignorance –  
then reason's other task, the probing beam  
upon the dark, cruel cobweb-cornered mind  
may shine; and as it clears the willing mind,  
the sharper (and more seeming painful) those  
last vestiges of age-old, flying things  
that lurk and creep in coward-cov'ring dark!

A stormy sea needs most a light-house brave:  
for age-old things resent the searchlight's beam;  
but when the night, and that unknowing's cloud  
yield to the eastward flush of dawn – how bright  
the daylight shines, for those who watch all night!

And so, George Herbert, as you spoke the word -  
in all things seen; for Whom, all done: our Lord.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Secret Of The Universe

I put the teacup down,  
looked up from my book;

and whatever calls the eye  
then called to me:

a cobalt blue glass jar  
in front of a Chinese yellow vase

that seemed to hold between them  
the secret of the universe..

the mind whispered, that's just not true..  
it couldn't be that simple..

I dared to look again: now  
it did not matter whether it were  
the secret of the universe or not... for

it was enough. It is enough.

and there, perhaps,  
and that, perhaps...

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Song Of Forever, The Dance Of Now

Before the world began... did our Creator  
contemplate the way it should begin?  
the sweetest way to animate and order  
all this glorious whole contains within?

The Hindus have no doubt: a sound, a dance,  
were our beginning; every molecule  
of Shiva's body dances to the song;  
his soul the music of eternal rule:

so should we dance our way through mortal life,  
eternal music in our inner ear;  
so make our life a flowing song, a flight  
that sings immortal ether into air;

a sound, a dance, a rhythm; harmony;  
from which soars each soul's unique poetry..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Taj Mahal Of The Still Mind

How I suspect 'busy' people...

Who said that spirituality  
has anything to do with busyness..?

They turn enthusiasm into 'duty';  
turn duty into guilt...

How I love those people  
who always have time for anyone..

they are like swans:  
serenity above; activity below;

never busy; always active;  
floating white, serene, unruffled,  
like swans; like lotus flowers;  
like love.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Tale Of Emma Chissett - For Dan Dan The Betcha Man

Emma Chissett's  
missed out lunch;  
she's suffering  
a credit crunch;

Emma Chissett  
checks out who  
today is offering  
three-for-two;

Emma checks  
the cornbeef tins  
in those illegal  
'sell by' bins;

finds 'eat by' dates  
passed (hard to see.):  
mentions this;  
and gets them free;

Emma's icebox  
shelves for meat  
holds tougher cuts:  
chew first, then eat..

Emma's sharp eye  
spots bruised fruit;  
negotiates  
a price to suit;

Emma does  
these shops a good turn:  
avoids some angry  
customer return;

she's there before  
every Church bazaar:

spots the mispriced  
from afar;

turns the expensive  
fashion gown  
to show the tear or stain;  
brings the price right down;

and woe betide  
a market stall:  
'emmachissett? '..  
and prices fall..

Emma Chissett, with  
her sharp-eyed corncrake voice,  
weather-hen of our economy;  
true star of Market Choice..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Teacher

I wish I'd known him better.  
But our respect for him was such  
that you only spoke to him  
when you needed to.  
In a way, that was to know him truly.

You wouldn't notice him, passing him  
in a crowd; and yet, two paces on,  
and you'd feel you had just passed  
someone who walked in their own space  
and left space itself quite unaffected.

To meet him, in the corridor, say,  
early in the morning, was - what? -  
awesome, refreshing, vitalising:  
there was a sense that overnight,  
he'd dived into some deep ocean  
of sheer bliss; and emerged  
like a morning seashore,  
washed with freshness,  
full of deep thought,  
and his eyes  
full of an understanding kindness  
which stayed with you all the day.

What was extraordinary – of the many  
things about this gloriously ordinary man -  
was that although no-one ever saw him  
looking at his watch, he was always  
in the right place, and at just the right time,  
yet never in a hurry – almost as if  
he had some satellite navigation system built in.  
And he always looked so genuinely pleased to be  
just where he was. I don't think his facial muscles  
knew how to pretend..

And so this spread to all of us around him –  
and of course, he never put this into words;  
yet love surrounded him; and we just loved

to work with him. Though there were some, new to him,  
who could barely handle such goodness  
when they met it – wanted to challenge it,  
find some reason to pick holes  
in such perfection, although it was  
unboasted. But these, he seemed  
to know instinctively, and why they were  
just as they were; one day, he and they  
would be involved in some unusual and difficult situation –  
even on occasion, dangerous -  
and they'd be friends with him for life.

It was said by those who had known him well in earlier years  
that extraordinary and miraculous things  
happened to him – visions, angels, future things revealed,  
revelations of some law beyond all laws;  
we never talked of this; the story was  
that when one older friend had questioned him of this,  
he'd said, he always knew it would in time  
be what he needed to pass on to others.  
And there the matter rested.

I'd say, for me, for life  
he redefined the nature of true love.

for S.S.

Michael Shepherd



# !! The Wasted Landing - Thoughts From An Airport Strike

In the hour of our departure O Lord  
In our beginning is our end  
To depart is to arrive yet not to arrive  
at the same hour and place  
in some other time zone  
and in our departing is our arrival  
and to arrive is to depart from where we have not been  
and to depart is to arrive at where we will not go

into the departure hall from where we did not depart  
into the arrival hall where we did not arrive  
and the end of all our departures is our arrival  
that we may arrive at where we did not go  
and depart from where we have not been.

now and in the hour of our departure O Lord

I Tiresias have foresuffered all  
on this self-same divan, or tired banquette  
in the departure hall from where we have not gone,  
in the arrival hall where we have not arrived,  
and all our arrivings are departures  
and all our departures are arrivings  
departing from where we have not been,  
arriving at where we will not go

the sun shines bleakly through the window panes.  
into the planes the trim staff come and go,  
laundered into skies we cannot breathe.  
'All flights are cancelled';  
'Sorry Sir, this ticket is not valid for this flight'.

I Icarus have suffered thus  
in Greece, in Rhodes, on all connecting flights,  
in Delphi where I was not warned,  
in Cumae where I could not go.  
Passport Control. Do Not Pass This Point.

Too hot the sun of Greece that day,  
the sun I shall not see.  
'Arrival Delayed'. 'Departure Delayed'

A cold coming we had of it:  
the baggage heavy, and the escalator steep,  
the information scanty and the children fractious,  
and the people. Oh the people.

Cans. Packets. Yesterday's papers from yesterday's travellers.  
Sandwiches we have not eaten.  
Tread softly for you tread on my icecream.

Now and in the hour of our departure Lord

Michael Shepherd

# !! The Wasted Landing. Thoughts From An Airport In Disarray.

In the hour of our departure O Lord

In our beginning is our end

To depart is to arrive yet not to arrive  
at the same hour and place  
in some other time zone  
and in our departing is our arrival  
and to arrive is to depart from where we have not been  
and to depart is to arrive at where we will not go

into the departure hall from where we did not depart  
into the arrival hall where we did not arrive  
and the end of all our departures is our arrival  
that we may arrive at where we did not go  
and depart from where we have not been.

now and in the hour of our departure Lord

I Tiresias have foresuffered all  
on this self-same divan, or tired banquette  
in the departure hall from where we have not departed,  
in the arrival hall where we have not arrived,  
and all our arrivings are departures  
and all our departures are arrivings  
departing from where we have not been,  
arriving at where we will not go

the sun shines bleakly through the window panes.  
into the planes the trim staff come and go,  
(they stay at Novotel Michelangelo) ,  
laundered into skies we cannot breathe.  
'All flights are cancelled';  
'Sorry Sir, this ticket is not valid for this flight'.

I Icarus have suffered thus  
in Greece, in Rhodes, on all connecting flights,

in Delphi where I was not warned,  
in Cumae where I could not go.  
Passport Control. Do Not Pass This Point.

Too hot the sun of Greece that day,  
the sun I shall not see.  
'Arrival Delayed'. 'Flight Cancelled'

A cold coming we had of it:  
the baggage heavy, and the escalator steep,  
the information scanty and the children fractious,  
and the people. Oh the people.

Cans. Packets. Yesterday's papers from yesterday's travellers.  
Sandwiches they have not eaten.  
Tread softly for you tread on my icecream.

Now and in the hour of our departure Lord

\*

(re-edited)

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Wisdom Of A Strifetime

Who is grateful for a long life  
when that life gets just too long? ....

meanwhile, while  
I can still cross my fingers without help..

there are things that it's taken  
a whole strifetime for me to learn...

such as, cake tins work best upside-down;  
and, praise is quite the best revenge...

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! The Young Poet

Poetry was something else

written by others

somewhere else

and came from

somewhere else

but the poetry

which he did not know

called one day

in a language he did not know

so he put down words on paper

and threw the paper away

but the words did not go away

and he did not know what poetry should do

until he wrote the words

which told him

what poetry could do

for only poetry can teach you poetry

\*

Gertrude Stein stood behind me while I wrote this.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Their Presence In Their Absence

'Oh, how I miss her...; and him...; and him; and her...'  
a pause; a sadness; a moist eye; a tear...  
...and as you age, the list grows longer  
until you wonder why you're not  
already there on it yourself...

Oh, but think again... you miss them so, just  
because you have them in your mind, so clear...  
they could almost be here now, right beside you...  
but they aren't...yet better...  
they're there within that greater you...

you respected them; admired; listened to their every word;  
loved them; felt them forever a precious part of you...  
so now, they live in you; your presence  
is their presence: and

you opened wide the pearly gates for them;  
you waved them through the judgment day;  
welcomed them with choirs of angels; even  
thrust a ready coin into the boatman's hand  
who took them to that dark and part forgetting land  
from which, they may return more glorious...

you are a radiant heaven of their life; they live  
eternal in your mind, your memory, your heart;  
when people see you, greet you, they are meeting  
more than that familiar you; they meet the presence of  
a great company of those who've filled your life -  
and now, you're filled with them...

listen! hear them call to you,  
not to imprison them in the past,  
but live, now, here, with you; live again  
in the radiance of the self you share...

call to mind this glorious company  
not on the other side, but at your side...



why, if this were physical, you'd have burst by now...  
instead – see how you shine!

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! These Three

Faith; hope; and loving-kindness;  
these three surpass all worldly understanding:

all these await in human nature  
as inclinations that are natural;  
to be awakened by the grace  
that ever waits within us:

as these arise, faith takes the precedence;  
then follows, hope; itself precedes  
the love, the charity, the loving-kindness;

yet if alas, disorder, dissolution intervene,  
first, love is lost; then hope;  
and last of all goes faith;

yet, when these come into their perfection,  
greatest of all these, is love;

hope and faith are then the charity  
which love may shower on the world around  
circle on circle as the gentle rain from heaven.

\*

[leaning on the writings of Josef Pieper]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! This Charm Thing

There are guys who think they have charm  
and are so confidently wrong that  
the molecules in our stomach grate together  
as we watch them get away with it

and those who don't know they have it  
and are deservedly babe-magnets  
and what makes you think I envy them

and those who know they have it  
but behave like gentlemen  
so we try to like them

and those who so successfully  
have it and overuse it that  
we call upon the Fates and Furies  
saying hey did you see that guy over there

you, I think, Billy Collins  
know you have it but  
don't rate it as important  
as writing poetry, so

one moment, it's a one-liner  
waiting for the full second house;

another, taking the short cab ride  
from the Algonquin to the New Yorker  
smiling secretly but  
purely from the pleasure of sharing itself;

or sometimes, it's chiselled perfectly  
on a fragment of smooth white marble  
lifted out of the Aegean Sea  
which sparkles timelessly  
because that's how it is

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! This Door... (To The One Who Listened)

Take the deepest breath before  
you open this immortal door:

here, you will first receive  
what you think you want the most:

if it's to enhance your self-image,  
that will be arranged;

if you want to tell others  
what it's all about; even bully them;  
there's a place for you;

if you want to come along to prove  
that you knew it all already,  
fine.. come in; and later, go...

if you want to prove your life  
to have been ruined by others and  
it never was your fault –  
that can be arranged;

or if you want to be just a little wiser;  
or life to be a little easier;  
you'll love it here;

but this is the house to bless you with  
two unsuspected further wishes:

when you have tasted  
what you thought you wanted  
you are of course, free to leave;

but if that which you thought you wanted  
turns to ashes in your mouth,  
you may wish – and whoosh! it's gone;

and then there comes the third wish...:  
so deep in you that only now

you knew it to have been always there;

here you will find yourself  
to be yourself;

so stand here on the pavement; pause;  
these are not wood, but golden doors.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! This Is A Shouting Poem

This is a SHOUTING poem.  
Not a gentle wildflower poem  
not a whispering-of-love poem  
A SHOUTING POEM.

This is a POSTER poem.  
Not a subtly persuading poem.  
not a think-about-it poem  
A POSTER POEM

This is a HARD OF HEARING poem.  
What?  
I said a HARD OF HEARING POEM

This is a LOST SPECTACLES poem  
to test your sight.  
No no not LAST TESTICLES  
NO TRY THE NEXT LINE -  
A LOST SPECTACLES POEM

This is a HAVE YOU SEEN MY? poem.  
I know I put it down somewhere.  
Are you sure you haven't seen it?  
Oh no, you didn't use it for THAT...?  
Why are you laughing it's not funny.  
I hadn't even finished it...

This is an ACROSS THE ROOM poem.  
Read it while you're in bed  
watching TV  
doing the ironing  
reading the newspapers  
putting the new wallpaper up  
combing the cat  
having a bath  
washing the car  
talking to the neighbours  
gardening  
this is an ACROSS THE ROOM POEM

This is a BLOWN ACROSS THE STREET POEM  
no need to run after it  
and pick it up  
just watch it blow  
maybe wonder  
if you missed anything

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! This Life Is 'On Approval'

Is 'approve' another word for 'love'?  
So that, when we say 'I love you!' there's the sense,  
'It's good – I'm glad – that you are in this world! –  
that you exist!' – so that, to love, becomes  
an act of will; creative affirmation?

The sense of holiness; and music; sunlight; lemon curd –  
from these, 'approval' stretches out a list  
that may be boundless, as it sings them into praise;

approving even dreams into reality:  
as if to kneel, self to self, with God  
and, eye to eye, both say, 'I'm glad that you exist..'

\*

[leaning gratefully on the writings of Josef Pieper]

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! This One For Hanque With Thanks

All around the world,  
poems are talking among themselves  
when the books are shut,  
when the computers are switched off,  
when old-fashioned poets put down  
chewed pencils, sucked ballpens,  
lips a little stained with the flavour  
of ink that's washable or permanent;

poems talking among themselves  
in that language that poems understand,  
that poets seek to write;  
poems murmuring, complaining,  
sometimes shouting desperately,

who are these people who  
have dared to speak our language? What  
is their right and reason? When  
did they arise? Where  
did they get their ideas? Why  
do they even try? How  
do they hope to improve on this? What  
is a poet, anyway?

The tumult of their languages,  
the babel of upraised voices  
speaking, though, with that unutterable  
beauty of that sound which can really act,  
can change the world of change,  
can touch the heart for lifetimes,  
melts a heart of stone,  
brings tears to eyes needful of tears,  
opens clouds to blue sky and to sunlight,  
watches angels as they ascend and descend,  
speaks of, speaks,  
the unknown, formless, eternal, ever present –

the tumult dies down; in the  
silence and the stillness,

only the pure sound of sound itself; and

in that sound the absolution:  
forgive them, O Muse of Poetry:  
they know not what they do..  
yet in their hearts, they know  
what must be said.

The pain, exquisite;  
found worthy; loved.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! This Peach My Teacher

This peach  
that I've just eaten,  
been graced by,  
been blessed by,  
been taught by,  
been transformed by...

it's as if some  
Messenger of the Gods  
had arrived, stopwatch in hand,  
saying, everything holds in perfection  
but a little moment -  
as William Shakespeare noted:

so I'm going to arrange things so that  
as the stopwatch ticks out  
ten seconds to that moment,  
you'll reach out your hand to the fruitbowl,  
take it, feel its yielding softness under velvet skin,  
cut it carefully twice through the poles,  
once equatorially... and as it falls apart,  
spear one segment; eat...

this peach  
was full of what even Rilke  
could say no more than, peachness..

it was a living proof of Plato:  
its perfection taught me  
where essence meets experience,  
where actuality meets the ideal of peach;  
where a singular perfection speaks of  
all perfections; where perfection  
leaves from perfection, naught else but perfect...

how could such a perfect thing  
have been invented by one  
who does not love? Who is not love?  
This peach is love itself, and I the worshipper

must needs make of myself a living God  
to whom to kneel, to offer praise and gratitude  
for all perfection known..

this peach my teacher.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! This Poem

This poem  
is friendly:  
see, it's wagging its tail,  
it will follow you anywhere,  
run off and come back,  
a perfect companion;

this poem  
loves fun:  
you want to play dressing up,  
it'll laugh and rush off to the attic,  
the basement, the dressing-up basket;

this poem  
is serious:  
you want to be silent awhile,  
rest your head on its shoulder,  
it will wait for you in  
sympathetic stillness;

this poem  
is humble:  
turn it over, write  
a love poem on  
the other side,  
it will glow with your love;

this poem  
is disposable:  
write a few lines, be angry  
with yourself, scrumple it up,  
throw it on the pavement,  
someone may pick it up,  
someone may tutt and place it  
carefully for recycling;

this poem  
is an origami:  
you can make any shape you like:

a paper boat on  
the waves of destiny;

a ladder to reach to where  
you always wanted that fruit;  
a crown; a dunce's hat; a witch's conic;

this poem  
is elastic:  
a tablecloth for a picnic,  
a sheet to cover two lovers,  
a ground plan for a new world;

this poem  
knows where  
nothing meets something,  
nowhere meets everywhere,  
no time meets all time,  
anyone meets everyone,

this poem  
has a bright eye  
whether you read it or not;

this poem  
likes you though it  
hasn't met you;

this poem  
is impervious to scorn;  
it knows who it is,  
and where things begin and end.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! This Poem (Says)

This poem  
is friendly:  
see, it's wagging its tail,  
it will follow you anywhere,  
run off and come back,  
a perfect companion;

this poem  
loves fun:  
you want to play dressing up,  
it'll laugh and rush off to the attic,  
the basement, the dressing-up basket;

this poem  
is serious:  
you want to be silent awhile,  
rest your head on its shoulder,  
it will wait for you in  
sympathetic stillness;

this poem  
is humble:  
turn it over, write  
a love poem on  
the other side,  
it will glow with your love;

this poem  
is disposable:  
write a few lines, be angry  
with yourself, scrumple it up,  
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has a bright eye  
whether you read it or not;

this poem  
likes you though it  
hasn't met you;

this poem  
is impervious to scorn;  
it knows who it is,  
and where things begin and end.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! This Your Gift

She said that each one in the world  
has a special talent: what we're better at,  
than anybody else... so, it's a glorious gift,  
- a glorious duty - to know, acknowledge, this;

but what happens, so she said,  
is that we know this, and deny it;  
but then if pressed somehow, we make  
a condition for ourself: 'well, only if...'  
and this - the devil in the detail - is a way  
to lock our talent in; to keep the world without...

I said to her, an instance? and she said,  
this man, he had a gift: to be always  
in the rightest place, and at the rightest time;  
but when this was revealed to him, he said,  
OK but only if I can give up my job..  
but it was his job, she said, enabled him  
to manifest that talent...

you may not forget this poem;  
this was a lady I shall not forget.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Those Birds

Those birds outside your window at dawn  
singing all at once fit to bust –

did you know they migrate from Islam  
in the fighting season?

They're all Sufis: they sleep all night  
with the Beloved; and in the morning

they exchange the jokes they heard,  
the pillow talk from the night before sleep;

then the blackbird and the thrush  
weave these into stories which they sing

all day; then at night the nightingale  
makes them all into one beautiful poem

about being intoxicated into song  
by the wine of Shiraz; the rose-water wafers;

and how those who say  
that one cannot be intoxicated

by the longing for the One  
have proved themselves wrong

and proved the nightingale right  
as you can know in yourself

when the nightingale sings of this  
to the heart's light pulsing in the stars.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Those Twenty-First Century Bluuues...

So it's morning start time at the office.  
Or should be.  
Red-eyed, those tell-tale diagonal ridges  
from eyes across the cheeks..  
we roll in late, proud, but exhausted..  
our wrists flashing with  
bling allied to timekeeping...  
but even we ourselves don't care;  
and sore did you say sore...

By now, judging from my emails,  
just about every wage-earner in the East and West  
sports a fake Bulgari, Patek Philippe, Gucci,  
weighing down their wrist; and  
who believes or cares when we say, we keep  
the real one at home?

Ah yes, at home -  
where our nights are longer  
and more extended and  
you know just what I mean..

and we'd love to go freelance but  
where but the office  
could we discreetly boast, show off  
our new swinging thingies,  
or our pert bouncers, or simply flash our wrist,  
to all those who are now equipped with just the same  
by consumerism's joyless games  
and internet's gross joyless claims,  
and money now, only confers  
the same as his; the same as hers.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Three Of My Friends

Yes, it's a photo of the three of them –  
it's not so often I can get them all together;  
they're so much in demand...

This one's Rosa. She has something  
quite unique: she's no great beauty, yet  
she has that something which  
we've given up trying to define:  
let's say, it's, inner beauty...

her girl friends are devoted to her;  
men can't keep away from her:  
when you're with her, you feel yourself  
to... shine? As if you too, are beautiful?  
(Her 'girls' admit it; men,  
they do not like to put a name to it...though  
sometimes contemplate themselves her husband;  
glow with imagined, noble pride;  
then sigh, at their unworthiness;  
can't wait to see her once again...)

Here's Cora.. I don't see her much,  
she's in demand for every possible  
committee or whatever... for  
her innate goodness seems to grace,  
to bless, bring harmony, to every  
well-intentioned, sometimes rancorous,  
committee that she sits on...often, chairs;  
we sigh and say, what is it about her..?  
She just brings out the best  
in everybody... when you're with her,  
you love yourself; you never doubt  
that you, too, always have the good of all  
at heart..

This one's Max. He'd be at his happiest  
in the research lab, discoveries  
uncovering themselves under his steady gaze  
as if eager to be found...

yet such is his ability to pass on  
that love of finding out,  
he's constantly in demand to lecture and to teach;  
his students, past and present, stand in awe,  
yet love him for himself: when you talk to him,  
he listens to your every word,  
his eyes, shining all the while; as if  
beyond the words you stumble out,  
he hears – always and only – truth itself...  
and for a while, you feel you share  
his clarity of mind...

Yes, I treasure that photo in its silver frame;  
it's so rarely that I get them all together;  
but they themselves just love it when I do:  
maybe you see it in the photo there?

For as I stood behind the camera, I saw,  
there's such respect there, for each other;  
as if they know they share  
a something so incredible,  
that it's a joy too absolute to name;  
I breathed the word: humanity.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Three Of Them

Three of them.

Young; they've written prize-winning essays  
about their life so far  
and what they've had to deal with.

Their photos are attached.

They smile from minds and hearts  
open to the whole wide world

as if they recognise you, too,  
standing behind the camera,  
the whole world looking over your shoulder,  
you too, all of you,  
as the self of self.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Thumbnails And Finger Ends

A book of learned scholarship,  
open in my hands, at the first page...

and then I saw, to the right of it,  
my thumb nail...and marvelled –

at its perfection, at its beauty,  
and at my own ignorance –

which strangely, was all part  
of that same beauteous perfection...

the thumbnail: curved, as a hollowed claw,  
the curve I knew would give it added strength;

sitting as secure as any child of love,  
within the folded mystery of skin and flesh;

three-coloured: pale rising moon  
emerging from its secret nail-bed  
as some goddess might appear;

then the subtle shades of rosy pink,  
hinting at blood serving readily  
the nail's demands;

finally, the top (long, shaped, as best to gouge  
potato's eyes, and other kitchen tasks...) :

I looked at it, and marvelled:  
the whole creation, conspiring to present  
this perfect thing...

Fifty years and more ago, I wrote,  
in those years when I despaired  
of making sense of so-called 'adult' world,

sitting at the desk, to find myself  
before setting off to earn my daily bread,

I wrote – in lines that never quite linked up  
their visioned moments into complete poems,

on white and yearning pages like a life unwrit:  
'we know not our own finger ends...'

The wrinkled thumb and finger – they have lasted;  
the holy mystery - praise God - remains.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! To A Fellow Poet

What can I give you –  
for only giving can I think of,  
in this dark season of the year  
which needs no festive name, to name the need...

this dark season, when hearts yearn  
for all that's bright, and warm, and love..  
what can I give you, at this time?

I give you – music... music, heard  
outside the heart's dark winter door  
to say, that all's not lost; all's never lost;  
there's music still and always, through the door...  
you'll hear, and know yourself to be that all...

I give you – laughter... laughter, on the face  
of strangers, as you open that dark door;  
strangers who laughing turn to you  
and share their laughter and a proffered hand;  
a room of laughter shared with you, illusions laughed away...

As poet gives to poet, these I give you;  
they are – but poetry;  
as poetry, may live.

\*

[occasioned by discussion of 'the three persons' in poetry:  
the confessional poetry of 'I';  
the poetry that speaks and gives to 'you';  
and the poetry of he, she, it, they – of universal truth..]

Michael Shepherd

# !! To A Japanese Poet

Haiku's wet ink  
shines;  
a warm heart

Michael Shepherd

# !! To A Much Loved Poet

You know how people who are  
really serious – that's, not those  
who pretend to be serious, or  
those who are paid to be serious –  
pretend to be not so serious?

And you know how people who are  
really lonely – that's not those  
who want sympathy, oh no, or  
those who want to enjoy being lonely –  
pretend to be not so lonely?

So she never quite believed,  
for obvious reasons,  
just how much she was loved  
by all her readers:

perhaps and I only say perhaps  
she might have feared to lose  
that painful treasure  
that we wanted to love away and  
which made us love her  
so much and even more.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! To A New-Born Poem

The midwife's tidying up  
with professional detachment

and there you are; wrinkled; pink  
with a glow that no man ever made;

and I, a part of you for ever, yet  
knowing, now, you're you...

one day in a little time  
I'll take you for your first High Street outing  
in the pram or baby buggy;

trying to pretend you're someone else's...  
not one I'd fight my life for..

pausing to allow some friendly soul  
to glance permission to have a peep;

smile; glow; say a few kind words;

then after that first stranger's looked at you,  
I'll look at you myself; to see

if you look different, or look differently at me  
now someone else has met you.

Sometimes, you are more beautiful,  
more full of life, more independent and more you;

as if your path through life had taken  
its first step away from me; and yet

along with pride, there's quiet, sweet relief:  
you'll make it on your own.

But still, I touch your pillow, smooth your cover,  
look at you for some reassurance

that we both know where poetry may go;  
and you – you laugh, and kick the world away.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! To Buson

The great temple bell  
and small butterfly asleep  
may both be surprised.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! To Elizabeth Bishop

Although it is a cold evening,  
down by one of the fishhouses  
an old man sits netting.

If this were a novel  
by, say, Jack London,  
something would be about to happen:  
time would pass, events move on,  
dramas unfold; we might see this old man again,  
or we might not.

Instead, we share a moment outside time,  
share our being – the old man;  
Elizabeth, whose grandfather was his friend;  
ourselves; knowing that, the more real this moment,  
how frail our knowledge: historical, perhaps,  
yet sharper, crueller, cold as this evening,  
salty sharp as the encrusted herring barrels,  
fluid, powered, secret, as this sultry silver water  
lapping at the quay;  
here, flowing, flown.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! To Friedrich Holderlin, Poet

Here in this river valley below the Alps  
which mimic high Olympus' watching spirit,  
everyone's a silent poet of nature:  
lakes; rivers; green fields; steeper goatfoot pastures;  
forests; bare gaunt rocks and snow;

and the poetry of seasons of the year.  
Once to see the seasons through, is to be  
a little nearer God; to know  
how gods measure out the earth.

Here inside the wooden room,  
the measures, not so clear:  
measured out by sterner, darker gods  
whose seasons are not so predictable:  
storms, tempests, thunder, flood  
may last until we learn  
lessons we do not yet understand.

Outside the window now  
the last rays of evening sun catch  
the metal spire of the nestling church;

its metal lightning conductor running  
down its walls to that patch of earth  
whose signs of scorching warn the devout soul..

Here inside the room, the poet too:  
aspiring spire, lightning conductor;  
rattling between heaven and earth,  
torn by view of outside, inside..

Poets are only responsible to their words  
when lining up their obstinacies  
in the mind, on paper:  
after that, must send them on their way:  
the words mean more, or less, than the poets knew  
while writing them; someone else may make  
better use of them. This too,



the measure of the gods, of God.

\*

Friedrich Holderlin, bi-polar poet-philosopher, 1770-1843; correspondent of Goethe, inspirer of Rilke, subject of much discussion by philosopher Martin Heidegger.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! To Holy Russia

The door creaks, as she opens it  
and the fall of the heavy iron latch  
echoes through the empty church.

The atmosphere inside, this cold cold day,  
is heavy, as such holy places are;  
locked now at night; heavy,  
with what? Anticipation; presence; memory  
of all the human emotions  
that have passed through them?

There's still the clinging promise,  
the fragrance of yesterday's incense;  
it could be a midnight cedar forest  
in its dark wood-scented mystery.

She lights a candle, drops a coin  
slowly, as those do to whom  
each coin has a meaning.

She is small, shrunken as the aged are,  
wrapped into roundness against the cold,  
yet neatly; today there's an extra sense of purpose  
about her walk towards the glittering  
gold ikonostasis –

is it the anniversary of the day  
her husband perished in the labour camp?  
Or the day her son died fighting  
so that such as she might live,  
to mourn him, proudly, all her life?

Or was she, is she, that unmarried, once famous  
junior lecturer who lost her job  
for speaking truth, whose students  
carried her shoulder-high and placed her  
on the tank outside the university,  
challenging its gun?

She kneels in front of the ancient ikon,  
thick with gold; the ikon that tourists  
note with brief glance as 'Christ'...though when painted,  
it was known as 'Son of God'; now they call it  
'Son of Man' – that seems to suit it.

She looks intently into His eyes  
as she has so many times; each time,  
a new day, asking what He has in store for her;

asks as intently as its painter: praying as he worked,  
that He might come and fill the painted form  
with His eyes, His heart, His soul; all that He brought to earth  
from That which sent Him...

She looks into the eyes of the ikon –  
or does the ikon look at her?  
In some other world, there is mighty sound,  
perhaps a word; the air is filled with soundlessness;  
there's fire that burns forever; great waters flow  
like grace itself; new earth is watered.

She sees, in some great where between  
herself and all things, love that cannot be measured;  
mercy that can only explain itself with itself;  
grace that's only to be known; her heart  
opens itself to her soundlessly;  
all is revealed to the seeking heart.

The candles flicker in the draught; the door creaks,  
and the heavy iron latch echoes  
once, in the empty church; the Son of Man,  
as an old woman, wrapped against the cold,  
steps out into His kingdom. A few snowflakes;  
a pale winter sun. But look into His eyes.

\*

(revised)

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! To Ibn Al-Arabi, Sufi

God walked in his garden;  
his footsteps became the universe;  
his shadow became Man.

In the garden, the shadow  
that knows itself a shadow  
looks for the footsteps,  
thinking only poems.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! To Kobayashi Issa

A bath when you're born;  
a bath when you die;  
between, a long river

Michael Shepherd

# !! To Parents

Come back, swim back... I need you...

When I stood a child upon the seashore  
waving through the tears as first  
the one and then the other  
was taken by the tide until  
no longer visible in that dark sea  
too vasty to be thought about...

then turned, and ran back up the beach  
to meet and greet my life..

that was, as it was; but now  
I run back to the water's edge  
shouting come back... I never knew you,  
I'm grown up now, I want to meet you,  
ask you all the things I never asked,  
tell you all the things I never dared,  
look you in your fierce, sad eyes...

come back, swim back, I need you,  
for I'm grown up now; I can love you  
without restraint; give love not ask for it...

or must I wait, until the tide  
laps feet, then knees, then heart, then sight...  
to join you in that dark unknownness which  
may be, may be, an even greater love  
than that which stands here at the water's edge  
as the evening water darkens,  
shouting swim back, swim back...

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! To Praise

Spring morning; air full of promise in the nostrils;  
scents of flowers yet to bloom;

dew as diamonds on the grass stems;  
sunshine on the hills across the river valley;

outside the rabbit hole, a terrier, crouched  
on the scuffed reddish run-dust of a hundred paws;

focussed, completely still, every muscle ready and alert;  
ear occasionally twitching at some movement underground;

now, all things are praise.

To live with praise, to live in praise,  
to know; be blessed; be full;

joining, giving back, taste of that  
which satisfies beyond all else;

then, dare to speak it: hear within the voice  
knowledge of eternity in living now;

today, all things are praise.

The terrier, full five minutes still,  
knows the rabbits knowing him;

gets up as if there's nothing in the world  
but this moment; scampers, wagging tail;

glances towards you, as if to share  
the joy of dogginess and paw and earth;

a sudden move of breeze, off the still sea down there  
to bless the land; the view quietly sparkles as if to say,

you will remember this all your life  
because a moment speaks eternity;

today, all things are praise

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! To The Bible-Bashers I Just Turned Away

They were black of course.  
Saturday mid-morning; myself  
just searching to round off  
that poem on praise, adequately, so as not  
to let down the poem up to there...

They were black of course.  
Who else would hope to bring  
the whi' fo' back to God? ...  
even the Muslims have given up on us...  
they, twentyish, I guess; he in front,  
she all eager friendly smile behind..

they shone with goodness; goodness  
that shone beyond what they, what I, would say;  
beyond the headline of the magazine  
he showed me, smiling, asked me what I thought:  
'Are these the Last Days? '...

I said, I'd pass on that;  
wished them my good wishes:  
wishes nondenominational, unspecified..  
returned to the computer, now to find  
the poem on praise, a hollow mockery...

and to the mind, there came that potent line:  
'Live each day as if thy last'...

They're probably still knocking, down the streets,  
gathering reactions mild and wild ...  
I'd just like it if they – all too late - could know that  
for a moment, goodness met the eye of goodness,  
yet found no time to praise in present words..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! To, For, Or Against An Irish Poet

When you re-ad aloud your own poems –  
(prizewinners, dammit, every one) -  
lingering on every noun, adjective and ad-verb  
as if they are simultaneously ancient jewels  
that you're touching, showing to us; and yet  
new jewels you're yourself in wonder at...

clothing each word with the scent  
of peat fire, soda bread, a glowing hearth;  
a child asleep there in the corner;  
a woman who's grown rich, timeless in your love;

outside the cry of curlew, seagull,  
the slap of wave on cliff;

but edged, sharp, like the sudden  
intake of breath, with centuries on centuries  
of uprisings cruelly downtrodden,  
famine, allegiances,  
leprechauns and muskets and the Armalite...

all these wrapped in baby's or in widow's shawl;  
the shawl of memory that is a poem..

when you read your own verse like this –  
may-aking a trinity of vowels from each Anglo-Saxon one –

then, I'm emerald green with envy,  
reading my own verse in your imitated voice  
as if it were those precious ancient new-found jewelled words...

and wishing that all poets – or no poets at all –  
were, are, shall be, Irish-born...

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Today

Today

(Mark it in the diary -  
then throw the diary away..) :

Today dawned with the unusual  
wrapped intriguingly in the familiar;  
a freshness unidentifiable;  
a promise, that promised  
nothing specific:

as if I walk in a world  
whose infinite complexity  
is no problem;  
its multiplicity, a straightforward matter;

which delivers something hoped for  
and yet never formulated with real meaning:  
simplicity;

here and now, yet feels eternal;  
a heavenly sense of down-to-earthness;  
a freedom that can't remember  
what it's freed from;

where activity only seems  
to tell one more of stillness,  
and noise just sings of silence;

a day that's a gift, without  
a need to ask, or to receive;  
where surrender is instantaneous, and continual,  
and barely worth the mention;  
where paradox is just a game;  
where being, itself, is gratitude enough;

a day that says, this is how things are;  
this is how it is... raising a quizzical eyebrow  
and the hint of a smile:

you thought it otherwise..?

a day that deserves a new-coined word  
to mark it as exceptionally  
unexceptionable: the word has  
spoken of itself:  
oneness..

for the gift of just being is beyond  
all thoughts of giver and receiver;  
it's a day that promises to itself and myself,  
what it delivers right now  
in each present moment –

the indescribably magnificent,  
glorious, who-would-have-guessed,  
strangely familiar, and yet utterly new,  
sense of the ordinary.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Translating Love

Oh, how to report to truth  
the many shades of love?

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux,  
monk of a silent order  
writing what he could not speak,  
writes of love for brother monks  
without embarrassment;  
expatiates upon the Song of Songs,  
erotic metaphor, with passionate, pure heart;

finds so many Latin terms  
for all the shades of love,  
of which we can translate to English speech  
but a modest few – love, delight, affection, charity,  
true friendliness; the glowing heart...

Then, pen laid down, the saint  
returns to narrow cell – and love:  
in silence, stillness, solitude,  
pursues translation's lifelong art,  
but now beyond all words;  
holy love into the human heart.

Oh, how to report to truth  
the many shades of love..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Travel Guide To 2009

Let's get away from it all..

that is, to take 'it all' with you  
and dump it on an idyllic beach  
whose native population rake smooth  
every morning

but who will remove your burden of thought  
from that idyllic community  
when you've come back?

OK go ahead, now hate me..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Two Birds On A Tree

Look at this old photograph..  
some of these old photos look  
more ancient than their, what,  
hundred-and-twenty years;  
as if the very air was different, then?

This one's simply of  
two birds in a tree:  
one sits and watches;  
the other eats the fruits..

this moment, frozen, framed, in time,  
takes on the epic stature  
of a metaphor, a myth:  
what of the previous second  
in our passing time? What  
of the next second?  
Where have those birds come from,  
where may they go next?

If we cease to patronise  
their 'bird-brains', see them  
closer to their God than we  
whose minds depart so far from nature...

if we think they think, in thoughts  
which we may share – then,  
what are they thinking? what  
do they think of one another?  
I look again at the photo, speculate;  
the photo grows in my concern  
to some great tree of primal Paradise...  
the Tree of Knowledge, could it be?

Is the one bird thinking,  
what a fine place this is to rest!  
A place to hide, if so need be,  
among its leaves; a height,  
an observation post,

I still, the world about its business;  
in stillness, I a little nearer to God,  
just a little lower than the angels,  
without beating my wings to find  
a heaven above...

Is the other bird thinking,  
what a fine restaurant I've found,  
that God provided; I so hungry  
on my way; how much I need to eat  
to give me strength for further flight...

and have these two birds even noticed  
each other, and each other's state?  
Are they two siblings from the self-same nest,  
flying together through their lives;  
loving one another until the last birdfall?  
Two rivals, just about to fight to death?  
Or, two fore-flyers of the same great flock,  
about to land and strip the tree of fruit,  
then rest, God-filled, to know Him in that stillness?

These thoughts; an ancient photograph;  
now I wonder about the unknown photographer  
who saw the world, in two birds on a tree.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Two Birds On The Same Tree

Two birds rest on the same tree;  
their eyes are bright;

they look alike; yet one  
is the Teacher; one the Student;

the Student tastes all the many fruits  
upon that tree; the Teacher sits, just watches,

filled with love and pride;  
the eyes of both are bright;

when the Student has tasted all,  
the Teacher asks what has been learnt; for

only the Teacher knows within their heart:  
that now the Student is the teacher;

the Teacher listens as a student;  
the Student speaks now as a teacher

who has learned this of themselves;  
the Teacher's eyes are bright:

knowing that to live it through  
shows the knowledge to be true;

the Student is teaching the Teacher now, of  
how to teach; the Teacher glows to know

the Student may surpass the Teacher;  
knowledge shines from both their eyes;

who is the more glorious of these two  
who share both the same name?

who rejoice to need the other;  
who rejoice to be the other;

now they are silent; now the tree's rejoicing too;  
Its roots above; its fruits below;

its leaves, a shelter;  
its branches, home.

\*

[ Leaning on a poem of Kabir: Indian readers will be familiar with  
'two birds in a tree' as a metaphor for acting with detachment; Kabir takes this  
further, into knowledge gained from wise action...]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Two Cows Deconstruct Derrida

These two cows were ruminating  
and one says, I was listening  
to the milkmaid's transistor

and this French philosopher  
was explaining that there's  
no English translation of the French word  
'betise' except 'stupidity' but

'stupidity' only refers to man  
where the French 'betise' means  
to behave like an animal...

and the other cow says  
well what's wrong with that

and the first cow says  
well his point is, English cows  
can't be stupid; only man  
can be stupid..

and the other cow says  
well that's a relief then  
so does that mean that French cows  
can be stupid

and the first cow says  
no because they don't have a word for it  
in French

so the other cow says  
so then is it better to be  
an English cow  
that can't be stupid  
or a French cow  
that can't be called stupid

and the first cow says  
who cares, I've always said

the French ruminates too much  
and then talk bullshit...

and the other cow says  
I'm glad I'm a Jersey

what about that French milkmaid  
I call sexyhands but  
the farmer sometimes calls  
a silly cow I wonder what  
Derrida would say about that

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Two Paper-Thin Haikus

This crisp autumn morning,  
the great tree sighs  
for its destiny: a dictionary.

This warm summer evening  
the dictionary sighs  
remembering when it was a living tree.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Unity Of Source

That's what she called it;  
surprised that, as musician,  
knowing how a piece of music  
sets out from, and finally returns to  
some chosen 'key' based on a single note:  
which remains in mind of the composer  
and the listener alike; calling back, after  
the great adventure, to your loving home;

she, finding that poems, too,  
maintain that sound, somewhere in mind – of  
what the poem's about; and whence it started;  
which guides each word that's chosen;  
where it shall return to rest..

You hear this (even if you know  
nothing about music..) in Mozart's playful sounds:  
as if each day, he packs a rucksack with a snack,  
sets out for hills and mountains, clouds,  
the tinkling streams, bird cries, goats clambering and  
bleating; maybe hears a village band  
practising down there below; smiles;  
perhaps clouds gather; lightning flashes,  
thunder rolls; for that is life..

then, as the shadows of the evening mountains  
begin to creep towards the city streets,  
follows the streams that skip beside him down the hillside,  
paths appearing now, by goats and men more worn;  
knowing that, at the end,  
his home will still be where it was  
that morning after breakfast...

Sometimes, when no-one's listening but myself,  
I sit at the piano, and play the 'Mozart game' –  
strike a keynote chord; then close my eyes or turn away,  
put a finger on an unknown note,  
say, around two octaves above that; then  
listen as a melody unfurls from inner ear; perhaps

an intermediate harmony assists; and  
finally, return to that loved home; now refreshed,  
shining-eyed; content; and needing only rest...

Unity of source..  
you hear it now?  
how much we know of this,  
yet scarcely knew we knew..

\*

for Elizabeth

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Universal Joke

You can't get really near  
the Beloved Friend  
who some call God  
without a sense of humour;

humour; and paradox:  
sadness brings humility,  
humility catches God's ear...  
now you're laughing for sheer joy.

And have you heard this one...:  
you can't take anything from this world  
without the world taking something from you...  
isn't that the best joke that ever was...?

Cows, who ruminate as well as Rumi ever did  
Call it the Unified Field Theory.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Universe At Finger-Tip

Two or three months back  
my little finger caught in a closing hinge;  
could have been worse...

since then, the nail's been  
every shade of blackish-brown,  
living some ancient, primitive life, of battered claw,  
or shellfish, bruised by rock and ocean,  
yet preserving, in its shell  
such tender life  
as heroes live to save..

every day, I watch this primeval drama  
as, secretly, beneath the horny shell  
so measured in its protectiveness,  
dying slowly like a hero who enfolds  
a baby life within his arms,

secretly beneath, there grows a new pink life;  
its promise makes me look afresh  
at its neighbour nails; and marvel  
at the delicacy of their shade  
from crescent moon to nail so practical..  
what lacquer could ever hope to match  
this living beauty?

and I fall silent, still; humbled at this scene  
that brings the universe's law and love  
here to my finger-end. No name of god,  
or evolution, or Intelligent Design,  
may encompass my humility;  
I who know not my own finger-end;  
humility so still, it's even beyond prayer.  
If praise can be one, without form -  
then this is praise.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Unthinks-Balloon

Ask a saint  
or ask a balloon

how fullness  
can be emptiness;

how joyful they both are!

\*

[leaning on Rumi]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Vaanii

Vaanii

You spoke of 'vaanii' as that speech  
that follows true perception  
with exact expression  
in that glorious inner sound  
that's followed into action..

intrigued, I took the dictionary from the shelf..

and it speaks of music..  
like - I hear from memory -  
that roadside stream accompanying your walk,  
whose music – ever changing,  
ever a continuance of the same –  
speaks of its source among the wooded hills;  
speaks of the beauties that it passed;  
and of its destiny, in merging with salt sea;

as Saraswati, goddess of wise speech,  
protected now within the deepest stone;  
that music that the head hears and obeys in reason;  
that music which the heart hears in the voice;  
that music dancing in the graceful action:

unmistakeable as truth, it has a name:  
vaanii.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Vanaprasthiya

Their grandchild's silken first hair  
brushed with tender love;  
their own hair, grey or white or gone;

household handed over to  
their son, daughter, or  
their spouse; now,

to find again themselves, to be themselves;  
free, they walk the morning air of freedom  
towards the woods; upon the way,  
meet others of their age.

Trees - as every child knows  
and old men may remember;  
old women see through their own children's eyes -  
listen with such silent wisdom,  
that among the trees,  
all become wise.

And so they, the honoured aged,  
meet, acknowledge, greet,  
speak as many words as truth may draw;  
meditate; then, open eyes and every sense  
teach, this is what a temple is;  
this is what you are.

Evening stillness; then they return  
to the hearth and warmth of family; as  
a great grove of ancient, fresh-leafed trees  
where in stillness soul meets nature  
and finds truth arise.

\*

[With thanks to Sunil Bhattacharya for some hints of history]

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Verbs V. Nouns

Nouns...

they're dead things; names  
you give to things to render them  
immobile; to make them yours, your very own; fit for nothing  
except scrapheaps, museums, dictionaries, armchairs;

but they make you feel good;  
you have control over their world;  
you don't have to think about them any more;  
they're all locked up safe in your collecting-box,  
the noun for which is head:

you can sound important with nouns:  
this government's raft of measures  
for fiscal stimulation of the economy

but verbs... ah, verbs!  
you can't own them, push them about,  
collect them, be important about them;  
they own themselves;

they're outdoor words: going about their  
lawful business, doing what they're best at,  
measuring their own life as they work;  
adapting themselves to what needs to be done  
which nouns can't do without a committee  
and then it's too late; happy  
to be themselves, being; even  
being while they're doing.. don't you wish  
you were a verb?

Nature – (that's a verb, by the way,  
not a noun) – is all verbs; evolution  
is a verb (not a theory):  
DNA's a verb – you can't own it  
like a noun...it doesn't even  
want to own you...

so, be a child – put your boots on,

run, splash, shout look at all those verbs;  
how bright the world, what fun,  
nothing to put in your pocket to take home

(or if you do, it'll change to a noun, your noun,  
in your pocket, in your drawer, gathering dust:  
verbs don't have the time to gather dust...)

verbs are for observing; verbs are for  
seeing for the first time; wow! Verbs are for  
inventors, explorers, tree-climbing,  
coming home after a day of verb-watching  
tired and looking forward to tomorrow  
and sleeping soundly, maybe even  
thanking, laughing, giving, living;

God is a verb.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Versus

Wood, leather, metal  
clank together in irregular rhythm:  
behind the Roman ploughman  
crows and sparrows compete  
to see what the blade throws up  
from this red soil like ancient pots;  
the horse, its patience godlike,  
knows when to turn without  
that hoarse, brief, ancient shout.

The old typewriter rattles on so fast  
you cannot tell whether she is happy in her work;  
again, again, the bell rings, telling her  
it's time for carriage to reverse.

The poet's eyes are unfocussed,  
lost to thought; the words come slow;  
more certain, where the line may end -  
the mind to take the mind's own breath.

Versus. Where the furrow ends;  
and where the line of verse  
asks some new thing of the mind.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Water Into Wine

Once upon a time,  
Jesus, who called himself the true vine,  
turned water into wine  
in an act of love.

All over the world, right now,  
a million grape vines  
are performing the same miracle

slowly; silently; aided by the sun;  
their roots, like farmers, coal or diamond miners,  
searching in the earth  
for the most precious;

it doesn't hit the headlines  
but who dares say  
a patient, silent, unsung love  
is any less a miracle?

Who dares say that grape vines  
do not seek and love  
their beautiful perfection?

miracles, an act of love;  
love, that miracle unearned –

what may we do to earn, to drink,  
that wine of Love, but love?

\*

[with a bow to Hafiz]

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! We As Parents To Our Parents

They never teach you this at school;  
they'll try to teach you reading, writing, 'rithmetic  
in their own instructed ways;

but now, if anyone suggested it, there'd be howls  
about the impertinence, the interference,  
the rights, the dangers of this and that -

but all the same, they never teach you:  
how to get on with your parents.

Oh there are books and books and books  
telling your parents how to look after you, but hey!  
there are two parties here! Mom and Dad  
can ask their own parents (sometimes - because they  
were in the same situation as you are now and so,  
reckon they can do a better job...) but  
who can you, ask?

Philip Larkin told us memorably that  
'they f\*\*\* you up, your Mum and Dad',  
which may not be the case for all of us;  
Hindus have their own stern answer to this question:  
you chose them, in effect, as the result  
of your behaviour in your previous life...so there,  
work with that, kiddo, could be  
the making of you...stop blaming it all on them!

So there you are, in this heated cauldron of love and hate, or  
like sharp stones shaken in this bag called family  
until the rough edges wear (each other) away and  
those smooth round pebbles roll out to the world...

but perhaps a little help wouldn't hurt?  
I was exactly four and a half when I told the truth about something,  
since I didn't know any other way; and as my parents' voices  
rose in argument about 'knowing what was best for me',  
(I remember the moment now, so clear) I turned my back  
on this so painful sound, faced the 'wireless' on the chest of drawers,

and decided there and then  
that grown-ups made such a fuss when you told the truth  
that it would be better not to - at least, until  
they grew up a bit... and there, went half a lifetime  
of prevarication, dodging the question, fantasy: never tell the truth  
until you're sure they really, really want to hear it...

Then when I was eleven or thereabouts  
(and again, I remember exactly where I was standing  
at the time - the bottom of the stairs)  
the solemn thought 'entered my head':  
that in some way I knew but couldn't quite explain,  
I was in the position, had some duty,  
to take care, in some thoughtful way, of the minds of those  
my parents...

But they didn't teach that at my school.

love, I knew all about; but  
parents? Aren't they strange? They try so hard, too...  
and no, I don 't need 'counselling', thanks -  
I'd rather keep it in the family. All I'm asking  
is, a few lessons, maybe? I'd even do  
the homework.

XXX love you both XXX

[revisited]

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! What Is Your Substance...?

What's your 'substance', Aristotle, pray? -  
that in your book On Metaphysics, you  
should feel the need to look at 'being' more  
than Plato said of soul? How 'know thyself'?

You focus your so glorious mind, O sage,  
on what confronts us in our human state;  
hoping that from there, all will disclose  
itself; and so you seek to formulate:

in Book Four, Chapter Two, acutely list  
four ways, four meanings, of the Greek as used;  
to us, they're more apparent grammar-wise:  
'being' as noun, verb, adverb, adjective...

you ultimately choose the languaged thing:  
nouns as existence, substance - 'ousia';

no wonder Shakespeare took you up on that;  
asking as he did, God's self in human form  
what were the essence of that insubstantial  
substance that the world's whole being holds:

and out from all these cloudy worlds of thought -  
it's 'constancy' in godly human heart..

I wonder, Aristotle, if Will's search  
to see the One that's constant in the All  
would satisfy your subtle Grecian mind?

or, in Creation's grammar as it lives,  
do active verbs precede substantive nouns?  
And do we know our godly self more true,  
as constant in ourselves, in Being Now?

\*

[For Pete, who asked]



# ! ! What She Told Me

Arrived at last at the monastery  
she listened as he asked

why are your aspirations so very puny?  
why do you not aspire  
to be liberated for the sake  
of all mankind?

and, she said, she could  
have cut the silence with a sword;

the two-edged sword, of unreason  
and of reason; the same light  
flashing from the hero's sword  
or burning steady, gentle, from the candle  
there in the temple of the heart.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! What The Stone Said

This stone: scraps of wet earth  
still clinging to it;

rounded, greyish; large enough  
to fit into my palm as if,

cradled there, it's enough part of me  
to tell me that it's more than  
inert matter without consciousness..

its pleasing roundness – warming  
in my hand – tells me a little  
of its history:

once it was one of many, jostled  
over years or centuries in  
a river or an ocean bed;

to be thrown up, again and again,  
from the maw of breaking, angry wave  
onto a beach; then at some high tide,  
pulled back again;

it's covered with its history:  
a mass of scratches where a fiercer sand  
from the hierarchy of stone's hardnesses,  
scratched it; to be soothed and smoothed  
by its fellow sufferers on the watered bed.

Warm in my cradling palm, it shares  
or so it seems, my own consciousness:  
the same consciousness as all Creation's wonders,  
but here in supreme, uncomplaining,  
inexpressive, yielding pure obedience:  
a sermon in a stone; awaiting future call  
to be raised up a man..

no wonder - as all children know –  
'beach' (and can't you hear there,

tread of feet on hard, resistant, partially  
yielding stones?)

and `shore' (and can't you hear there  
the waves smoothe the sand,  
then draw back to crash again  
like a drawn breath of astonishment?)

- as children know: beach and shore  
full of their shared consciousness;  
God's playground which he shares with them.

That was what the stone said.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Where Do You Go, Girl?

Where do you go, girl,  
when you fall asleep?

for even when we've spent a passion's time,  
you, all woman and all animal,  
and then drift gently into sleep  
and I to watch you drift -  
you're straight away a girl again.

Do you dream a girlhood's dearest dreams?  
or roam a woman's world?  
What girlhood's safe, safe place  
do you retreat to  
in your private sleep?

Was it when the only man to love  
was your beloved father,  
still recovering from a wartime's hangover  
with alcohol - and your so fierce, despairing help?

Where do you go in sleep?  
while I now watch this unknown girl;  
an upper lip that asks so innocently  
to be kissed?  
And lower lip that just so innocently  
enjoys?

Where do you go, girl,  
so far, so many years away from me?  
Where do you go, girl?

Michael Shepherd



# ! ! Where Prayer Meets Praise

Where does prayer end, and praise begin?  
Can there really be distinction?

In prayer, we believe, we call upon the gods,  
those forces greater than our smaller selves,  
to give us what we feel we sadly lack;

In praise, we ask them nothing; simply dedicate  
our inner selves to honour all we feel of worth;  
honour, laud and magnify those highest qualities  
that mortal minds conceive as boundless life..

Within us, then, some prior knowledge grown  
of what we feel should govern our full life!

And now the blissful sages speak to us  
and tell us that the heavens which we seek  
are equally inside our very selves,  
awaiting recognition and acknowledgement;

so what does that imply? That what we call upon  
with prayer, must be answered; for it's there  
within already – courage, strength or love;

and what we praise, is, too, all there within:  
we praise ourselves, while thinking of ourselves  
as other than ourself.. now, is this strange? or beautiful -  
beyond all beauty: good beyond all good?  
and true, for all hearts know the truth of truth?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Who Needs Speling Enyway

Why

I asked myself, a child,

do those marmalade jars

need to tell you

they're made of sevrал oranges?

Any child knows that..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Who's First To Bat?

'What is it like to be a bat? '  
Sprigge asked the question first;  
then Thomas Nagel took it up  
with philosophic thirst;

What is it like to be a bat?  
Who knows? Bats aren't so chatty...  
but if you asked a bat, I guess  
he'd say, 'Well.. kinda batty..'

\*

(Written to mark the impending publication of the great man's essays, 'Secular  
Philosophy and the Religious Temperament')

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Whose Photos?

In the mind, there's a photo-album  
stamped on the cover, My Photos?  
with a question-mark –

the stranger's profile, immortalised  
as they waited at the crossing lights;

the face crumpled with laughter  
at the joke you missed, as  
you boarded the bus;

the first glimpse of a future lover's  
stance, expression meaningless:  
strangely unattractive,  
insignificant yet remembered;

whose photographs are these?  
it's as if some other mind  
borrowed your camera without your consent,  
to leave taunting hints of timelessness.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Whose Tears?

I don't cry. Not  
floods of tears cry.  
The eyes moisten, but,  
It's the rest of it...:  
the chest heaves unsuppressibly, as if  
it would leap out from the body's confines...  
it's all beyond control;  
'sob' isn't the right word  
because it's all silent.

It never used to be like this;  
now – well, I'm too embarrassed  
to tell you everything  
that sets it off.. just think 'sentimental'...  
except that it's quite without those personal thoughts  
like, what a cute puppy,  
I can feel for her,  
how I'd be proud to be him right now...

athletes of any sport or any nation  
ascending the podium while  
their strange national anthem plays...  
and it's a sure bet;

anyone who fulfils themselves,  
achieves something which  
makes them clearly proud...

triumph over adversity, over handicap;  
the Paralympics - have you noticed,  
they're the most quietly satisfied of winners?

the shining eye of  
someone who's given from the heart...  
or someone who's received that gift...

sometimes the perfection of  
a sung phrase, its subtle timing,  
the emotion kernelled in a single note...

the first notes of those hymns they sing  
when heroes finally are laid to rest...

or a convincing love story –  
no, I won't give you the names –

or a moment of some unexpected truth  
which speaks of something far beyond...

even a silence, an unfocussed presence  
that holds some revelation yet  
unformulated; only recognised..

I have this strange, beloved stranger  
in my shaking chest,

a law unto itself, which doesn't  
ask for my consent before  
the convulsions start...

in a way, it's quite reassuring:  
something within me, announcing  
its independent life;

something capable of being stirred;  
and when it stops its heaving,  
here's the best part: then, it's gone –  
no thought to smear the mind,  
no mood to coddle or indulge..  
it came; it went; so pure, so clean;

best to give it no attention,  
let it live its life without my interference;  
it's asking nothing of me but  
to love its freedom; watch it be itself.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Why Should I Take Your Time...?

Why should I take your time  
describing in loving detail  
the day so many years ago  
when I smelt the air on a cliff-top –  
sunlight, stubby wind-blown salt flowers,  
still glitter of the sea, etc –  
and knew freedom, liberation,  
the blessing of landscape,  
the magic of perspective...  
all in the unfamiliar, so innocent, cliff-top air  
that touched immortal on the cheek...?

I guess it's like an expensive gift that you give  
without unwrapping its elaborate protection;  
inside, something both banal, and magical:

not the memory; but the memory  
of being, just being; just being a child;  
when the world spoke of itself  
in every magic detail, unwrapped itself and  
with so much to say...

the magic of memory; being, not quite forgot;  
offered to you, not wrapped by me,  
(watching your face as you open it...)  
but, from yourself?

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Why Shouldn'T Poems...

...be hot out of a  
news item – even if  
it barely ranks as 'poetry' -  
if it moves a would-be poet  
more than many a poem...?

Here's the story: Dr Jill Bolte Taylor,  
who became a neuro-scientist because  
her beloved brother was schizophrenic...  
had an exceptional opportunity for research

when one morning a golf-ball-sized haemorrhage  
in her left brain, gave her a stroke, which  
she was able to observe as it happened...

becoming herself schizophrenic in a fashion,  
so that one half of her brain said  
this consciousness is boundless...  
while the other half said, I'm me...

struggling to support one another as  
for forty-five minutes, she tried  
to find her office identity  
in a blur of pixels that were a number  
she must dial...

it took her eight observant years  
to recover; now she tells the story,  
(always herself, always as boundless  
as her story):  
some of us smiling through our tears, her tears,  
her smiles..

maybe I could turn that into  
more of a poem... but why?  
Between these lines, between  
she and me, I and you,  
the boundless, too..





# ! ! Wild Thought

Twin squirrels leapfrog  
on the gleditsia branch.  
Do frogs play squirrel?

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Winter Fun

Delicious snowflake  
floating perfect then melting  
on my outstretched tongue

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Winter In The City

The snow is yellow  
round the doorway to the pub;  
gone, the sound of 'Aaaahh...'

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! With A Hey And A Ho And A Txtng To-And-Fro

It was a lover and his lass  
with a hey and a ho and a texting to and fro  
that o'er the sidewalks smiling pass  
with ringtones, with ringtones,  
with dotty ditty ringtones  
while cellphones ring  
hi! tingalingaling,  
sweet lovers love a ring.

It was that cool dude and his chick  
with a hey and a ho and a texting to and fro  
swopping tunes and sharing pix  
with ringtones, with ringtones  
with dotty ditty ringtones  
and all the birds  
txt lv ya bf wrds  
sweet lovers love a ring

Michael Shepherd

## !! 'Woman -'

How can a mother ever quite forget,  
or quite relinquish in her memory,  
that state which babies share with saints:  
to be free from all desires of mind?

And so the mother must take on  
that strange but natural responsibility  
to desire, for the baby in her charge; but then,  
one day, to learn to stop to 'mother'  
for the child's own growing sake..

And how much more, instinct and reason  
must have played in Her; given a responsibility  
greater than the world itself?

And who can ever know those private conversations  
between the growing Child of God  
and young earthly mother of that heavenly Child?

So, when at that wedding and its showing-forth  
the servants were unsure, She was there  
to say 'Do what He says'..

And from John comes that bald account  
which we must read each for ourself:  
'Woman, what have you to do with Me...? '

He, not yet ready as He thought,  
for destiny; divisive miracles?

Who knows how many private conversations  
lay behind that question and its rhetoric –  
public, and recorded by that deeply impressed scribe...

and whether it was said with gentle smile  
(who reads the words of Jesus as from One  
who almost always smiled – His words, a gift?)

or said with firm authority, which we may take

as heard by Her, not with a fuser's shame,  
but with Magnificat still ringing in Her mind?

And then, perhaps, She learned to grieve  
and not to grieve, beneath a holy Cross..

I think this passage is forever read  
by men in one way; women in another;  
and perhaps, that's just how it should be.

Michael Shepherd

## ! ! Writing Poetry

To make of every poem  
a challenge; face with joy an  
honourable failure; blaze  
with glorious sadness:  
laughing at the glory,  
smiling at the sadness;

but hearing in the heart  
that which cannot be said, but  
is to be ever listened to:  
unknown, formless, eternal, always present.

Michael Shepherd



## ! ! Yahbu Haiku

The cherry tree laughed -  
three days' yearly blossoming:  
no haiku poet!

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! You, To Whom I Am Myself

O You Who Are - the formless, nameless One,  
more real than all forms and names can speak:

You for whom we seek to find a name  
and yet who has no name, who needs no name;

You for whom we seek to shape a form  
and yet who has no form, who needs no form;

Yet whom we name in every name we speak,  
and whom we see in every form we seek:

is there some name bestowed for nameless name,  
a form imagined for a formless form,  
by which all hearts today that seek themselves  
may shape their search as if for One unknown?  
may kneel in front of their own golden throne?

Should we approach you as the Lord of Hearts,  
who's spoken of in heartfelt praise of glorious human brilliance,  
endeavour, art, achievement and discovery;  
the Lord who gave us hearts to know we love?

Should we approach you as the Lord of Self,  
whom we all know when we relax, become  
more our known self, in silence, rest, or company  
that sparkles round a table built of happiness?

Should we approach you as the Lord of Consciousness  
in whom we live and move, and be; yet never see  
for you're the seeing in ourself; to whom we wake  
and know, and stand securely, watching all?

I ask You for the sound of some new yet eternal name;  
that sound by which all quickly know themselves  
and talk once more from hearts forever free,  
of what we are, and know, and love to be.



## ! ! Your Self: From Plotinus' 'Enneads' 6.3

Seeing yourself - at last - so beautiful:  
cease, at last, that vision to deny!  
What then, to see in your so glorious self?  
What qualities shine out upon the world?

Loftiness of spirit; righteousness  
of life; the purity of discipline;  
majestic face of courage; gravity;  
fearless, tranquil, passionless modesty—

and shining down forever on all this:  
that glorious light in all things known and seen;  
that watches even, its own watchfulness;  
your self as all things, ever known to be.

And now you are Yourself: a blazing Sun;  
glorious with the radiance that is One.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Zen And The Art Of Plastic Flower Maintenance

From time to time, when  
I've been meditating, and  
these things matter, I pick respectfully  
the plastic flowers from their vase,  
wash the vase, wipe the dust  
off the leaves with a moist cloth,  
dip the flower-heads in water  
as one would give someone  
a holy bath

and then replace them in  
a slightly new position in the vase,  
a slightly new position on the table.

absurdity and  
something beautiful  
have met and got along together rather well.

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Zimbabwe

My heart, which lives  
its own laws  
cannot bear to talk  
with my fine Zimbabwean friend  
when he comes to Britain  
about 'the situation'

my heart wishes only  
to be in the presence  
of a fine man  
and to feel myself  
a fine man  
in his presence

together we are human  
and there is no  
despite

(for Taylor)

Michael Shepherd

# ! ! Zimbabwe - An Echo

The day before yesterday  
they dealt with the terminally ill to free the hospitals.  
Yesterday,  
they dealt with those who did not contribute to the economy.  
Today,  
they dealt with those who oppose the government.  
Tomorrow,  
they will deal with those who have heard of a better life.  
Next week,  
do not be surprised at the truck  
with bloodstains on its tailboard  
at your gate tooting its impatient horn.

Michael Shepherd

# ! .. S A D

and sad, perhaps;  
as of children  
visited for the first time in their life  
by sadness; pure sadness,  
without friend or enemy,  
just sad; sadness which does not tell  
of its parents, or of where it came from,  
or of where it might be going;  
or of how long it might stay before it goes..  
yes, sadness like that.

Michael Shepherd



# ! ...Their Blackness...

'..and their blackness is incontrovertible...'

as the mind surfaced out of sleep today,  
these words – matter-of-fact, authoritative –  
spoke in my inner ear.

had it been a fleeting image or  
the painful ending of some dream – like  
struggling to catch the last train  
which all the time receded –  
it would have been dismissed;

but the writer's mind seizes on such things:  
this line, an Alexandrine or hexameter:  
what scene had come before  
this ultimate pronouncement?

was this the verdict of some shining, white-robed one  
summing my mortal sins, written indelible?  
what came before? had there just been  
some paltry list of virtues dimly glimpsed,  
good deeds half-done? or could I hope  
this shining one spoke not of me at all?

was this a glimpse of what had gone from mind,  
the glorious radiance of a perfect world?  
or glimpse of compensatory twin mirror-world  
which physicists speak of as balancing necessity  
of charges positive and negative,  
where all is in reverse; and so, perhaps the mind;  
and black is good and God; and white is...trash...

or had the mind been in the world of art,  
where, as in the etched fine lines like thinnest wire  
of a Picasso or a Hockney – incontrovertibly  
shaping in the finest, mindful black  
a world of friends, of fears, of foes,  
of loves and lives and lovely, lively things?

we know so little of the world of dream,  
so close to poets' fantasies of truth;  
and shall I wish, tonight – so far away this sunny dawn -  
to find again that other world, where all is brightest white?  
or meet that other world, where black is beautiful..

Michael Shepherd

# ! ? ! 'Please Read My Poems'

'Read my latest poems.

Here's a list of the twelve  
you need to read first..

In return, give me a list  
of any of yours you might like  
me to read..

Though I can't promise to do that right away;  
I'm very busy, writing poems and stuff.'

Well, go stuff your stuff  
just where it came from.

Oops, I forgot to take the tablets..

Michael Shepherd

# ! 0009 Thank God It's Friday

I'm on night shift at the moment so  
I miss the local news. But  
I take the dog up the hill, there's  
usually something going on.

there were three of them up  
there today but I must have  
missed the excitement; just  
two old ladies and a young man  
standing on that huge pile of skulls  
waiting there beneath them  
for the inevitable

they were telling each other  
Jewish jokes to keep their  
spirit up. I only caught  
one joke - 'they say that  
Jews are just like  
other people - only  
more so...'

Laugh? I thought the One  
in the middle would die  
laughing

I was halfway back when  
It all went dark

Michael Shepherd

# ! 0253 To Li Po On Saint Patrick's Day

Dear Li Po

you wrote your Po-em of The Day  
for Poemhunter  
about drinking - and alone at that - without mentioning  
that it's Saint Patrick's Day  
when drinkers seldom drink alone  
for the craic's the thing

so next time you have to drink alone  
except for your shadow,  
notice that your shadow  
under the light of the Moon,  
dances more drunkenly, and sooner  
- happy shadow -  
than you. You haven't noticed?  
Then perhaps you're thinker  
than you drunk you are

pionta Guinness, le do thoil

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Ring Of Bright Words Dancing

and that day  
eighty words woke up, listened to each other,  
smiled, joined hands,  
danced in a ring

and as they danced around and round  
the space inside the circle  
became magic  
the earth flowed  
into a brightness in the air  
which in its space  
became sound

the words dancing  
left a ring in the grass  
in the sound of a poem

then returned home  
to where words rest  
in stillness and in silence  
until called upon  
to waken fresh

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Bawdy To My Mistress' Landscape In 17th Century Style

A rather lovely hilly place  
resides below her lovely face  
and beyond that, a lovely valley  
reveals a fertile grove that's pally

[the first line comes from a lady's bio-data on this site...]

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Birthday Celebration

How strange it seems, that old age follows youth!  
when all the world seemed one's own, at that time,  
with time enough to seek a higher truth -  
who'd guess the stairs so steep, so slow to climb?

Worn carpets and worn kneecaps are old age  
- and yet, a blessed time for life of mind:  
for those who wish, a different sense of wage;  
free-chosen universal work to find;

and yet more blessed still: that earth-bound soul  
to meet and greet, and work its soil and flowers;  
to live with gratitude; and scan the whole  
to find that One which proves the whole world ours.

As iron age yields to the gold of truth,  
so our old age may find within, true youth.

Michael Shepherd



# ! A Buddhist Speaks: A Man Listens, Drinks

'The burning flames of anger have parched the stream of my being.  
The thick darkness of illusion has blinded my intelligence.  
My consciousness drowns in torrents of desire.  
The mountain of pride has flung me into the nether worlds.  
The driving blizzard of envy has dragged me into samsara.  
The demon of belief in the ego has me firmly by the throat.'

(Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche)

[samsara = the flow of the world]

]

\*

Oh Dilgo! You too? And you,  
high in the snowy mountains, in a thriving monastery,  
surrounded by devotion, love, study, meditation, prayer...

what hope for me and us, if this is what you find in you?

Then I remember your serene and smiling face,  
untrammelled, unaffected, giving, and compassionate;  
your first thought, before and after meditation  
and the seeking of those light-clouded inner worlds,  
compassion for the world; as you in turn were taught..

what hope for me and us, what can we do –  
but, read this... not with self-loathing, but compassion,  
the compassion that brought you, too, to write...

and I recall how snow, hanging from a mountain ledge,  
forms drops of water sparkling in the sun and mountain air;  
now and then, they drop; join together in a trickle;  
a little way below, a mountain stream  
gurgles, laughs upon its way;  
makes a channel in the rock, splashes from the overhangs;  
further down below (silent and still from up here, but for  
a single bird, wheeling, gliding, in the lower air)  
down below – a mighty river plans to form;  
how pure its water tastes.



# ! A C\*\*\*\*\*s - Well, Ok, Seasonal - Plea..

Art brings a smile and a message.  
Thus the art of 'Christmas' cards...  
(and I use the word loosely,  
as its public use is now disapproved...)

A folded card: that's four smallish sides to fill.  
An appropriate seasonal smile on Page One;  
Page Two requires nothing,  
blank but room for something else to say  
in lieu of that family catch-up print-out page  
your children will have helped with; or maybe not..

Page Three offers a seasonal message – but  
watch out these days – 'you can't use  
THAT for THEM...' oh of course, they're,  
what exactly? Crypto-Buddhists?  
Lapsed Amish? Richard Dawkins and  
his, er, dour or smiling family ?

Page Four – the great let-out  
for the card's – and implicitly your –  
abysmal grey vapidness...  
it's a charity card!  
No money for the Hallmark millionaires!

So spare a thought this season, for  
those who have to choose those  
cards for charities...

non-denominational, non-racist,  
politically correct but only in  
a negative sense – no dolphins  
or humpback whales with an  
ambivalent Monna Lisa smile:  
your Japanese friends might sense a slight...

For suspected closet Christians  
where the charity's along those lines,  
it's back to symbol and the catacombs

and secret worshippers – perhaps  
a burning nightlight, hinting  
faith, in outer, inner, darkness?

or if that's risky, then the January snowdrop,  
suggesting hope, continuance..  
for children's charities, you can risk  
a teddy bear – so far, no pulpit East or West  
has denounced him as a capitalist, or as  
American as Roosevelt...or an  
endangered species thus dismissed...

but keep the smiling children off the card..  
their faces might betray leanings  
towards skin-colour preference,  
adoption difficulties...

The 25 charities who have grouped together  
as the '1959 Group' have risked this year  
a Santa, face hidden but for pinkish nose...  
cavorting on the ice, accompanied  
by an antlered orchestra;  
I guess the charities for multiple sclerosis,  
epilepsy, autism, lifeboats, have agreed...  
the rink-edge board behind him coyly  
says 'Merr....stmas'...hmmm, close thing...

The glorious sunlit barn-end in the snow  
of a Massachusetts farm, 'printed in USA,  
finished in Canada'...uh? ... tells us that  
the year moves round; nature, seasons, farm work  
always with us; as it was in Bethlehem;  
how sweet the fresh, clean manger smells!

we turn as always, to Page Three;  
where heart warms heart with written words;  
taste, politics, social obligation,  
have no place here; it's simply, love.

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Cautionary Tale For Parents

" My mother told me  
that I never should  
play with the gipsies  
down in the wood...

but she didn't tell me  
why not, alas...so  
'shouldn't...'  
turned to 'should..' -

now I'm wiser,  
but I'm pregnant..  
guess I got that  
roamin' blood..."

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Cream Tea To Live For

It's the flash of bright sunlight  
reflected off a passing car  
that stops me in my tracks –  
picking out the teatime plate which  
-since I'm one of those who motivate themselves  
by the 'reward' system –  
twenty minutes of gardening  
have made all the sweeter:

a slice of soda bread, warm  
from baking just two hours ago;  
spread with crumbly-textured home-made cream cheese  
(got it right this time, as much by accident) ,  
and spread on this, red strawberry jam;  
a slight mound here and there  
implying a whole fruit promising itself  
in this superior 'preserve'..  
the sunlight shining on its gleaming surface

it's like those foodie photographs  
(and yes, I know, they have to use  
shaving foam because of those hot studio lights...):  
those photographs in the lifestyle section  
which we linger over, but have  
already decided long ago,  
yes, that's for me; or, that'll never be for me...

today, it seems, its perfection  
is, for me: for this, heaven and earth were made;  
if the gods are to be sought,  
they are only to be sought  
in the present moment.  
Today, they do not fail. Nor I. Nor I.

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Garfunkel Moment

' I've always thought  
the game in life  
is to stay interesting  
to yourself '

2007

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Girdle Round The Earth - I Fly, Master!

Right now, there are near 5,000 visitors on this site.

Let's suppose

you spend 8 hours a day surfing the web

and 8 hours sleeping

and 8 hours doing stuff

that's, er, 15,000 readers of one / lots of / poem(s) every suncircle.

And we thought Shakespeare's Puck and Ariel were fiction?

Michael Shepherd



# ! A Good Man In An Evil Time

This is the story I was told – I've omitted  
the details which might identify  
and narrow down the nation,  
the place, the family, the man...

It was in his teens, at school,  
when the national leader arose  
to bring the nation to its future,  
its fulfilment, its destiny; so, like  
his fellows, he joined the youth corps,  
their eyes shining with ideals.

When the war inevitably came,  
the time to show the world,  
he was conscripted as a soldier.  
He was not easy with this; killing for any noble cause  
was not in his beliefs; he sought advice  
in every holy book of every faith,  
and knew within himself that he was right:  
life is in the gift of the gods, and not of men.

One against the many, what could he do?  
Should he commit suicide, there and then,  
or its equivalent, disobey until he was shot,  
unrecorded, unpublicised? That too,  
he felt was wrong, life denied.

He decided to do just what he was told;  
but at night, alone, to lay all this in prayer  
at the feet of God; to sleep then and awake  
with a conscience washed by that same God  
who, it seemed, allowed wars just and unjust  
for reasons which few men may unravel.

As war continued, this model soldier  
rose within the ranks; and by an irony of fate  
was chosen to be on the staff  
of the death camps now being secretly set up.  
How intense his prayer now became;

how testing was this time.

The details of this now are all known  
(more than even those involved then knew) :  
after the war, when the trials of war criminals  
attempted human justice, some leaders  
felt that suicide was the honourable death;  
some lived in hope, were tried and hanged;  
some committed to life imprisonment  
to repent their life; or not.

For him (and some camp victims who survived  
even spoke for him; 'unyielding,  
but never wantonly cruel' said one)  
and truth to tell, at that sorry time,  
those not involved  
sneered at 'I was only obeying orders', and  
to his fellow countrymen, he was an uneasy figure  
to represent their national conscience  
-for him, the ten year sentence  
was much the same as a (conscript's) monastic cell;  
adequate sustenance, housing, humble clothes,  
and prayer.

Here the story told to me  
breaks off; I cannot say  
whether as a model prisoner  
he won the admiration of his guards,  
even the love; whether he wrote this down  
and it was lost, or may one day make a book;  
whether, if you met him, he would shine out  
with love and truth and wisdom,  
even saintliness; so that  
you'd be proud to have met him; some say  
that when he came out of prison, aged around 38,  
he became a schoolteacher; some say, a priest;  
others say, a doctor in a hospital..

I can only say, here was a good man;  
and wonder how I would have behaved  
had I been in his place; and whether,  
as his life drew to a close,

he was even grateful in his soul  
to have been so tested; and  
to have known life whole.

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Hero Of His Clime

This morning, as I cut into  
the tough flesh of the huge tomato  
with its brown, half-healed scar  
like an old sabre wound from some great battle,

the thought came, if you can call  
a vegetable, heroic, and why not,  
then this old bruiser is a hero...

its red proud chest so stalwart set,  
saying, I saw the season through..  
come rain, come shine, come wind  
and foul weather - what's going on these days? -

I saw it all - and more than that -  
I grew it - my way... and if they said,  
as mortals do -  
as if they knew a tom that's true -  
you're not for us - I'll say to you -  
I saw two thousand seven through -  
I lived it - my way...

Michael Shepherd

# ! A High Cue, Or Japanese Billiards

Beware the person  
who says 'It's not that simple...'  
you may believe them.

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Journey Through An Interminable Poetic Landscape

In the midst of the dense thicket  
of the poet-milky wood, just beyond the gas pumps  
standing as lonely as a trio of crows  
waiting for a poet's metaphor, and just beyond

where the pavement ends,  
the road divided:  
I took the road less travelled,  
- unlike, say, a wise purveyor of ice-cream;

pausing only to think, as the evening  
fell like sadness from my cigarette, that  
the other road will be for me  
for ever, the road I did not take

into the landscape which I did not see,  
in the time that will not return;  
but the road I took, led past  
plum-trees, showering Spring's wild daffodils

as with a late Spring snow, falling quietly  
like the sighs of young slant-eyed girls thinking of love;  
I'm glad I took that road; for later, when Autumn  
with its mists and mellow plumful fruitiness,

came silently, so silently,  
I took that road again; although I'm told  
the other road was much the same;  
but now, as the brown leaves fell and swirled,

the small, hard plums had fallen;  
I took some home, put them in the ice-box;  
were they juicy, cold on my morning lips?  
No. They'd gone; along with the girl

I'd brought home, and the crate of beer;  
just a note on the ice-box door:

'I used to worship your poetry; now  
I know that you've sold out... loser...'

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Joyful Death In Life

There is, it's said, a state of joyful death,  
known to the wise; and this, more realised  
than that cessation of our mortal breath  
beyond experience; only surmised;

a 'death' that's not an end, but life anew;  
a death that leaves no space where to be sad;  
that leaves no time for guilt, regret or rue  
but sets us free to know ourselves, and glad;

quite free of 'past' and 'future' in the mind,  
a life entirely of the moment's grace;  
the present taking care of what's designed  
to teach the lessons which our soul must face;

consciousness then grows apace; and when  
the ego dies – there's no more dying then..

[with acknowledgements to Eckhart Tolle's 'The Power of Now']

Michael Shepherd



# ! A Lady Beyond Death

She's dying.  
She's had two heart attacks,  
they say the third, the fatal one,  
could come at any time.

But she's on her feet or sitting,  
talking of things different.

Her husband - his love already  
has taken him beyond grief - smiles, says,  
she's somewhere between earth and heaven..

but I'm awed by her. She shines.  
So this is just a hint of what  
an angel is. A whiteness in the air  
around her; she's like a young girl,  
yet beyond life, and yet again,  
younger than a life; unsullied.

She's somewhere, not between earth and heaven,  
but somewhere where earth and heaven  
meet, share their secret, know they're one.

She smiles towards me;  
she's just - a presence.

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Life In The Day Of

It was a late, late night;  
a wild, wild night;

primitive urges which people  
might never have suspected of you  
demanding to be slaked,  
and slaked and slaked and slaked again

copulation and  
population meeting  
more than once in ways  
no way related to  
planned parenthood

but that's already in  
the distant past – the nights  
are your own; the day  
belongs to others;

it's morning now; you open  
an eye or two; stretch  
luxuriously without a hint  
of shame; then  
a quick grooming – the fancy stuff  
can wait til later..  
and deal with what your inside  
wants to put outside..

maybe a quick stroll in the garden  
before or after breakfast  
to see what's new; a few  
moments to collect yourself; then  
the business of the day

which seems to consist largely  
for you, of satisfying the needs  
of those strange and otherly  
human beings with their irrational  
urges for love, pleasure,

consolation, power, control -  
compensation for the burden  
of being a human being...  
you do your best  
to doze through this farrago;

you might call it life's office politics  
if you knew what that phrase meant

but you're a cat,  
and know no other life.

Michael Shepherd

# **! A Little Bit Of Tolle In Sutra Mood...**

What a miserable day.

He didn't have the decency to return my call.

She let me down.

\*

It is raining.

He did not call.

I was there. She was not.

[with acknowledgements and a smile]

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Little Grammar Is Most Becoming, It Becomes A Man...

And in case no-one mentioned this to you  
on those hot summer afternoons when  
you could hear the sound of bat on ball, or  
ball on racquet, or foot on football, or  
just people enjoying themselves out there  
beyond the half-open classroom window –

a little bit of grammar can open your eyes,  
open your mind, make you curious...  
take for example the word 'become'..

many centuries ago the ancient Brits  
got it from some 'Germanic' tribe,  
and it meant, to come to a place,  
be somewhere, go somewhere...

and later it acquired the sense of something  
developing into something else, and  
being recognised as that –  
'she's become a real beauty, hasn't she? '

then in the Jane Austen 18th century years,  
they would say 'what a very becoming  
young lady..' though not to imply she  
wasn't quite a lady yet, oh no...  
and the verb had 'become'  
an adjective sometimes (well, OK, a verbal adjective..)

or they'd say 'How well those clothes become her! '  
meaning, not, she hung them up at night, and  
in the morning found herself hanging there inside them...  
but meaning decorous, well turned out...

then in the 19th century I guess,  
philosophers of the heavy sort (we might assume  
they'd reverted to Germanic tones...)  
talked about 'Being and Becoming',

implying that two things were going on,  
a bit like one thing standing still inside  
something else which was changing;  
or perhaps outside; a bit like God  
(whom those philosophers didn't necessarily  
believe in – but it serves...)

God saying 'I Am - BUT – I am going  
to become – Everything! ! ... so,  
Let There Be Light! ' and  
you know what – there was light...

and there alas, we must leave  
our friend 'becoming'; to become  
what it will, or rather, how we use it; but  
you must agree, life becomes more interesting,  
even you could say, more becoming,  
with a touch of grammar even  
on a hot day when you're becoming  
a little drowsy, please Miss, can I go  
and get a glass of water...?

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Love Poem To A Poem

for there's what you planned to write about,  
and what you find yourself  
writing about; perhaps  
find yourself, while writing about..

and there's the poem itself; did you  
consult it about what  
its plans were? and when  
it's got itself written,  
gone where it wanted to,  
said what it wanted to say,  
become what it wanted to become,  
do you really know  
what it's finally and really about?

is it telling you more about  
you than you knew yourself?  
is the poem writing you?

did we, as with the unicorn,  
feel the unspoken need for it,  
and it became?

in some other world,  
did two grains of dust change places?  
did a new sort of light  
shine on a new sort of place  
in some new sort of time?

poems are like cats:  
we think we own them;  
they allow us certain rights,  
but they own us.

this is a love poem  
to a poem

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Message Of Hope

to the joyless:  
it's out there  
somewhere

otherwise  
there wouldn't be  
a word for it  
promise

to the joyful:  
OK OK guys  
easy now

Michael Shepherd



# ! A Metaphor In Search Of A Poem Perhaps

Like a favourite vase,  
newly washed, saying  
I'm beautiful as I am,  
empty yet shining,  
what will you fill me with?

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Not-Quaiku

We are born, live, and die.

It's tough.

Where's my ink-block?

[with respectful acknowledgements to Vita Brevis and Art Longer ]

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Poem Deconstructing Itself In Homage To Barthes And Derrida (For Wendy If She Can Decode It)

I dreamed a dream profound and wise  
about the state of man:  
the brain a mass of wriggly worms,  
the mind an old tin can..

The first word presents the semiotic question  
of authorial authority:  
is this a real person recounting  
a 'real' dream, insofar as  
dreams are 'real', and thus  
presenting the authority of detached observation  
(insofar as accepted structures of waking,  
sleeping, dreaming, etc., are assumed,  
thus 'fictitious' in an absolute sense)

or, is this a hermeneutic introductory opening  
implying a proairetic forward movement?

moving on rapidly to the whole first line,  
what is the authorial stance in 'profound and wise'?  
is the 'author' asserting the semantic truth of this dream,  
or is this a lexia which is presented to the reader to resolve  
in his or her own reading?  
or is simply buttressing the symbolic integrity  
of the ontological construct presented?

jeezus the more I read the deconstruction  
the more I think the first verse could be true

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Poppycocktail From The Taliban

And soon defeat the Taliban?  
An opium dream! Why, no-one can!  
It's all world trade: their export crop is  
in high demand - it's opium poppies,  
passed via equivocal Pakistan,  
who somehow fail to impose a ban  
on this corruption, which is wider  
than any doings of Al Qaeda:  
the most effective tool, the best,  
for the moral self-destruction of the West.

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Psalm About Psalms

Overnight and forever  
the earth is soaked in love.

Abundance knows no limits  
to its gratitude, to its praise.

They have not forgotten  
when things were otherwise.

Their faces shine.  
With all this, their eyes are bright;

Here, now.

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Question About Art

Our world forgets – has never known, perhaps –  
that questions are a treasured magic wand:

the question asked, the answer may, most like, come freshly said  
out of a space that's new alike to teacher and to taught;

your question is today – how factual should I leave  
my verse, or should I seek to 'colour' it with metaphor? ...

this image comes to mind: 'old master' in his studio,  
famed painter of Madonnas with attendant Child;

demand's incessant; so he draws the outlines in,  
and passes on the canvas to his studio hand;

coloured then, maybe he adds the master's touch of life --  
the smile of angel's sweetness on the Madonna's face;

the glimpse of future in the Christ Child's eyes;  
and off it goes to some great patron's church,

to comfort all of womanhood in woes and joys,  
its colours gleaming candlelit in sacred prayer;

and yet, how connoisseurs may treasure that quick sketch  
on scrap of hand-made paper, where the very touch

of sanguine chalk or silverpoint, reveal the immediate mind  
of that old master, as it found the new track of the line;

the world will praise, admire, your coloured image of Her face;  
but She will see, in pencilled sketch, how love springs from her grace..

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Question For Darwin

Did humming-birds  
forget the words?

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Quiet Word To Poetry Teachers

The poet means  
what the poet said;  
look for the 'meaning'  
and the poem's dead.

Michael Shepherd



# ! A Rainy Day Enjoyed

Waking this morning is unhurried, even slow –  
the weather is saying something to the body.  
The forecast for the day, it seems, is rain.

Time, then, for that ease of human living –  
a day of light and measured pleasures,  
to be indulged in, not too briefly,  
not too long; to love each thing at home within itself;

open all the windows, and perhaps the doors –  
let in that rain-washed air, conditioned, cool,  
be inside and yet outside; it once was said  
that rain comes only after sacrifice;  
this rain is holy.

Idly open a drawer not opened for some time;  
find there a children's toy or game;  
live for some minutes as a child again,  
smelling rain as you once smelled it,  
full of the promise of a lifetime not yet lived.

Be that child again, in this loving house;  
love this rainy day as children do,  
living life the way it's offered; all  
too present to need future dreams;

let the golden present sift gently through your fingers,  
you, unhurried, loving life  
as it now, today, loves you.

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Rant About 'Unacceptable'...

Today, and every day - someone booped!  
Someone who's paid a lot, not to..

An apology, a resignation of their tarnished  
position in our public life? Don't  
make me laugh...

No - they grandstand, chest inflated  
with their moral worthiness -  
'This is absolutely unacceptable...'  
implying, some minion... escaped my notice...  
of course would never countenance...  
...torocaca! That's exactly what  
you just did - accepted it...

It's another variation of the now familiar  
response to some organisation's failing -

don't admit it; just issue  
(as you scrabble shamelessly through the scree  
for the moral high ground, way beyond your reach...)  
a mission statement - 'Our company upholds  
the very highest standards of public life...'  
blah blah... it didn't did it? ...

OK, having said that,  
at the end of the day,  
and other clichés that stick on our tongue  
like an ice lolly that another has already licked...  
whew....

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Robert Hass Prose-Poem Impertinently Versified

Hassless

For a summer week he watched her;  
she watched him watching her.

He wrote his music; thought of her,  
sixtyish, Japanese; flat-breasted like a boy;

she brushed her paintings; thought of him,  
young, eyes like an untamed pony;

he grew to love the discipline in her painting;  
she loved straightway his wild indiscipline.

That warm night when, on her tidy, well-swept doorstep,  
music yet unwritten met rice-paper yet to be inked,

she told him of her mastectomy;  
he looked her in the eye; held hands; and bid goodnight.

The blue bowl on his porch the morning after  
full of rose-petals; underneath, dead bees.

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Silent Night, And Stars

Oh yes he said, there was a birth,  
you ask me how I'm sure

remember shepherds train themselves  
to see the slightest things  
on dark nights, on starlit nights  
when it's windy, when it's still,  
when snow makes strange lights,  
strange shapes, strange shadows –

under the shadow of that low stone wall,  
there's a darker shadow... does it move?

yes, it's a great job, out there on a starlit light,  
a great bowl of stars, nothing to do except  
be alert the whole time; so you never miss  
the unexpected; so peaceful, there's already love  
for everything around you. Best job in the world.

so you can't miss anything out of the ordinary;  
what's not so easy is to explain to others...  
but it's all here in my heart; my children know it's true..

but it's funny how you remember the small things  
on a special day.  
The straw. When it's clean, it's always gold of course  
and shiny. But I'd never seen straw shine like that.

And the cow's eyes. You know how cattle look at you  
as if they're interested, but not very interested?  
That one was different. It seemed to know  
just why it was a cow..

And then of course the other guys.  
You don't come so far, so precise  
unless you're very wise.

Far things and near things. We each  
have our special skills, he said;

in the high things and the humble,  
love.  
It's here, and there.

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Strange Glimpse Of Remembered Moments

Dozing this morning – was I awake,  
or was I asleep? for many minutes,  
I entered a bright and shining world,  
but of my own remembered moments;

yet more than visual memories:  
that state of mind, that happiness  
which knows no other..

all was brightest colour:  
the first Mickey Mouse Weekly  
to come out in full, rich colour; (I'll swear  
it smelled different, too..)

the new craft room at school,  
the intoxicating smell of open tins  
of bright coloured enamel paint,  
the smell of fresh-cut wood...

sunlight on ancient grey-gold stone;  
oh, a whole repertoire of memories  
on which there was no need to dwell,  
for they declared their shared totality...

but one brief, vivid glimpse I'll share  
for your amusement and what else:  
slightly curled, from being rolled in the post,  
a copy of 'American Home' from the late forties:  
against a blue blue sky, white clapboard and  
white picket fence; inside, a gingham apron,  
a sweet-smelling pipe, proudly ruffled hair..  
a gingham table-cloth, hand-stencilled furniture,  
blue and white plates against a butter-yellow wall..

all radiated promise, satisfaction, happiness;  
as if winter sings of Spring;  
all things were possible, and live on now;  
but, above all, in myself,  
a glorious sense – of ordinariness...

as if I was in place; had always been;  
would always be; no other place to be,  
no other self to seek, no world seen alien;

our holiest, most precious,  
self-sacred moments, when experienced,  
have this glorious matter-of-factness;  
saying, how could this be other?  
The glorious, here, is ordinary...  
and back in your familiar world,  
the ordinary must be glorious; deserved;  
and to be savoured as its truth...

I opened my eyes, eventually;  
saw no reason to deny that world;  
to cover it with yes but, or, maybe;

later thought, only a poem,  
to share this, give this back.

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Sufi Life

Pen in hand, and pensive...  
sitting by the open window,  
the curtains moving gently in the breeze,  
listening to the spontaneous liveliness  
of the fountain whose joyful drops  
the sunlight plays with as they fall;

catching the scent of a rose  
which comes and goes to the nostrils  
as if it has its own intentions;

watching the sunlight moving round  
the courtyard garden;  
remembering with an inward stirring,  
it's the earth which moves...

words passing through the mind;  
in this golden stillness, all things  
are a metaphor for all else;  
it's beyond the tender tying  
into lines of poetry;

just a light touch, these words;  
nothing to prove; no-one to convince;  
more like a hand unfolded towards life,  
an acknowledgement;

as when you join the dervishes in turning,  
and as the mind-free centre grows more strong,  
more established (for this centre holds) ,  
the thoughts spin off...

the poem too, spins off:  
one arm upward which remembers,  
palm open to receive in wonder;  
one arm outward, palm open, offering all to all;  
take it, while it's warm with life.





# ! A T - O N E - M E N T

'Atonement' – for me, it has a solemn,  
lifetime, deathtime, this-is-final  
ring to it – spoken in the severest tones  
in some headmaster's study in the skies...

and you, feeling that this is the last chance  
to rake up all your worst, your very worst  
memories that still chill your heart after all these years,  
so you try not to think about them...

so, to ease the sense that fate's about to pounce  
and is it really true about hellfire...

you look it up in the dictionary ....

no, it must be some clever pun...  
no, it's there in black and white  
and Oxford blue...

at...one...ment... oh,  
how pure upon the page the words here rest –  
look now upon this book, sweet masters –  
see how the angels smile at human guilt...  
there's joy in heaven today...

just... that... you mean,  
it's really that simple, and  
all that stuff from the past...?  
so I can just... oh wow...

'Sorry, I can't come to the phone right now,  
please leave a message and I'll ring you back..  
I'm having my daily at-one-ment...'

and maybe one day, if I work at it,  
someone will say to someone else,  
seeing me walking down the street,

'Just look at him, or if you're lucky,

talk to him - don't you admire his cool,  
his here-and-now, and his at-one-ment...? '

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Thankyou For A Comment

What is a poem without a reader?

What is a reader without a heart?

What is a heart without another heart to meet it,  
greet it?

What are two hearts without what they share?

What is sharing without sharing everything?

What is everything without poets?

What is a poet without a reader...

How beautiful a circle is.

How still its centre.

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Thankyou To Margaret

Some thankyou's are best private;  
some deserve a public airing,  
in case they touch someone else who's suffered:

I wrote a poem about my mother's restless, painful death;  
and you, who had just lost your husband  
but whose deathbed was a memorable day  
as he with cancer and you his wife  
had the most beautiful, memorable hours of conversation,  
about two rich lives lived together -

you, struck by the contrast, wrote to me  
in sympathy. And so, my pain is eased  
in sharing in your beautiful sad joy..  
and you, I hope, may be the happier for this -  
I wonder, do you know what good this brought?

thank you, Margaret.

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Thought From Isaac Of Nineveh

Isn't it extraordinary – when  
you come to think of it – that  
the One whom atheists deny  
(for then they would have to acknowledge  
One greater than themselves...)  
knew, knows, about humility...?

I mean, how could He?

Suppose, He hadn't sent  
such men as Jesus Christ  
to show us that humility  
was, is, godly, and indeed,  
a path to know that One?

Would we then be treating  
the humble as the self-victimising  
scum of the earth? And we, assured in being  
proud and arrogant?

What else could that One  
know of contraries and opposites,  
paradox and contradiction,  
unless He (or She, or It)  
knows all; knows us  
better than we know ourselves?

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Thousand Poems

yeah yeah, nothing for you to boast about –  
'100 good ones would be quite enough...  
no, make that 20 – who's got time for more,  
even if they were masterpieces...'

So perhaps, merely a little quiet satisfaction  
in a personal kinda way: I guess  
retirement years hang heavily for some,  
recalling days of authority, command;  
others find them richer, busier than ever; or  
do just the same jobs as they did so well, except  
they don't get paid for it...

or you can put all your ego in one basket –  
try to do the one thing well; after a life  
of unfinished jobs and hasty jobs,  
and jobs you dreamed of and yet never did...

or, there's poetry: if speech is actually the Word  
that set the cosmos on its merry way, that  
sings the praise of gods or human enterprise, or  
draws attention to the sunlight on a wall;  
melts the heart; reveals, relates  
the physical and the metaphysical;  
raises the spirits, lights the mind... then,  
poetry's no bad thing  
to sieve, to pour a lifetime into;

and if, as the statistics state,  
400 of those 1,000 poems get a reading, averaging  
two people each, around the world and every day –  
then perhaps, a little quiet pride, a hope  
that something useful has been tried  
in these last years on earth...

a small gift to the fleeting soul,  
the ferryman's so solemn toll  
to help it on its way; a fee  
to offer; if that were, shall be,

what's appropriate..

Michael Shepherd



# ! A Tribute To Poemhunter's Popularity

' Dear

Greetings to you, i hope this mail finds you well & healthy and i hope we can established a relationship since we are meeting for the first time, i have gone through a profile that speaks good of you and it interests me to contact you for an assistance to help me transfer the Sum of 6.5 Million USA dollars my father deposited in a bank here in Cote d'Ivoire before he was assasinated.i like honesty, trust, love, truth, caring, & respect, i have all this qulities in me and i believe you have all this qualities too, that is why i decided to contact you for this transaction, i will like you to contact me through my private mail box(rita\_benson204@) so that we can know ourselves better.

Thanks and hoping to hear from you soonest.

Rita Benson '

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Tribute To President Bush From Europe

Mr President,

You are all

that makes America

grate

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Tribute To Ramana Maharshi

Movement, beautiful movement  
comes out of stillness;  
dancers know this;

sound, beautiful sound,  
comes out of silence;  
musicians, singers, know this;

what then, of stillness and silence?

Be still for a while;  
be silent for a while;  
and you will know  
all you need to know

and the question, who am I?  
is answered  
in stillness, in silence,  
in the riches of yourself;  
in the treasure of yourself.

Michael Shepherd

# ! A Word In Your Era

I'm miss-spelling this message to try to shove  
it past that spamblock that bans risky words like vole;

and to tell you, my darling, my angel, my beaut  
that I love every inch of you from your head to your foto

Michael Shepherd

# ! Abbot John Of Forde At Prayer

All the wonders under heaven and earth  
would take more than a lifetime to enumerate –

why then, to be surprised, that One  
can speak to such as me,  
not in my outer ear, but straight  
into my inner ear – nay, right into my soul  
his gnosis whispers as it were myself  
that spoke it... whispers  
such sweet things,  
that though they blessedly inform my later words  
- as these to you – yet they tremble  
in their truth, upon the very edge of words;

whispers such new things to me,  
though such things, old to Him,  
old, but present; thus, they're ever new...

for this, I'd waited; waited in the stillness of my heart;  
now listened as it were to all  
my life explained to me; not, not in judgment,  
but in the sweetest grace of friendly intimacy;

and then, when I can no longer hold  
Him to me, dare to ask for further news of my true self,  
He's gone...

At first, it was the sweetest pain, His going;  
and then one day, I learned as from myself  
the way to share with Him, his return journey –  
which for Him must be – as must have been – joy beyond all joy;  
returning to His Father... so I accompanied Him  
with gratitude and praise...

and then I learned, when I accompanied Him  
to that place where all inner and all outer meet,  
a further, private, holy thing – His Father's love  
for Him... which aforesaid had been but words  
that I believed to be beyond man's mind...

the whisper in my thought, now thunder in the world;  
silent thunder in the mind, flashing lightning in the soul;

yet in the silent church, I by the altar there, sounded  
near as altar candle's peaceful flame:

I knew that what men call a mystery,  
is daylight truth as visible as mountains or as streams:  
that what men read as words, dance off the page  
in holy silence, to the heart: the Holy Trinity  
was, is now to me, as necessary and inevitable,  
as Man and God; as living, now, as God and Man;  
as living, now, as Grace.

So John of Forde records for us, by grace of grace itself.

[John of Forde, c.1145 – 1214, is a newly translated witness  
to the undivided Church in an age when spirituality,  
scholarship, and poetry of speech came together at their height.]

Michael Shepherd

# ! Alle Thyngen Af Thu Syngen

Today, all things sing of you;  
you sing in all things.

you show yourself -  
today - in all things;  
all things show you.

you are here  
in all things – today –  
all things are you.

Dare we say – today –  
You made them?

Better to be silent,  
eyes shining.

Alle thyngen af Thu syngen,  
Goddess-sonne yeboren ys;  
Alleluya, belles beswyngen,  
alle menne, synge inne blysse!

Michael Shepherd

# ! An Ancient Japanese Saying

Persons in cities  
driving 4x4s  
should smile a lot  
but not bow

Michael Shepherd



# ! An Ardent Wish For Others

How ardently, now, I wish for others  
what I –alas too late – wish -  
would have wished - for my own self,  
and maybe, for my parents too:

some time in life – it would depend on you –  
but not too late, too late –

to sit down together -  
each parent, each child, individually –  
and maybe with a few days 'thinking time' beforehand -  
and say – you could take this in turns –

'Ask me all the questions  
which you never, until now, thought to ask...  
ask me all the questions  
which you never liked or dared to ask...  
and I shall answer you...'

and if it goes well (as I pray it will)  
you might even incorporate this  
into a yearly family occasion:  
done with humour and with love;

this is what I wish for you  
as ardently as I would have  
wished it for myself;  
for this is my regret,  
for myself; and perhaps, for them..

Michael Shepherd

# ! An Exploration Of The Subtleties Of The English Language In Second Childhood

If I don't  
go and  
go  
when I need to  
go

I still  
go  
anyway

without  
going there

Michael Shepherd

# ! An Old Armenian Limerick

I once had a friend called Djirdjirian;  
His Christian name was Haig - though Armenian;  
(The British had a fine Post-  
al Office on the coast) :  
So two friendly Djirs for Djirdjirian!

Michael Shepherd

# ! An Unofficial Report On Poemhunter

'So tell me, Michael...'

the voice is slow and measured,  
that of one used to public speaking,  
his words so significant that the audience  
must hear every one...

James, the high-flying lecturer on  
the humanities and beyond,  
writes books, poems, travels, mixes  
with the great and good...

'So tell me, Michael, is there any  
great poetry being written on  
your website? ...'

James looks me in the eye,  
as one who's used to hearing, impartially,  
all the evidence, then making up  
his finely balanced mind...

Inside myself, I inspect  
this utterance for undertones...  
a hint of patronising sneer? ...

Well, thanks for asking, James, I say  
(no harm in a touch of gentle irony...) ,  
you have to understand -  
this is the muddy, churned grass roots  
of poetry - you might not even  
recognise it as such -

it's the First Aid box, the 'where does it hurt? ',  
the surgery, the remedial therapy,  
the further diagnosis required,  
of poetry and the human heart;

it's where the kid who's made  
his or her first poem,  
brings it like a child's first drawing  
home to be admired...

where the first unforgettable time  
the world or God has let you down;  
the first time you've been dumped on;  
the first time that a friend's betrayed you,  
or shifted their allegiance – these yelps  
need to be both distanced and recorded  
in some words of black and white;  
wounds to have their scabs  
constantly picked at; or statements  
to be transcended, even, later, laughed over;

where teenagers declare their total loneliness,  
threaten that uncaring world with suicide; or  
dare to hint at family abuse;

or simply sketch their life as drama,  
themselves at centre-stage,  
the first daring thrill  
of self-invention...  
first explorations, line by non-sequential line,  
of rock star lyrics and the rapping boast...

or, exhilarated, throw words together  
in poems that - well - only look like poems...  
build defensive-aggressive barriers  
to claim a feistiness; and  
over which to shoot at imagined enemies..

and at some point, settle in belief – or not –  
that rhyme and structure are the thing  
that gives poetic status to a verse..

and later, when they're no longer centre-stage  
(though some may never – or do we ever –  
quite get past that point.. or merely, just learn  
to hide it more...?) write poetry..

and that thrill when you've put  
two words together for the first time  
in your life, to make a new thing...  
as if two words have married and brought forth a child...  
and then you're hooked on poetry...

this is the hospital for the human soul;  
this is open-heart surgery before  
the term was used; this is where  
we show a lifetime's films  
from our internal camera; learn  
to no longer pick our scars in the vain hope  
that new scar tissue will perform miracles...

this is where we meet the world  
as if for the first time; where we discover wonder;  
discover words that previously were imprisoned, even dead,  
in books of scripture – forgiveness and compassion,  
mercy, justice, grace...begin to live  
as human beings should live,  
in the fullness of ourselves..

and, as the mind reveals itself as servant,  
brings unsuspected skills, until one day  
we say with tentative pride, to our best friend,  
I don't just write poetry, I feel that I'm a poet..  
and laugh a little at our daring to declare  
ourselves as shoulder to shoulder with the great...

So, James, I say straight-faced (it's up to him  
to see the irony in this...) I doubt  
there's much to detain you in this Poemhunter...  
but you might glance at it, sometime...

Michael Shepherd

# ! And Meanwhile Love

Waking in the dream-tossed night, I knew you harmed  
a thousand miles away in suffering's dark storm;

so only love

pain comes no easier when it comes again,  
the closing and the parting, pain

so simply love

I would it did not come to you,  
but come it does, makes true untrue

and meanwhile love

the salt sea breaks on fate's dark reef,  
the tears are salt, bring no relief

so only love

all things may pass as summer rain;  
I cannot promise aught of pain

but meanwhile love

my heart beats fast, your heart's repair  
not mine to give; I here, you there;

so only love

there seems no sense when innocence  
lacks reason as its last defence

yet always, somewhere, love

(for both of you)

Michael Shepherd



# ! Angels

Angels..

do you believe in angels?

do angels believe in you?

which question, the more sensible?

suppose angels

to know greatly more than us..

suppose, that's why they're there...

suppose, they know space is not fully real:

enter it knowingly, to deliver us

a holy message, wearing whiteness, light,

which would announce them

truthful, good of all good, and beautiful..

suppose, they know time is not fully real:

enter it knowingly, to deliver us

a message that's eternal, phrased

in terms of human life, direct, immediate;

suppose them, to be untroubled

by human frailty: knowing all

they need to know; messengers

of love beyond all love;

rejoicing in the heavenly joy

of living under perfect law..

suppose... suppose...

that all this living metaphor,

so recognisable to human mind,

lives in each human heart..

Michael Shepherd

# ! Anger

Epictetus the stoic philosopher said  
that anyone who angers you becomes your master  
by disturbing you;

Well, that's me -

full of righteous and unrighteous anger;

on the other hand,  
God gets pretty hot in the O.T. -

Are there different rules?  
After all, we both know we're right.

And don't ask me what 'religion' I am, OK?  
Or I could get really angry...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Anna - The Story Of A Love

The Indians say  
that the eater is the eaten.

We caught each other's eye  
across a crowded room...  
she with her mates,  
but blushed in my direction...  
and when I looked at her,  
she glowed  
and I glowed.

She too was ripe for passion.  
We couldn't be kept apart;  
later in the privacy of my room  
my lips sought her unsullied bloom,  
the irresistible downiness of her young skin  
and soon that soft skin  
was moist with passion  
as we consumed each other,  
and were subsumed in unity.

Now I have died two deaths from love:  
first consumed by desire, then  
consumed by pleasure.

What a peach she was.

Hey, seize the moment -  
there's another in the bowl.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Another Cliché, Er, Bites The Dust

Every few months, a shot rings out  
in the desert of the public mind;  
another cliché (reading its local newssheet,  
chewed cigar in mouth, string tie,  
six-gun handy, sheriff's badge  
worn shamelessly..) .. thup..  
bites the studio dust...

Last year 'bout this time,  
we buried WMD.. or  
'wepmastruc' in Bushspeak...  
seems it had lived quite long enough,  
demented in the Sunset Home...

This week, we're invited to the wake  
after the private burial of  
War On Terror; RIP (for some) :

Seems it's made life too heroic  
for this captive audience:  
a pre-Christian world,  
neatly divided into forces of evil,  
forces of good: you'n-me'n-Johnny Wayne'n-  
the Mayor of Carmel 'gainst  
the bad guys.. but...  
some guy up in the projection room  
lost the last reel... now we'll never know  
about that happy ending (fade in music) ..

seems the old guy saw life just too black and white  
(I'm talking metaphorically, OK?)  
and life just ain't that simple any more... pardner..  
the old West is dead...so ride off into the sunset,  
ole 'War on Terror'...as the credits roll -  
the bad guy now lives down the street from you;  
a quiet family, always greet you as they pass..

but don't worry, ours is a lively language  
here in Spinville; we'll think of something else,

like, say, 'Neighbour Threat'...  
just fill in this form, would you,  
and don't forget the  
'Confidential Neighbour Information' page?

Michael Shepherd

# ! Another Gem From Jon Haidt

Look inward to God,  
Look outward to God,

but for God's sake, stop trying  
to make the world conform to your will...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Another Rant And A Wicked Suggestion

Spent one hour plus on the phone  
trying to book a routine visit  
from the power company;  
innumerable options,  
given seven further phone numbers;  
it was booked; they never turned up;  
round the circuit again...

Suggestion: get a numbered invoice pad printed,  
charge everyone who does this to you  
'For professional attention: x hours @ \$/£ xxx = \$/£ xxx'...

Bet some of them pay you...

Have fun.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Are Persons People?

and he says

you don't write poetry to please people, you know  
that's with a comma after people  
you write poems to please you  
with shock lines like I still treasure  
our first condom oh my love  
to show that you're cool and hip

but she says why write poems at all  
if they don't please people  
men have such egos I suppose  
it's because they can't have babies

but who are people anyway, how  
many persons make a people or  
how few persons and are they  
a random mix or is there like  
a recipe, some of this lot some of that

he says people who know about these things  
like poetry but how do you know  
which are the people who know  
I'm not sure I know he knows for a start

and she says well ordinary people  
so what then do you slide up  
to a bus queue when there's no  
bus in sight and say look you're  
ordinary people I've been looking for you  
yeah watch them give you a nasty look  
and skedaddle pretending they remembered  
they were due some place else

I'm beginning to wonder if people really exist  
I mean as such but I'll have to stop there  
my PC says it's run out of virtual memory  
that's another thing I don't understand  
maybe people are just a virtual memory too  
I'm beginning to wonder if anyone knows



what \*people\* should think about poetry  
maybe they should just write it throw it away  
see who picks it up and not never nohow talk about  
other \*people's\* poetry

Michael Shepherd

# ! Armenian Americans - American Armenians

Oh dear Armenians - you whom  
Mother America took to her bosom,  
helped so many of you to become  
rich and powerful...

if the Turks acknowledge the ethnic cleansing  
as we call it now, of so many years ago,  
when so many erred -

will that assuage your grief? will that  
soothe your soul? Must you ask this  
of an America not without its own blemishes  
in ethnic cleansing, over a longer term...

when the guilty men have long since met their God;  
met His justice and his mercy; who - if some  
faiths are to be believed - have been reborn  
to live out the fruits of their good deeds and their bad...

yes, it is wrong for Turks to bring injustice to today  
and say, we'll only help you if you dropp this call  
for 'apology, admission' - from whom to whom?

equally wrong, to demand this of the Turks  
who today are blameless of their past...  
will admission help them too?

Should Adam forever apologise to Eve,  
forever, Eve to Adam, and the serpent, thus, to both?

Koha - you the beautiful, who shone behind  
the counter there at Macy's - may we look  
into each others' eyes, and drink the future's love?

Michael Shepherd

# ! Artist As Verb

Perhaps the world is more grammatical  
than grammar: reveals itself, a little coded –  
as codes tempt, when grammar hides  
under the guise of schoolmaster:

the artist, say, as verb:  
as the verb, to be:  
luring the mighty subject  
beyond all thought, to become  
an object we can all enjoy:

the sculptor, deep within his isness,  
praying with his chisel  
so that Krishna cannot but consent;  
entering this stone;

the poet, listening to  
the Word behind all words,  
charming the spirit of all things  
to make all objects sacred in our eyes;

the musician, listening to the silence,  
as through his being, pass  
worlds of knowledge beyond all words..

we, as heaven's verb,  
watching as subject, object,  
make themselves a mirror for each other.  
Grammar could be love.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Autumn In The Northern Hemisphere, Spring In The South..

It's autumn here: the leaves fall brown,  
the nights are cold and frosty,  
the days are shorter and shorter,  
there's snow on the way...

is autumn asking you to be sad?  
Go take a walk: fill your lungs with air –  
isn't that good? Don't you feel the air  
singing of everything that nature needs  
to keep things going the whole year round?

Listen as you walk  
to all that goes on in silence;  
secret movements pretending to be stillness:  
the trees are making plans for Spring,  
the plants, the flowers too; the earth  
is bubbling secretly with thoughts of Spring..

If on an autumn walk  
a Persian poet met a Japanese poet  
they might write  
a Persian haiku:

This autumn evening  
my mind is full of endings;  
trees smile as they plan.

Michael Shepherd

# ! B L I S S

When asked 'What is it like? '  
he'd only say,  
'There is no 'there'; no 'like'; no 'not';  
no 'other'; no 'away'..

Michael Shepherd

# ! Backward Boys

Saturday evening, the week's hired film, click-click, click-click  
while we chewed fruit gums and shouted FOCUS!  
from time to time when the reel changed;  
and after The White Hell of Pitz Palu  
or The Lost Horizon, and Mickey in black and white  
and Corky the Cat; after the hired films  
and the occasional black potato growing on the screen  
when the celluloid caught fire,  
the home movies run backwards:  
and the world was a magic kingdom -  
things jumped from nowhere into your hands  
like the world's top ball player;  
while you ate, the plate filled instead of emptied;  
and the happy smiles-for-the-camera  
became inane dissociated grins  
as if you knew you were being totally idiotic  
but had no control...

Suppose  
that life, on Saturday evening, did just that for real:  
Saturday's trashy film would take on the solemn  
inevitability of Greek tragedy;  
shoplifting would be an act of humble charity  
as one slipped the goods- blink-back onto the counter;  
and we the older would look so eagerly forward  
to childishness and irresponsibility  
(as we alas will; but then more agile and more loved with it) :  
like teenagers, go to bed alert and wake up tired...  
and in the bathroom - no, let's not go there...

and then at midnight, Cinderella Time would revert to real time.  
Boing..oing..oing..

But under the covers as we blissed off to sleep,  
a great big, wrinkled, toothy grin...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Beauty Of The Shining Self

The life of a 'minor poet', an amateur,  
of, say, fifty, a hundred years, ago,  
and long before that:

a lifetime's love of poetry;  
and one's personal contribution,  
after 25 years, let's say, might be  
a 'slim volume' of verse,  
distillation of that lifetime,  
printed elegantly at one's own expense  
in 200 copies, maybe,  
a few sent to literary journals  
for, perhaps, a few lines of review; and  
some letters of appreciative response  
from friends to whom one sent the poems;  
'the quintessence of a beautiful soul', wrote one.

today – when 'beauty' is no longer thought a virtue  
in many areas of art – there's something  
more important, so some think –  
a poem on the internet as here  
can produce a written response  
so unexpected, so beautifully expressed,  
that it leaves no doubt of what the sages say:

that there are two aspects of that which we call 'beauty':  
the fine, yet temporary, one which may be studied, learnt –  
a lifetime, say, curating or collecting Chinese ceramics  
of the finest period, when making or owning such a pot  
was like a spiritual act of devotion –

and that beauty which is eternal – that of the human self,  
shining in all its glory from a human being so roused,  
beauty that melts one's heart and brings one to one's knees  
all inwardly; known, reflected; entirely of itself;

and which can be found from time to time  
blazing from the screen here, from persons known or unknown,  
within a 'Comments' box...

a beauty, surely, greater by far than any poem,  
revealing all the riches of the human heart  
without any inhibition;  
and yet, given cause to blaze out thus  
by this form of words called poetry.

Michael Shepherd



# ! Being Human Has Its Side Effects (Read The Small Print)

Where are the great myths of our age –  
hiding truth within their all too human stories?  
In their absence, scientific research  
has wondrous tales yet to tell...

Jon, the renowned professor of psychology  
and not averse to self-examination and experiment,  
took Paxil – Prozac's cousin – for eight  
adventurous weeks.

In week five – 'the world changed'...  
his heavy work load, his insecurities  
as an untenured professor,  
vanished like magic; changes which he'd wished  
to make for himself for years,  
happened overnight – he loosened up,  
he lightened up, he accepted his mistakes  
and did not dwell on them –  
who would not want to be a Prof like he?

But... a side effect: names began to elude him –  
'Hi!' and 'Hi there!' were all his students got  
out on campus, in the morning classroom ...  
and along with that, the subterfuges –  
how can you ask a student whom you've known for years  
to give their opinion... er, point, smile,  
hope they're watching.. yes, you...

and facts too started to recede –  
just out of reach on the top shelf of  
the mind's rich library, memory's repository...

Greek tragedy would have a word,  
a scene, a moral, for it:  
the Fates had claimed their own...  
Nemesis had struck; Icarus' wings had melted,  
Prometheus' insult to the gods avenged...

or in our scientific terms, a brain on Paxil, Prozac,  
has more serotonin in certain synapses,  
so the neurons fire more often...

The celebrated young Professor  
stopped taking the pills; five weeks later,  
the memory returned; as did the worries  
(security of tenure threatened even more  
by Professors who can't even remember  
what they profess to profess...) .

Mnemosyne, goddess of memory,  
bestowed one gift alone on Prof:  
he remembered just how he had been those weeks;  
as certain Greeks, it's said,  
remembered like a dream  
the Golden Age which they never  
might recapture, but only tell of  
in myths and suchlike tales  
of truth and goodness; beauty too..

Michael Shepherd

# ! Being Philosophic About It All

reviewing one's life  
in the light of eternity and  
rebirth theory and  
the lostcounteenth beer

I'll say this...  
I'll say this...

one could say –  
no listen I'm being serious –  
was I fated to live this life  
or did I earn it  
or - was I fated to earn it,  
ha?

but I'll shay thish –  
maybe I didn't deserve better  
BUT (dramatic pause, points finger)  
I didn't deserve worsh...

sub specie whatsit aeternitatis  
strawnery how theesh Latin tags shtick  
shub shpecie aeternitatish...

hurry up please it's time

Michael Shepherd

# ! Being Today

Today is that day  
not on the calendar,  
as National Olfactory Day,  
but far more exciting than that:  
the day when scent, fragrance, smell,  
awoke on the warm sunlit air from a winter's sleep  
and out of nowhere easily spoken of  
produced a whole new world.

The first shock was the hedge two doors down  
which yesterday was a green hedge with white bits  
but today a burst of fragrance, a Hallelujah Chorus  
transcribed to be played with or on or in the nose.

The restaurant two blocks up  
unleashed from its kitchen  
garlic that burst out like a bunch of singing nudists into the street  
cavorting shamelessly and shouting to the world  
every Mediterranean memory  
of romantic meals and much else  
that one thought private.

Then subtle smells that made one into a cat or dog  
pursuing trails not on the street map  
and making beaten tracks into voyages of discovery:  
the baker's became a European trip of fresh morning bread  
with another hundred freeze-dried memories unloosed;

And all down the street,  
other people's lunches opened their front doors  
and said 'Come and join us! We're having roast beef today  
with all the trimmings, and we've enough smell  
to feed the five thousand! '

and a hundred gardens one thought dormant  
leaned on the front gate  
and exchanged the time of year with a childlike innocence  
that couldn't be told to come inside this minute or else,  
and presented nosegays to strangers

without asking for a contribution to a cause.

A day for bringing past happinesses out from the store cupboard  
and giving them a shake and leaving them on the line  
until the sunlight moves off  
and the air leaves them cooler and even fresher;

and wondering whom one will be tomorrow,  
if one can feel like this today.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Benediction

Read this poem only aloud  
read it as slowly and with such solemn dignity

as if it were the whole great human race  
declaring itself to be truly great

read it as if it were  
as indeed it is

not words but a great sounding bell  
and you are that great bell

so large a bell so low its boom  
that it is more vibration than a sound

struck in a temple courtyard  
by a robed monk so full of love

that he merges into love itself  
every time he sounds the bell

and as its sound now travels up  
into the clear mountain air

the goatherds and the goats hear in its sound  
the meaning of their life

and in the fields the workers raise themselves  
and know what blessing is

and in the valley the silence after each stroke  
becomes more real

as the echo fades  
and the air knows itself

this poem is the sound of the human heart  
listening to itself beyond all words

hearing praise and gratitude and love  
knowing themselves in stillness for what they are

this poem is what is beyond all words  
smiling sorrowing as it seeks for words

as it vibrates out into the silence  
the wonder of the unspoken

the magic of all that's yet unmanifest  
the thoughts yet to be thought

hear in this bell the sound that tells to all  
that there is enough love

in one single human heart  
to nourish the whole world

hear this bell sounding aloud  
sound out eternal in your soul

\* \* \*

[work in progress]

Michael Shepherd

# ! Bird's Nest

Here in the ivy,  
cupped, a light,  
an aery, faery thing;

no artist could make better,  
no mother could do more;

so much intelligence,  
so much love;

every threaded fibre  
a flight of love.

Is it fulfilled, or waiting,  
or plundered of its life?

too precious to destroy,  
this cradle of intelligence.

Michael Shepherd



# ! By The Grace Of [autofill]

My knees, my mind, my whole soul aches  
and yes a drowsy numbness steals  
around my kneecaps – it's been  
a self-assembly afternoon.

I'm not made for self-assembly:  
unwrap the components, lay  
it on the carpet, they advised;  
and then? The postures of  
Islamic prayer, cross-legged Hindu,  
Christian missionary position, none  
seemed to work for more than  
a few seconds at a time.

It proved an allegorical point though:  
I'm a sorry kit of self-assembly in myself:  
impatience, rage, resentment – they  
never said it was self-assembly, either...

by now every nation in the world  
must be swearing as it sweats  
over self-assembly, to its own One God  
which however, has a different name  
from the One God of others, and it seems,  
plays by different rules..

how ironic it must seem to Him, or Her, or It –  
a world united in the jihad of self-assembly,  
divided in its allegiance to the One God  
whose Unique Selling Point, you'd think,  
was that of ultimate unity.. even before  
we get down to justice, mercy, goodness, all that stuff.

I wonder if in this age of internet-speak  
it might aid the unity of nations and  
the deity they pray to (yes, He/She/It might like it too?) if  
we would offer up our concerted prayers  
for simplified but easy-follow instructions  
in our human self-assembly kit

to [Autofill].. the God  
of a Thousand Names, yet  
only one Creation.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Cat Skills

So the diminishing tribe  
of wild cats  
got together and agreed hey times is gettin' tough  
we need a strategy.  
Urgently; ideally  
a subject race  
with superior paws  
while we wait for evolution  
to do its thing. How about  
using easily-fooled, sentimental  
old Two-legs?  
They got great hands,  
sexy bastards.

Right guys,  
we need to be smaller than wild -  
-the smaller, the more sentimental Two-legs gets; and  
catch them young, they're yours for life...;

and we need just enough variety too  
because Two-legs like to think they're all unique and different  
and they can impose the image of their uniqueness  
on their own pussy  
and love us almost as much  
as they love themselves - for their kids,  
as much as life itself...

just enough character, in short,  
to make us prized, but not enough character  
to get us into war, or divorce, or corporate fraud...

The Egyptian wild cat proposed  
that being seen as sacred to temples  
would enhance status;  
but other cool cats pointed out  
that temples might get neglected in time;  
better far to be a god(dess) of the hearth  
than the temple. Agreed nem con.

And that took care of all the smaller details like evolution,  
the rearing of cows,  
and tin-openers. Bingo!

That's funny. The cat just jumped on the keyboard  
and scratched me.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Charity, Caring, Loving-Kindness

Translators live a life  
of great blessing, and of frustration:  
they live uniquely in the mind  
of the great ones they translate – and yet  
are destined never fully to reveal this  
in their native language, to their fellows,  
countrymen and women;  
must leave it to the reader, to restore to life.

We too, translators –  
words into deeds, deeds into experience,  
experience then taught in words...so -

charity, care, or loving-kindness?

maybe we are old, and we uncared for;  
maybe we are young, and we uncared for..

but, caring care – this is so beautiful;  
to receive; even just to watch; or best, to give...  
and too good not to know...

so, we might follow that wonderful advice:  
'What you think you lack – give that! '  
and bestow all our 'agape', our 'charitas' –  
the word which taxed - along with 'faith' and 'hope' -  
the translators of the Bible...  
that care that cares not to be care-worn...

we, to translate word to deed,  
love, to loving-kindness;  
love, to boundless care.

(for Mary N., too, who knows this)

Michael Shepherd

# ! Childhood

At the height of sun-pressed summer  
the tar on the seaside pavement  
stuck to the Start-Rite sandals  
with a sound like half-dried glue.  
Gg-luck, went each step. Bliss.  
Life needed nothing else.

Because we have not yet lived our life  
we do not know - to grasp, or hoard -  
that this - to live in the present with every sense,  
without a thought, without a care -  
is a totality of happiness  
we may yearn for later

but may remember  
properly  
without sentiment,  
without regret;  
and thus,

forever.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Childhood Circles Around

The sharp, irregular knock of wooden  
brush's shoulder against skirting-board,  
punctuated with the lighter tap  
of brush on pan, the contents neatly  
tapped back into its metal or plastic maw;  
the knocks, sometimes gentle  
with the happiness of home and heart;  
sometimes, sharper, as if they carry  
unspoken messages of time too short,  
and tempers too..

not today the Hoovering intake of that continuous  
indrawn mechanical breath that so disturbs  
domestic pets; that brings unease to the couch potato,  
a guilt just short of offer to assist...

these unexpected memories stirred  
of simpler times and childhood's unappreciated  
securities, then taken so for granted..  
how sweet, nostalgia's evocations of the so selective heart...

fact is, there comes a time when wisdom's word  
is that it's now the time of life when one would be advised  
to risk no longer, the pythonic entanglements,  
the tempted fate, Miltonic fall,  
domestic heaven turned disjointed hell,  
of vacuuming the stairs...

\* [and a Betjemanesque coda for Dan Tyler: ]

Time now to cease unequal fight;  
Nor trip on cord - Satanic the machine;  
Hoover no longer to dust-free Jerusalem  
In England's suburbs, leafy, green...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Christmas Butterfly

Perhaps it had arrived undercover  
between the rich dark green leaves  
of the organic cabbage which from  
the huge holes in its tough outer leaves  
had brought it up so lively – perhaps  
reared in some protected warmth, mimicking  
the months when `small cabbage whites'  
are supposed to live – July to September.  
Or had it flown in or been shipped in  
from some warmer clime?

Christmas Day – was that the kitchen ceiling light  
about to go? No, it was a butterfly,  
frantically circling round and round  
the low-energy bulb, not hot enough  
to make an Icarus of its daring; always  
clockwise round the bulb, I thought;  
palest green to grey to white; frenzied; delicate..

At night, the light switched off, it rested somewhere;  
then at evening, resumed its mad dance,  
ceaseless lover, love unconsummated...  
paid no attention to its cabbage home  
there in the vegetable rack; only the light, the light...

Butterflies do not hear; it did not heed  
my cries increasing in despair –  
nothing like a butterfly net to hand;  
I tried to bring it lower with a gentle spray  
so that I could catch it; too wild its Maenad dance,  
too high, too frenzied..

Two, three days passed; so much strength,  
determination, endurance, in such a tiny thing;  
no longer garden's scourge; now a holy thing,  
in which I saw myself; even wished to love;  
we became of equal size, in the eyes of God...  
as were we not always, from Creation's birth?



The fourth morning, I caught it in a cut-glass tumbler  
against the window pane – the open window  
had not tempted it – myself now talking to its unhearing,  
as I did my father on his way to death...

it settled in the glass, still moist inside  
with orange juice; did you know,  
butterflies taste with their feet...  
they so quick to land and then take off...  
such discrimination in those tiny feet,  
that tiny brain, those tiny,  
heroic muscles, devoted to its life and love...

It flew across the cold and winter garden  
at such speed, I chose to see it joy or gratitude..  
and then, was quiet for a time.

\*

Tiny thing,  
holy thing,  
as near to God  
as angel's wing.

Michael Shepherd

# ! City Of The Mindful Heart. For Kv.

The inhabitants are rightly proud –  
let's take the guided tour...

they show you first (they've never been inside,  
themselves.. though they know someone who has...)  
the Palace, it's still called,  
the seat of government... throughout  
its sometimes turbulent, sometimes complacent rule,  
it's stood for that central place where golden hearts  
seek unity in national multiplicity;  
and seek to care for multiplicity...

not far away, that great domed building,  
it's been temple, church, mosque in its time,  
been desecrated, restored, so many times;  
and truth to tell, while it's the symbol  
of the nation, there are many more  
who are proud of it, than have entered it...  
here too, a quiet place to find  
the unity in multiplicity...

what will they show you next? Depends...  
The lively Central Market, vivid in that multiplicity?  
The great Museum and Library, where  
The nation's treasures (and some plunder  
from the glory years of empires won and lost)  
gleam like golden giants to our pygmy eyes?  
Or perhaps the huge, round, stone Arena  
where in former years, men fought to death  
(some say it's coming back..): celebrated  
battles won; fireworks, clowns and circuses –  
whatever brought the greatest crowds;  
here – appalled, delighted, bored - you'll bring  
the children anyway – you'll see what 'popular'  
means, this very day...

Traffic regulations, ever tighter, now control your tour;  
a glimpse of lakes and parks perhaps;  
city dwellers recovering their humanity;

a place to be themselves, and know it.

Unless you ask – guidebook carefully perused  
before your trip – they'll miss out that quiet  
'residential area' full of blue plaques (no time to read) ,  
where peacefully, behind closed doors,  
individuals adventure far into the mind;  
fantasise; invent; look deep into the heart;  
their passports are well stamped; and yet  
there are no frontiers here.

So now, you've done the guided tour;  
seen everything – and yet seen nothing;  
you're a tourist in a foreign city; and  
this is a working city; proud of its past,  
shaping its future, it exists, and always has,  
only in the present; but stay awhile,  
you'll find it irresistible..

This is the city of the mind;  
this is the place of poetry; it's all around;  
Kenneth, you've just written  
a comprehensive guidebook to this place;  
called it 'On the Nature of Poetry';  
an art, you say, which has for 4000 years,  
'distilled the spoken thoughts of mankind';  
a finely-carved new monument,  
set by the lake, the park;  
the distant view of snowy mountain;  
how thoughtful to include a fountain;  
how appropriate. (The guided tour  
sets out from Place de Métaphore..)

(Kenneth Verity, Shephard-Walwyn, £25)

Michael Shepherd

# ! Clichés I Have Loved

'My life has been one long...  
cliché! ...' she sobbed.

He put his sunburned  
muscular forearm flecked  
with golden hairs  
around her shaking shoulders.

She lifted her tear-brimmed,  
reddening eyes to meet  
his steady gaze.

'Oh my darling..'  
she breathed.

And they fell into  
a passionate  
cliché..

I've said it before and  
I'll say it again.  
One man's cliché is  
another woman's love-byte.

John Ciardi said,  
The craft of poetry  
is not easy.  
It is better than easy.  
It is joyously difficult.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Cradled In A Crescent Moon

to be born, cradled in  
an earthly view of crescent moon:  
a lighted small part  
of that hidden yet complete,  
awaiting a future light  
from somewhere as a sun;

where does that first newborn smile  
come from? what does it know?

Michael Shepherd

# ! Cutting Edge

Like a sharp knife  
cutting through a bitter lemon  
into red lips dripping

the hairdresser takes my pleasantries,  
chops them with a cruel hand,  
throws them back in pieces in my face

snip snip into blond hair, brown hair, black, grey, white,  
what heroic restraint, condemned  
to a lifetime's cutting, and not  
to plunge the scissors into a spinal cord...

this little girl who cut her finger with  
her mother's scissors perhaps  
to try to explain how they cut her heart  
her love that would grow like hair

how can I know the heart  
of this woman who cuts my hair  
so expertly.. snip, snip..

Michael Shepherd

# ! D E A T H

Well we don't know do we?

You asked me to write something  
about it and I said,  
I have nothing to say...  
maybe that's a better place to start.

So should we keep a curtained silence  
about it? Stuff cottonwool in that wound  
that never quite heals, once made?

Or run down the street, knocking bang bang at all the doors,  
shouting tell me about death... and  
before that stranger knocks at your own door  
and the face is strangely familiar, as if  
you've been expecting someone, but  
weren't sure what they'd look like...

One thing is certain, in its breezy way:  
you'll be the one who knows least about it  
when it happens; but hopefully  
the one who knows most about it  
after it's happened...

We could be rather Irish about it,  
say, it's a crying pity you'll be missing  
the wake... but look at it this way,  
the funeral won't cost you a penny...

I'm told that the other day,  
a friend of a friend said  
whoopee I'm going on holiday...  
I guess that would have made for  
a rather merrier funeral

as we say now, no dear not a funeral,  
a celebration of her life...

but there's still that moment

of awful mediocrity, when  
the coffin begins to move, and it's half,  
this is it, and half, we're doing this  
with discreet good taste, so  
you don't have to notice it... ha...

Then, some like to know beforehand what  
they hope just might be known,  
visit comfy mediums to ask about  
those loved ones who've just passed over, is it, dear? ...

they make it sound like a well-run care home:  
it's really very nice here, you'll like it...  
they sound as if they're still wearing  
the woollie that you knitted, and it's tea cups chinking  
and a chat about old times.

For the truly religious, of course,  
it's glory day, and so it should:  
they've made the will, cleaned the house,  
given away all that they've collected over the years,  
said goodbyes; mopped all the tears;  
the bags are packed and waiting in the hall,  
their conscience clear. This is the moment  
when what it's all about, is what it's all about..  
envy them – their soul is clean, shriven was the old word for it,  
their lifetime has been but a preparation,  
a walk from one pure spring of grace  
to a glorious river full of grace..

so here's a suggestion: in your mind,  
bring together all you've loved in all your life –  
teddy bear, dolls, kittens, puppies, horses,  
maybe even parents... best friends, lovers,  
strangers who were unexpectedly kind to you,  
friends you hope you'll never lose,  
places that you were forever happy in,  
times of happiness that you'll never forget,  
and those strange moments when  
you knew you knew something just so great,  
but didn't know exactly what it was you knew...  
those moments when time stood still, and



didn't seem to matter any more, because  
the where and when that you were in, was forever..

then add to this, all you've been, should be  
grateful for; all the things you would have praised  
more loudly; everyone, but everyone, you love; see  
the world as full of wonders unexplained;  
see glory everywhere, and yourself  
the centre of all that...

stay there.. then what is Death – apart  
from what will surely be – compared  
to all that glory which is your true self...  
go on, admit it... me, I see it shine in you...  
what shines in your eternally young eyes  
is something that can never die...

Maybe we'll talk of this some more,  
now that we've tried to talk about it...

you asked me; this is the best that I can do;  
you asked me; this, with all my love, for you..

[A poem written by request]

Michael Shepherd

# ! Dancing The Invisible Line

Some like to sit on fences, admire the view in safety;  
some are born hurdlers; .

draw a line, and some minds shrink back;  
others can't wait to compete, first over wins...

poets, said the sage, should always  
walk on the edge of madness...

ah, remember when you were a child,  
walking down the path one foot within,  
one foot beyond?

'a line of poetry'...every line, a line,  
one foot beyond, one foot within –

prose, verse; rhymed, unrhymed;  
metered, unmetered; actual, fantasy;

elevated, jokey; personal, impersonal;  
tragic, comic; a road taken, or not taken..

oh, so many lines  
that others painted on the road –

dance down that road,  
one foot beyond, one foot within..

Michael Shepherd

# ! Dasgupta Asks...

What have you gained  
if you have not gained yourself,  
yourself the immortal,  
yourself the infinite ?

What have you gained  
if you have never tasted in your life  
the deep longing to be free,  
the deep longing to be liberated?

The spirit of the saints of all the ages  
whispers in my ears -

what have you gained  
if you have never tasted  
the joys of self-surrender?

If your heart has not longed  
to make of you a flute  
in the hands of Krishna,  
master musician of the universe?

And if you have not been able  
to sweeten all your miseries  
with a touch of God?

(versified from a lecture in Evanston, US, in 1926)

Michael Shepherd

# ! Dear Poemhunter Correspondent

Thank you for your last message;  
it was good of you to write  
and at such length..

I'd just like to say first  
as a preamble  
well a short preamble  
let's say a presprint that's pre-sprint

and as you must know by now,  
I tend to be rather fussy and academic  
about punctuation  
though I'd like to say  
that from my point of view  
this arises from a love of punctuation  
which is to me as  
those pauses which lovers share  
between remarks –  
those pauses when their silent minds  
rejoice in that unity of selves and  
rejoice in the completeness  
of their own self  
as reflected in the lover – as  
Plato and Shankara and others not yet known to me alas  
agree

so, that said,  
and I hope you're  
still with me on this,  
I'd like to mention what  
may be a small point to you...  
well, this is it:

when you rounded off your very  
self-revealing and self-analytical  
study of yourself in depth:

Love Sally

I was drawn to wonder  
if the absent comma  
was an oversight..  
which can so easily happen  
in these hurried times

or perhaps a Freudian slip  
which we might discuss at length

or a deep wish, which  
might have implications  
for our formal relationship  
which we would also need to discuss at length

or simply a command

I look forward to your reply  
to what I hope you appreciate  
is a sensitive and well-meaning  
question which might forward  
our discussion of your poetry in depth?

PS there's no need  
to reply at length to this  
possibly trivial matter  
on this occasion..

Michael Shepherd

# ! Dear Will Shakespeare,

Dear Will,

How are things out there?  
just thought you'd like to know,  
that you're eleventh on the Top Poets list  
as of today (though I should mention  
that the hittership is 75% from  
the New World that you just foresaw  
before you 'closed your book'; not  
that that's relevant - they speak an  
English, isn't that great, which is nearer  
to your own sound than the strangled  
glottal stops of Cheapside Thames-side these sorry days) ...

So to the list: and so you'll understand  
that no offence is meant, etcetera...  
top dog today is Sheldon Silverstein -  
the sort of oddball who lives down the street  
just where the sidewalk ends,  
whom your children hang around with all the time -  
they loved his poetry when they were kids,  
and still love him now they're all grown-up  
for what he brought to their childhood - I bet  
you wrote some poems like that for your kids  
but never got them published? So I know  
that though my fellow poets sniff,  
you'll grant him - love?

The second is a curious case -  
you may know him as Nuftali Basoalto,  
we know him now as Pablo Neruda -  
and though he wrote in Spanish  
(they didn't conquer England but  
did rather well on America's southern shores)  
you'll recognise him even in translation  
as a fellow poet, worldwide in his heart...

The third is Maya Angelou - now, no-one  
wrote more deeply about women than you did,

and of the human spirit:  
so though our fellow poets and critics sniff once more,  
she is Woman in Splendour,  
Woman as Survivor - so,  
remembering your Mistress Quickly and her merry mates,  
you'll recognise her instantly for what she is?  
majesty - thy name is woman...

The fourth is Langston Hughes - a bit of history here:  
the human spirit under great duress,  
unvanquished - and if this may oft confine  
the poet's worldwide scope, may yet sing loud  
the human heart and speak  
to generations yet unborn  
of spirit tested, hope undimmed  
and tears.. and tears...and love.

Emily Dickinson, the fifth - I guess  
you may well need to read her twice -  
her punctuation's not so - breathless -  
as she may seem; neglected in her day,  
she speaks out of obscurity to the human heart;  
she's earned her place, wouldn't you say?

Robert Frost, the sixth - you may find him  
as austere as his wintry and keen-fingered name;  
like frost, he touches all the countryside;  
secure as Jonson, shall we say, in poetry's ear?

Seventh and ninth - let's put them back together -  
frail Sylvia Plath and gaunt Ted Hughes, the star-crossed,  
storm-tossed, heart-locked, lovelost lovers -  
oh, you who know what passion's spent,  
what hearts are wrung, for poetry's salt tears,  
admire, despair, their planetary pact  
eternal writ among the unrhymed stars...

Which leaves just wild Bukowski, raven Poe  
to speak as Marlowe, Webster most of all,  
as do your own black tragedies,  
of those dark places of the human soul  
from which emerges all that's truly clear and bright -

and then yourself...

and there is much to say  
of Whitman, Sharpe, Palutsky, Dahl,  
all widely read, and following on your heels;  
in whom, as you, the heart's as great as this great world itself;  
and darkest night smiled on by clearest day;  
statistics, poets say, have much, have nothing, yet to answer for -

and so, eternal Will - I wish you God's good day!

Michael Shepherd



# ! Death Visits In The Garden, In The Night

'The dead man was a six-foot ex-heavyweight,  
funding his unpaid youth club work  
by working as security in a night-club;  
shot for gently warning  
a smoker in the garden; no witnesses  
have come forward... the dead man's brother  
was a probation officer; now, from despair,  
a crime prevention officer...'

Committees meet, look serious, nod...  
are the crime figures up or down this year?

but the ones who could enlighten us  
just how it is, are the inarticulate...

'I worshipped my Dad, always so sharp-dressed,  
gold watch, rings, bracelet, all that stuff...  
but we didn't see enough of him...  
he had several ladies.. he'd appear,  
unannounced, every few weeks with  
lots of presents for us, stay a night or two,  
always on the phones... then he had business  
out of town... and there'd be another baby bro or sis...  
Mum said Dad said condoms  
take the pleasure out of it...  
she worked all hours, Mum, to keep us all together..  
black women are so strong...

'You got to carry a blade when young,  
just for self-defence, know what I mean?  
The first scum that I shot,  
I was real scared, man, real scared...  
but there weren't no 'witnesses' –  
know what I mean? '

There's 'unprovoked attack', and there's defence,  
and there's that grim grey nomansland  
of 'respeck' – where the fierce, bruised ego,  
which looks always for status, is

challenged by a single silent glance...

'Yeah, I got my posse and my patch,  
like to dress sharp, gotta lady or two,  
want my kids to make something of themselves...  
but I got an anger burning inside of me...  
life owes me, maan – knowhamean..? '

The dead man was a six-foot heavyweight,  
funding his unpaid youth club work  
by working as security in a night-club;  
shot for gently warning  
a smoker in the garden; no witnesses  
have come forward... the dead man's brother  
was a probation officer, now, from despair,  
a crime prevention officer...

This poem is for both of you.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Do Dolphins Leap Into Dolphin Heaven?

Be a dolphin. Feel yourself  
at home in the beloved water  
in which you were fathered, mothered,  
fed, grow up, and swim with all your friends...

and then one day, you see them disappear from view –  
a powerful twist of tail... their body's gone...  
gone where? ... you find that air, which  
your nostrils have already breathed, is more...  
a lighter, unsupported world  
in which all dolphins leap  
to celebrate their joy  
in being – just as they are...

and, perhaps, fall back into  
familiar water, with now greater joy...

who knows, what dolphins think –  
or how they think, their instincts water-pure?  
and what is air to them...  
and whether air is where  
they are on equal terms with those strange creatures,  
human beings – yet with whom  
they have a wonderful affinity;  
even in protecting them  
when danger threatens men  
in dolphins' safe, free element..

The early Christians, seeing dolphins play  
around the shores of Greece and Italy  
and Palestine and Egypt, saw a parallel:  
in that men, when lost to human thought  
beyond all thought, leap into an element  
of joy and freedom and a world above  
as air to dolphin's water; their spirits leapt,  
bringing back to earth a memory  
never then forgotten, of what lay in store...

and scratched upon dark, taper-flickering walls

of catacombs and prisons, a dolphin leaping;  
' My body's here; my spirit's leaping there  
where joy and freedom never disappear...'

Michael Shepherd

# ! Dogged By Comparisons

Behind the gym on the non-stop route out of town  
and the housing estate and the light industrial  
awaiting a so-called 'developer'  
there's this park – correction, Dogshit Central;

once, I guess, it was a 'common'; now,  
even 'civic amenity area' is too good for it;

at the far end, an occasional gardener clips a hedge,  
prunes the few rose bushes once a year;  
this end, it's all railings and rough grass  
and dogs.

Not dogs and people; dogs. At weekends,  
dogs and people, yes; balls and sticks are thrown,  
exercise taken, tails wagged;  
humans are human once again..

weekdays, how convenient  
to combine the dog-walkies with  
the shopping; leave them there for an hour or so,  
they'll be safe, make their own entertainment..

so – no balls, no sticks, no masters – what do they do?  
Today, there's five of them in a merry pack,  
tongues out, tails flying, bounding around half-turning,  
eager for more joy, more joy,  
using twice the energy they'd use for rabbit-stalking...  
celebrating their dogness, and pure being, celebrating life itself...

Now gather their five owners in a posse...  
a sorry bunch of humans,  
uncomfortable in the company of their kind,  
at best, living the wild life through their dogs,  
at worst, not fit to own a dog...

don't you wonder that dogs  
don't lose their sanity, their joy,  
their faithfulness, their loyalty,

having to look after the spiritual welfare  
of this two-legged and unnatural,  
inferior and drearier  
branch of evolution, the human race?  
They who bury their hopes and fears  
to dig them up again tomorrow,  
to chew them over in regret and guilt...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Don'T You Wish Your Soul Was Larger? (Advt.)

You were born with a little pink soul.  
That didn't seem to matter for your first ten years or so.

Then you started to compare it with what  
other boys had swinging for them...

and of course, how girls were different,  
but managed in their own private way...

then you discovered girls, bigtime. Well, for you, smalltime...  
They didn't mind the modest size of your soul, at first;

then they started giggling together, and  
favoured some other guy like crazy

since it got around that he had a huge swinging soul  
and knew just how to use it.

Now you've got a partner, and she doesn't say anything  
because she knows you're very sensitive about this

but secretly, she wishes you had a larger soul...  
and there's your very handsome neighbour

who advertises by the way he dresses, carries himself  
that he's well-endowed in that department...

watch out; she may feel that she deserves  
spiritual satisfaction from that guy

who sure spreads it around, from what  
her girlfriends tell her...

Now I'm here to tell you –  
There's a cure. Several cures in fact.

There's using weights for it.. that's  
sometimes called hatha-yoga in Indian circles.

There's the vacuum system – empty  
your mind; that's called jnana-yoga.

There's the traditional method –  
play with it a lot, get the bloodstream on your side...

love it and all it stands for, that's  
called bhakti-yoga.

Or there's patches – like, say,  
Church once a week...

A personal soul-massager can be expensive;  
depends if you can keep up the urge to work;

But now, there's tablets – easy, discreet,  
available at any bookstore, or by post.

So which method would you prefer?  
You surely can't doubt your need by now – for

every boot-up brings reminders on the net  
of just how tiny is your wee pink soul (how do they know...?)

Let's give your soul a friendly name – say, Richard –  
Ricky, Dicky, Rick, or Dick...

If you don't believe this e-mail from a stranger,  
ask your partner if she wouldn't prefer

the deep and stirring, long and oh so frequent,  
confident strutting you with your huge swinging soul..

or ask your soulmate: we've called him Dick:  
wouldn't he like to be a monster size?

be the talk of the neighbourhood,  
get that special glance from all the hottest chicks?

And remember – in a few more years of this spamming,  
and what is monster size now, will be standard issue then...



And by the way, we do a special junior version for your kids  
but present law doesn't allow us to advertise this...

(The Junior Patch comes in three styles: skin-colour; disguised  
as Band-Aid; or with our bold and trendy logo - best ask Junior first...)

give your kids a bigger start in life...  
it's what all parents want...

Try our seven-day introductory course today -  
you'll be amazed, insatiable...and so will she...

We'd quote you at this point, the glowing testimonies  
from satisfied and greater souls, hymning loud Our praise...

but I guess you know just how they'd read..

Michael Shepherd

# ! Dumped

Thanks, I'll have a white wine. Small.

You 'wanted to talk'.  
He's dumping me. I'll live.

because you 'like to live an honest life'.  
What life.

but you 'hope we'll be friends'.  
Friends of who?

so shall we share the bill?  
Probably.

Michael Shepherd

# ! E V O L U T I O N

evolution is no rogue elephant –  
crashing blindly through the forests of ignorance  
and the rain-forests of mercy, alike –  
trampling temples, churches, mosques  
in some apparent iconoclasm –  
scattering and shattering equipment  
in the laboratories of men -  
seeking a wise mahout who will tame  
and understand its wildness,  
or a Darwin who will zoo it,  
watch it tenderly, take notes...

no, evolution is a precious golden glimpse  
into the mind of – name That as you will –  
Paramatman, Jehovah, Jupiter, or God,  
Allah, The Creator, World Soul, Intelligent Designer...

who works in subtlety, bound by His own rules..  
who works at differing speeds  
in our so wonderful human entities...:

to change our body physical, it takes  
many many generations to 'evolve' –  
to grow –let's say, to take example  
at our finger-ends as we work at our computers –  
finger-nails fromclaws...

and yet, to evolve in mind, researchers say  
- the rearguard in this baggage train,  
studying the evidence from the teeming brain –  
to evolve the mind may take  
one human being just a lifetime,  
then pass this capability to a willing child...

and yet again, to evolve  
in spirit, being, higher consciousness –  
a few years' work, or months, or days,  
and, zap! the favoured ones –  
Saint Paul, Eckhart Tolle, dare I instance –

transcend their former level in the twinkling  
of Evolution's eye, and tell the world  
what worlds lie waiting in man's inner man...

evolution whispers its golden secret in our inner ear:  
there, where hope and possibility meet and kiss,  
we live; on the edge of greatness,  
magnificent, glorious; what a piece of work is Man!

Michael Shepherd

# ! Ecstatitude

sometimes it gets me that way

despite the past  
despite the future

yeah

despite myself  
despite other people

wow

and not knowing exactly  
what that word means

is exactly  
what it means

ecstatitude

Michael Shepherd

# ! Electric Haiku

First brown leaves falling,  
crisp air now the sun's set,  
another light bulb gone.

They last for years,  
go as the leaves fall;  
perhaps they too feel old.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Enlightenment Haiku-Ish

put aside questions;

learn of yourself, how to behave;

the answers will be known.

Michael Shepherd

# ! E-Ssential Rap Gospel 'Tude

Jeezuz him say, man, love all thy fellow rappers  
jes like I love dat MaryMag an' all dem hoes 'n slappers...

Michael Shepherd



# ! Evcharistos! And Not Only...

here is the world of not only:  
lifting its face, lifting its hands,  
beyond not, beyond only, to  
not only, but.. to That!

not only for some, but for all.  
Be sitting in your chair, or  
kneeling before an altar or a statue, or  
touching head to ground, or  
cross-legged, the sitar and the vina  
quietening to silence, the incense  
filling the lungs and heart;

or walking through the forest, in the hills; seeing,  
not only this, or this, but... that...

Eucharist, Communion, Advaita –  
Thanksgiving, coming together as one,  
'not two'... do all these mean the same,  
mean, not only?

not only you, but all of us;  
not only worshipping, or working;  
not only body or spirit;  
not only earth or heaven;

but there, where work is worship; worship, work;  
where activity is rest;  
where Body is Spirit; Spirit, Body;  
earth is heaven, and heaven's on earth;

where sound and silence meet;  
where stillness meets activity;  
where body and spirit know each other;

take, if you wish, this sip of wine, this crumb of bread,  
this handful of water, this flower,  
in the memory of centuries and millions,  
lifting, too, their faces and their hands;

looking beyond not only, finding, that;  
or put your hands together,  
as all things come together;

say the word, a word,  
give a name to it, to That;  
or listen to the sound beyond all names;  
the sound that's in the silence;  
the life that's in the stillness;

or stay with eucharist, communion, advaita, jihad,  
sacrifice, surrender, prayer, praise;  
they are your guardians and your friends,  
smiling as they run toward you, greeting;  
calling out to you,  
not only... but...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Even Green Bears Like Anecdotes About Them

Which college student would turn down even  
a few dollars? A notice goes, up, Dr. Wegner  
wants some volunteers for half-an-hour, most,  
in the Cognitive Research lab...

so when it's my turn in the queue,  
I go in and he says, now go in there  
for fifteen minutes, only one instruction,  
don't think about a green bear...

so, money for old rope, with bear attached,  
I go in there, check every few minutes that  
I haven't thought about some idiotic green bear...

come out, he's sitting there with all his smug  
students and assistants, looking just as if  
I were some green bear, about to amuse them hugely...

so to shut their silly faces up, I don't wait, but say,  
if you're going to ask me did I think about  
that green bear no I didn't once I checked  
every few minutes to see if I'd thought about it no...

and they all laughed...ticked the boxes, wrote  
in their don't- I- love-my-Prof little notebooks with  
their smug little smiles to each other...  
now I go to sleep  
thinking of feeding them one by one  
to that green bear, wow they taste good...

I mean, who in their right mind  
ever thinks of some green bear...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Evening Contentment: A Meal, A Temple

and as the thick heat of the day lifts off,  
the city comes alive.

What is architecture without shadow?  
At the wrong but necessary time,  
midday in high summer, when  
the overhead sun has stolen into siesta  
all meaning, even beauty,  
from the very temples themselves,  
we had been clambering around the Acropolis,  
which seemed to promise so much from afar,  
an ideal world; now up close, we couldn't find it,  
trying perhaps too hard; that tiny temple by the entrance  
offered more; the korae in the museum  
smiled an understanding of all this;  
knew all about us. This is what awe means.

Now, in the cooling air of evening, the tourists,  
showered, in their fresh cottons,  
meet and converge with their Athenian hosts  
at an unpretentious family restaurant  
at the foot of the Acropolis hill.  
The Parthenon, resting from its busy anthill day,  
is floodlit in all its glory, yet  
aloof; as if its subtle geometries  
hold it inviolable between two worlds; Plato in stone.

A hundred Olympian athlete's paces from the restaurant at its foot,  
almost as if generations of this family have measured it,  
the scent of cooking garlic welcomes us –  
guests even before we have arrived;  
then the simple tables, the evocative bouzouki music  
whose recording we will buy and in time forget,  
and then one day, find again with an exquisite pain;

this is the climax of the Mediterranean day;  
three thousand years of culture are the unspoken,  
almost unnoticed, stage set for our evening hours tonight, with  
the indefinable sense that the sea, blue into wine,

is not far away. There's a friendly chatter, men and women,  
in the kitchen. This is what an open-air restaurant  
should be about: they give us food and wine;  
we give them back, our happiness.

As we scrape our metal chairs on the concrete floor  
in a convivial circle – the sky dusted with stars over  
the Parthenon now at an awkward, unromantic, steep  
angle to us, but we know it's there –  
and settle, foot-weary but refreshed,  
you can sense that each of us is relishing  
the sense of the fresh, cool air  
between the fresh-laundered cotton  
and the no longer sticky skin;  
have we earned this with our guide-booked day?

Then, three or so enchanted hours –  
no great need to speak; silent acknowledgement  
that we have come all this way to find  
a sheer contentment in just being ourselves  
in company, around a table, drinking a little wine,  
eating simple food;

time.. time does not stand still,  
though that's the first idea that comes to mind;  
rather, time has surrendered to us  
its own unimportance; we steal a glance  
at each other's quiet glow  
as sunwarmed faces find some inner sun.

Some Greek grammar not yet learned  
is teaching us the living meaning, limitless contentment;  
the infinite infinitive of the verb, to be. The air  
is gentle as it cools; our bodies warm with food and wine  
and boundless love; we are, oh can it be,  
perfection in some temple of ourselves.

Michael Shepherd

# ! F A T H E R

I gave my father seven years  
of love unconditional

then in my eighth year  
my father decided  
to mould me

in my eighth year  
I saw through my father  
beyond the love

the love had not gone; simply  
there is not time for love  
when the battle is to find yourself

my eighth year was fatal; that's fatal  
meaning in the hands of fate..

forgive me, father, for  
I knew not what I knew.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Faves And Yuks

and some say  
oh that's my favourite ever poem  
my aunt my uncle my teacher read it  
to me when I was twelve  
and the more I read it  
the more true it is and now  
I'm older I can say it off by heart  
as if the poem knows my heart

and some say  
that poem yuk I really really hate it  
the more people said to me  
that's a great poem  
the more I hated it  
now if I see it  
in an anthology  
I skip the page quickly  
I really really hate it

and I wonder if  
the more people read a poem  
do they take a bit of its power into themselves  
so it no longer has quite that surprise it had

or the more people read that poem  
the more they add to it  
so it has the power  
to surprise more people

or do poems  
like a rest from time to time  
like that old toy in  
your grandparents' attic  
which so surprised you

that Jack-in-a-box  
with a face like  
Pushkin  
or Langston Hughes

Michael Shepherd



# ! From Kahlil Gibran On Friendship

Your friend is one who answers to your needs:  
the field you sow with love, and reap with thanks;  
you seek him for your peace, to hear his heart;  
and when he's silent - still his heart you hear:

because, with words or not, you share his joy;  
in presence or in absence he is there;  
and stronger love may in his absence show:  
the beauty of a love that asks for naught.

So tell your friend of all that ebbs and flows,  
your best and worst of what fate deals to you:  
no thought too great nor light for open minds  
who share their pleasures, and their laughter too.

For in the dew of sweet and passing thoughts  
each morning's fresh, for close and constant hearts.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Funnyossities

Where silliness borders on the realm of possibility –  
that's the blissful land where children play;  
inventing for themselves, or helped  
by those never-quite-grown-ups  
who spend their working week  
chortle-gurgle-wham-ouch-eeuucchh! -`\*\*\*\*? '-  
EEEKK! -AAaarrgghh! ! ! ,  
illustrating Kidz Komix and such  
in that blissful land

and there were books called 'Funnyossities'  
(they'd be nothing now)  
the pages chopped laterally in three:  
heads in the top section, every possible caricature,  
bodies of every size, shape, dress, the middle section;  
then legs of all sorts (lots of hairy ones, of course)  
occupied the lower section;

and you turned them over, this way, that way,  
to make the most ludicrous combinations...  
sometimes just absurd, sometimes surreally possible...

I'm there on the page you're turning now:  
a wizened face, eyes popping;  
from my mortar-board, it seems, a schoolmaster enraged  
to apoplexy and beyond;  
the body of a languid, greenery-yellery poet, wilting like  
a stick of celery long past its celery-buy date...  
the legs like ancient hairy sticks beneath the woeful shorts...

feel free to chortle, or to turn the page;  
it could be worse.

Michael Shepherd

# ! G A T E W A Y   T I M E O U T

O radiant Muse of Poetry!  
To Thee I.....

(sorry, gateway timeout...)

O Thou Unreachable Server of the Universe,  
Uncontactable Administrator of our lives,  
Gateway to our destiny on Earth  
from our log-in to our timeout,  
hear, we beseech....

(sorry, gateway timeout...)

Michael Shepherd

# ! G\*d Unnamed

So many are reluctant, in their speech,  
to make referral to the name of God;  
as if to speak thus is to overreach  
what may by human mind be understood.

Yet is it not the given power of mind  
to do this very thing, and boldly seek  
always the greater picture, there to find  
the greater causes, and of them to speak?

Our consciousness is greater than the Sun;  
it shines beyond the shadows of the mind;  
in universal thoughts that look to One  
a richer life this greater love may find.

Thus unnamed unity may head our quest;  
for Goodness, Truth and Beauty there still rest..

Michael Shepherd

# ! God And Michelangelo Paint A Ceiling

'And now, ladies and gentlemen,  
above you – ladies, it's easier with  
the mirror from your purse...  
Monsieur, Signor, Mein Herr...  
we've come to  
The Big Moment...'

the moment for which  
tourists gather; temples fill;  
saints and monks fall to their knees;  
contemplatives fall silent;  
even angels hold their breath;  
all Creation for a moment, still;

look around, the beauty of it all:  
the earth so warm and fresh  
under the morning sun;  
rivers sparkle among greenest trees  
full of breeze and birdsong;  
does this perfection lack?

One thing. The one, which may in time  
unite all this; destroy all this.

It cannot be the Lord God Himself, seen  
walking in the garden in the cool of the evening,  
in this paradise which is Himself;  
even God must keep His, God's, own rules;  
no, it must be His representative upon His earth,  
made in His image - but according to Earth's scope..

The tourists gawp, or are struck humble  
with some unexpected thought. Stay too long like this,  
craned neck, and older visitors may faint...

God – who for a moment, must resemble Man  
in order to achieve this earthly moment –  
stretches out His finger... His reflection,  
this mindless, aimless, half-awake and muscle-conscious hulk,

is moved to imitate the action; reflecting,  
as do the lady tourists' hand mirrors  
faintly dusted, scented, with face powder;  
(a surreptitious dab; it's hot in here with all the lights..)

But painters, even with God's aid,  
cannot paint a spark like that.

That over-muscled body will soon trim down  
when he must chase his breakfast  
through the jungle.. life's not going to be all  
milk and honey, manna and ambrosia  
from now on..

but how many years and eras in God's mind  
must pass before that hulk, who's known  
as Adam by his madam, evolves  
in God's good time, to ask  
'Who am I, Lord? '...  
the question echoing down the passage of the years  
so seldom asked, so silent answered;

the answer when it comes,  
comes as by reflection,  
comes like a spark to mind.

Michael Shepherd

# ! God Is In The Banana Skin...

God, say those who learn of Him,  
Is eager to be our teacher...

who would love to sit quietly beside us,  
like the mother which He also is,  
singing the meaning of the simplest words,  
the words that we'll most need..

but if we're the scourge of the classroom...  
He'll not hesitate to use full physical correction – though  
He will start small, in hope we take the hint..

but if we still resist, He's not beyond  
thrashing us within an inch of our sad life,  
until we're on our knees and begging to be taught...

and if our pride still needs to take a fall,  
to restore our humane self –

then God is in  
the banana skin..

He's ruthless in His love...  
there is no depth to which He'll rise  
to lower heaven to earthly eyes...

and since He is all women too,  
the arts of flirtation are fully in His power...  
He'll not answer letters; not turn up on time;  
not be taken your advantage of...  
change His appearance; or be seen  
accompanying some other to the scene...  
then send, out of the blue, a Valentine  
that knocks you off your feet of clay..  
proposes setting a marriage day...

Yes, God is in the banana skin;  
God the teacher is ruthless in his love;  
God, they say, made time, so that

we could exercise freewill  
in taking our time  
to find that our need  
is really much the same as His...

Michael Shepherd



# ! God! You'Re Like, Sooo Banal...

Imagine - if you'll  
pardon that phrase addressed  
to poets, of all people -

imagine, if we judged peoples' lives  
like we do their poems...

your parents separate when you're just seven?  
oh that's such a contrived, unoriginal theme...  
it's been done, and better...

you've fallen in love for the first time?  
that's so banal, so cliched; can you imagine  
anyone wants to share that?

you've been dumped for  
the first time in your life by  
the one you've given your life to?  
that's pathetic - can't you think  
of something more.. creative?

your family washed away in the tsunami?  
oh puh-lease - that's so -  
so - Hollywood - what do you want  
to be remembered for - Special Effects?

you're disabled? Can't you think  
of something more - personal?  
we've all been there one way  
or the other, do you have  
anything new to contribute?

you love your family? so what?  
life isn't a Hallmark card

so

reviewing your life,  
I find it trite, banal, cliché-ridden,

unreflected on, randomly commenced,  
shapeless, lacking in clear theme  
or sense of direction, unedited,  
unrevised, poorly punctuated, lacking in any  
metaphorical significance, veering uncertainly  
between real, surreal, and fantasy  
and lacking music, that's either  
melody or harmony or  
rhythm with 'em, and  
far, far too much repetition and  
and if you think you're aiming at  
poetic tragi-comedy I can tell you it  
reads more like farcical melodrama  
and in all honesty  
I couldn't recommend it for general release  
even in a niche market, I mean, who'd  
want to buy it even in paperback? and  
I had hoped in my patronising way that  
you could have done better  
(though secretly pleased that  
you haven't) - for God's sake, couldn't you  
have left us something to remember  
better than this? Just, done better...?

No, me neither

(dedicated to all those who've got the Tshirt...)

Michael Shepherd

# ! Godlike

So you're scrolling fast  
down a page of  
yeah yeah  
those old Greek guys  
did they spend their time  
dreaming up quotes?

there goes  
Democritus (460 - 370BC)  
(though of course he didn't know  
it was BC did he...?)  
saying  
'It is godlike  
ever  
to think  
on something beautiful and  
on something new.'

and just for a moment  
your mind stops mid-scroll:  
what was he wearing  
that day, was it warm,  
was he wearing the standard toga  
in off-white or Persil white,  
sandals I guess,  
writing with some kinda  
Greek reed-pen on some kinda  
tablet thing  
what he had mulled over, polished  
fit for posterity  
if there would be a posterity

or had he just had  
this beautiful, new thought  
come to him in his  
beautiful, bright mind,  
the sun shining on  
the Acropolis up there,  
the scent of herbs from

the sides of the hills,  
still green and wooded,  
feeling himself yes godlike  
and maybe saying  
a grateful thankyou  
to the Muse  
in Greek of course.

Michael Shepherd

# ! God's Notebook 1: Material Under Declassification

...so the next week  
I thought, why not bring  
these rather fine elements together

start at the bottom, earth, water...  
I gave it a provisional name,  
Material Under Declassification

or MUD for short; left it around.  
Not much happened.  
Then children discovered it, loved it.

Not much progress. So  
I added fire. Easy-peasy; hot country  
I'd chosen for the lab. Time later  
for those colder Northern hearts.

Yes. Had wait a fair mantime; but  
it passed like no time at all.  
'They' discovered bricks.

Things really started to move.  
Or rather, rest in bijou residences.

Labourers, have you noticed,  
get bored. Especially  
with no one passing to whistle at.  
I didn't invent the hajib, any more  
than I invented figleaf bikinis  
and shame - they did.

So - bored labourer in brickyard  
takes out half-baked brick (like him...)  
and papyrus root (yeah, yeah,  
that comes later...) and writes  
rude words on brick.  
About his employer natch.  
'Ph\*\*\* U Pharoah'

Yes, it's all going nicely.  
Everything's good.  
Oops. meant to write, good..

Michael Shepherd

# ! Good V. Evil - Watch The Rematch In The Comfort Of Your Own Home!

But hold on a minute –  
who set this league up?

Is it a fair game? Are the teams  
equally matched? Have they  
both got wealthy sponsors?  
Can they both afford those  
international mercenaries?  
Is it - excuse the metaphor -  
a level playing field? ...

Some say it's the oldest  
religion in the world, with  
the largest number of current  
devotees.. even those of us  
who say we're agnostic, atheist, or  
never got the voting paper,  
secretly keep its shrine, deep  
in our hearts...

Saint Augustine (who once was a devout  
adherent, some say never quite  
threw it off, called it 'original sin',  
'the taint of Adam' – that sort of thing)  
blamed the Manicheans; they said  
they got it from Mazda, who heard it  
from a friend – or was it an enemy? ...

Basically, I/you/we/they believe  
there are two equal forces battling it out  
out there. Which side do you support?  
Well, our side of course... out there on  
the terraces, we're all united in this..  
though sometimes we have a little quiet fun  
being the baddies, under an assumed name...

Some say, an impartial god looks on

as they battle it out; some say,  
that's how it ought to be.. make Mankind  
in your image, see where freewill takes them...  
if it doesn't work out, wipe out,  
change the rules and start again...

Some say, no god looks on; it's a fight  
to the finish, was you lookin at me, scum..? ..  
it's hate, hate, makes the world go round...

It fills the sports terraces, now that  
that wimpy old idea, fair play, but ref's decision  
is final, it's only a game, may the best team win,  
is dead and buried...

Politicians find it very handy; when  
they've finished rubbishing each other,  
grabbed a headline and a soundbite, then  
they mix good v. evil with  
that other useful device: ancient primitive survival  
means that we respond more quickly  
to threats, than to opportunities...  
it's great for manipulating people;

so there's an axis of evil out there – those guys  
we used to support, welcomed their  
extended families into East Side apartments,  
took their oil money eagerly on Fifth Avenue –  
now they're a threat, we're putting  
emergency measures in place...  
sorry about that, but  
we're here for your protection...  
no gray areas any more,  
we're the good guys, John Wayne  
played us in the film...  
it's how the West was won  
by the apple-cheeked against the bad apples;  
or formerly, before political correctness intervened,  
from those other dark-skinned guys, who  
I guess we'll have to rename...  
the battle-lines are clearcut... aren't they? ...



so as we file out from the briefing,  
take care out there... and if it gets  
all too much, there's counselling and  
the confessional...just in case you thought  
the battle was inside yourself...

take the day off; go watch TV; and if  
we lose the match, sack the manager,  
or boo the ref... switch channels,  
there's an old Western on...  
feel good about yourself..

boy, we'd sure miss  
those old Manicheans; life would be just so dull  
without a bit of drama...oh...  
have a nice Thanksgiving Day..

Michael Shepherd

# ! Goody Or Baddy? A Varifocal View

Turning over the pages  
of the national newspaper  
half-alert, this morning,

shock-horror! A full-page photo of,  
can it be? Jade Goody, the motormouth  
invited back to Big Brother for  
obvious reasons, who's caused  
world-wide repercussions for abusing  
an equally cunningly chosen Muslim  
of compassionate intelligence..so, controversy;  
a troublesome flea in the charmpit of  
the body politic..

oh, no - it's a model who just looks like her,  
advertising at huge expense,  
Specsavers' 'Varifocal' glasses...

ah! that's the word we need -

varifocal...

and aren't we all? sometimes we focus  
on the short-range, sometimes on the long;  
Jade; TV producers; media; politicians;  
motormouths the lot of us; one day  
we hate the Muslims or the Christians next door,  
and their perpetual cooking smells of curry  
or of vinegared fish-and-chips;  
next day we are on our varicultural best behaviour,  
almost, but not quite, inviting them to eat with us;  
it's called freedom of speech, integration, democracy..

Even as I speak, varifocal editors of varifocal media  
are preparing balanced feature articles by  
varifocal feature writers entitled  
'Jade Goody - true voice of Britain? '  
and we'll pour the milk on our breakfast fodder  
and slip on our varifocals with the other hand.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Gratitude Dawning

Alarm clock. The sun rises.  
The buses, railways, flights are running.  
There's a bottle of milk on the doorstep.

Facts of life. Except when they're not there.  
Who lives a life of continual gratitude for life?  
Hey guys, the sun which disappeared last night  
has turned up again today! Wow! Relief! Let's get down  
on our knees, raise hands, voices... and  
while we're about it, put your hands together for  
all morning milkmen, where they still deliver milk...

Except – no milk this morning.  
Shall you telephone – politely,  
with a subtext of unpractised gratitude?

I only saw the current milkman once;  
said to him, this is the first time I met you...  
he said, well, you're not around at 4 ay em are you?

So you telephone. A foreignish voice from  
the land of holy cows replies from  
a script I guess, ...your previous milkman...  
left the company... late...on his way...

Morning gratitude. The cow who gives you  
the love for her calves, in liquid form;  
yielding too, the butter for your toast;  
the pig who gave her life for your bacon rasher;  
the hen who parted with her offspring for you  
to kill its life in sizzling frying pan...  
they're all female, you've just noticed; how about  
the oranges whose liquid praise of the morning sun you drink?  
tomatoes, mushrooms, anybody?

maybe you should write a note to the dairy,  
say, please convey to the milkman  
who has now left the company for  
pastures new, hur hur, and we hope

a creamy, frothing future,  
our gratitude for services rendered  
which we would not ourselves  
be easily persuaded to take on...  
yes, maybe you should.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Gun Nuts

The FBI has considerably extended  
the list of those whose mental health  
makes it unwise for them to purchase guns...

that means, I guess, those whose state  
was discovered before they bought  
their first, or second, or fourteenth gun..

but what of those whose mental health  
is dangerously unbalanced, after  
they buy their guns and use them?

who graduate enthusiastically  
from air-rifles aimed at beer cans,  
to planning how to gun down  
their teachers or their fellow students?

then there are those who fight heroically  
throughout a campaign; but return,  
as veterans from Vietnam, to a ruined mental health?

or – let's be quite contentious here –  
suppose a whole people, let's say Texans  
or Republicans, or Afghans, or some extremist sect,  
want to fight each other; and  
an impartial expert called in by  
the United Nations (uh?) declares  
that neither side are fit in mental health  
to buy, or to be issued, any guns? ...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Haiku - To A Poet

The sound of words

Silence

Two friends

Michael Shepherd

# ! Haiku After Rumi

How happy the meadow is!  
How the trees tremble!  
Flash! Thunder!

Michael Shepherd



# ! Haiku For David

This autumn evening  
my haiku speaks of sadness  
yet the bare trees smile

Michael Shepherd

# ! Haiku For Joyce

The sky is heavy with rain.  
a poem still only half read  
in the sunshine

Michael Shepherd

# ! Has Music Gone From Poetry?

Has music gone from poetry?  
Words and music, still agree?  
Dance and rhythm, song and laughter,  
Do they echo, now, hereafter..?

Has singing gone from poetry?  
Words that sing a listened tune?  
Lullaby and melody,  
Old rhymes that sleepy mothers croon?

Has rhythm gone from poetry?  
Quick as a dance-step, slow as a glide?  
Laughing now; now weeping; now shouting with glee –  
Dancing round you, singing, can't catch me...

Has magic gone from poetry?  
Spells that summon fairy Fates?  
Incantations solemn spoken,  
Heroes, giants, to danger woken?

Have light hearts gone from poetry?  
Hearts that know the tears of life,  
hearts that know the grief of strife,  
yet sing and dance and laugh with glee?  
Who loves, who loves not poetry?

Michael Shepherd

# ! Hertes Academie (A Metaphysical Exercise)

My mistress' bedde, my wylling scholeroom is,  
where I do lerne my eager pupille's taske;  
her scorns, her prayse, to me as equalle are;  
her swete chastisement, alle thatte I may aske;

In her anatomie, I lerne newe worldes;  
I am Columbus, sayling to strange shores,  
fynde alle thynges newe; I am as one fresshe-taughte;  
nought of our schyppe to speke of myne or yours;

Whanne infants, we are all shored safelie uppe  
by parentes lue, upon us richlie pored;  
but thenne, in'th torment of our growing yeares,  
where mighte we lerne where alle thysse lue is stored?

Where is the hertes academie, to teche  
thysse bloody, beating, untaughte, human place,  
where hevenes Creator meetes thysse mortal coil,  
whatte is its role and rule, whatte it muste face?

Too layte, too layte, to tayke a lyfe to lerne  
thysse herte to growe, and swell, and gratelie strive;  
where is the hertes academie, whanne younge,  
to sooner teche oure hertes with lue to thrive?

Michael Shepherd

# ! Hickory, Dickory, Deconstructed Dock...

and the maker of the case  
had given it rudimentary legs  
with a little space between them and the floor  
and though the case was of finest polished  
hickory-wood, he'd not given much valued time  
to the cheap wood of the interior shelf  
below the shining weight swinging to and fro  
on the pendulum..

you don't often catch a mouse climbing;  
but the philosophy of all scavengers large and small  
is 'you never know...' – the floor is the first place, but  
the table top may hold hidden treasure  
on its fertile plain; and though this strange  
upright monster of furniture didn't seem  
promising to a twitching whiskered nose,  
you never know... Though the gentlemice  
are the family's scavengers in chief, the ladymouse  
can be desperate with all those little mouths to feed...

we'll never know whether it was a scrabble  
up the rough side of that hickory-wood case, or  
cunning deft paws thrust between the links of chain...  
she gained the top shelf, where the strange mechanism  
moved as discreetly as a mouse, above the ticking cogwheel...

and then, like some mighty god of fearsome justice and revenge, offended at this  
presumption...this hubris,  
to be punished, as Prometheus, as Icarus –  
a whirring of the metal monster  
shook the case and mouse; then – a sonic boom,  
shattering Minnie's ears – but more, shattering  
her tidy universe, at exactly one-o'clock in Green Witch time...

one tiny, traumatised ladymouse –  
the childmice fed and put to bed -  
snuggled close to her gentlespouse that night:  
'what's it all about, Mickey? ' who  
yawning, half-awake: 'Search me, kid...'

she, laying awake that night, filled with more curiosity  
than it needs to kill a cat; filled with unmousey thought  
(by which that godly evolution works its mysterious metamorphoses...)  
wishing 'even if I were reborn as  
the most timid human being, I'd like to know  
what it's all about...' and too much cheese  
tossed her sleep between harsh nightmare dreams...

\* \*

... she may work in your office, or the firm's up there  
above the factory floor.. that tiny spinster of uncertain age,  
large round eyes behind small round wire-rimmed glasses,  
eyes which however seldom meet your gaze...  
water-cooler gossip, calling her Miss Mouse,  
idly wonders where she goes  
and what she does, at end of day...  
back, we guess, to an ailing widowed mother who  
resents her daughter going out to work,  
but knows the money must be earned...

then, mother put to bed, she reads (and yes,  
Beatrix Potter's on the shelf above,  
next to the clock her father made for her...) :  
scared of mice, of course, yet  
feeling a strange affinity; remembering  
as daughters do, her beloved father  
whose clockmaker's posture, back bent,  
arms and hands ready for his intricate work,  
she has inherited, as she holds her Beatrix Potter  
cocoa mug between her delicate,  
timid, pink, deft, humble yet  
secret-strong, little paws...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Holy Questions Not Wholly Answered

When I asked them, why did You  
need to send Him, they said  
I was too young to ask such questions;  
I should just be glad..

I wondered but did not say,  
were You sorry that perhaps  
it hadn't gone quite right  
first time? ..

I wondered but did not say,  
how could they be sure  
he was the only son; might You - or we - not need  
another Son, every now and then?

Later, I began to understand  
the huge risk that You took  
in giving us freewill; and saw  
the mercy of Your sending sons  
whenever we had strayed too far..

How I would love You more,  
how I would love Him more,  
if others would not claim  
this Coming to be unique..and Ours...

then I would love You  
for Your mercy, as  
I loved You when I was a child:  
as the father in all fathers;  
I, the son who would be  
every son.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Horse And Rider

To lean forward in the saddle,  
the reins slackened for a while,

to lean forward towards its ear,  
its ear concerned with more immediate things,

across the muscled, tendoned neck  
so much more a neck than human neck

with the urge to whisper some unformulated words  
arising beyond a language, in the heart,

concerning some so briefly,  
so deeply now perceived

of some equality hidden in humility  
holding horse and rider

in some ancient bond of trust,  
perhaps of love.

Michael Shepherd



# ! How Brave This New World Shines! How Fine Its Words!

There were monkeys everywhere;  
all with badges gently velcroed to their coats –  
'Supervisor'; 'IT operative'; 'Catering';

in the corridors, those who chattered  
seemed to have been taught broad vowels;  
I swear they spoke pentameters iambic.

Down the corridor of this carefully designed space,  
even an in-house cinema; today, I note, it's playing  
the film of Borges's 'Libraries of Babel'  
and an old Marx Brothers comedy.

The building is light and airy, beside it  
the river flows sedately, as if it knows  
it waters hallowed ground; swans glide  
as if to speak of poetry in motion.

opposite, the Zen garden has been thoughtfully banked  
to accommodate that Asian requirement,  
a hundred tourists holding above their heads  
a hundred mobiles: sapling forest of trivial fond record;

calm outside, subduing the tourist hordes;  
inside, an air of suppressed excitement;  
it seems that after many years,  
the team had passed the major test –  
or as their press release phrased it so quaintly,  
'With proud-flying colours new apparition'd'...

I read on: 'Oh brave new world, that hath such creatures in't!  
No longer Nature's child, but Nature's pen;  
No longer aping man, but nurturing men! '

It seems that the Institute, programmed with all the data  
that man and monkey together might accumulate,  
were 'sailed upon a venture new embark'd':

a brand-new play by The Shakespeare Primate Trust,  
'honouring his great, unblotted name'...

Michael Shepherd

# ! How Long?

How long  
may a heart stay bruised  
before it starts to bruise  
itself?

How long  
may a heart stay vulnerable  
before it grows a strength?

How long  
must a heart wait  
for another love?

How long  
it seems

How long?

Michael Shepherd

# ! Hypersyllabic Lyric With Catalexis (For Mary Oliver)

There's budding in the springtime;  
fruiting in the fall;  
flowering in the summertime;  
but winter comes to all..

Michael Shepherd

## ! 'I Am A Part Of All That I Have Met'..

you're having one of those  
tricky, subtle, unpleasant  
'let's go for a drink' job interviews  
in a quiet, expensive bar  
that slick, smooth bosses go in for  
and you feel it's all wrong way up –  
you're being interviewed for life style,  
presentable company wife etc.  
and not the job; you'd like  
the pay of course, that's why  
you're here; but now where's this going,  
out of left field – 'I am a part of  
all that I have met' he says; is that  
to remind you that it will always be  
his company? Is it something he read  
in the latest aspirational book, and  
rather fancied it...? Sharply, you loathe  
the whole business world that got you  
where you are...

now, you're sitting out an excellent party  
except that you've been on your feet all day  
and now you're joined on the sofa by an attractive thirty-fivish  
who's also gently cruising the room.. you know  
instantly that she's, as you'd say to the boys  
but not, well not yet, to her personally, up for it..  
and you're wittily circling one another  
in banter, taking stock of the priority  
of your urges, and then she says,  
looking you straight in the eye, as if  
it's moving this chat onto another plane, 'I am  
a part of all that I have met'.. and you try  
to suppress the comeback line,  
yes, lady, I'll bet you are...  
pretentious flirty cow, says your inner jock...

Around 1666, when London burned  
like a pile of sticks, Milton, blind poet,  
said this. And of course, never saw the flames;

I wonder if he felt their distant warmth to chill his soul?  
What made him say this, a statement almost heroic,  
magnificent; a poet who also cared deeply for  
freedom of expression... you've skipped  
pages, chunks, of his 'Paradise Lost'...  
and now, one single remark quoted,  
and you simply want to meet him;  
drag him out of history into the present time,  
ask him about his life, try to know  
what made him - sixtyish, blind,  
having just written that sonnet on his blindness  
which once made you weep when you were young,  
say of his life, I am a part of all that I have met...

Michael Shepherd

# ! I Eager For You

today, O My Beloved,  
I eager for you...  
there was no such word  
until today; today, there is..

to say, I'm eager for you  
would be to say,  
less than, I am...  
when it's I am, and  
which you are, O My Beloved,  
that eagers...

nor do I recognise eagerness..  
how can I, if it's not me?  
no, today, it's an active word...  
what else might I say?  
to say I long, makes it sound  
that I may never find you...

to say, I languish, makes me sound  
so weak and hopeless...  
to say, I yearn, makes it sound  
as if I never knew You...

even the Hebrew word the psalmist used –  
the deer that yearns for the waterbrook,  
the hart that pants for cooling streams –  
even that word's uncertain; some say  
it's the way that a deer, feet slightly splayed  
upon the sloping bank, stretches out its graceful neck  
to the clear, pure, healing water...

some say, it's that slight sound the deer makes,  
as it gently laps that lovely water...  
the sound that quenching makes...  
today I am that deer, tasting what's just out of reach...;  
that feeling beyond all words possesses me –

the feeling that You who ever are inside me, Lord,

wish to proclaim You outside me –  
today, O My Beloved,  
I eager for to be myself; for You...

Michael Shepherd



# **! I Have A Fear - I May Be Wrong.**

I have a fear - I may be wrong:

that all too many, put off all thoughts of 'God'  
by those who claim to speak for Him,  
may cease to look for, name, all wondrous things:  
the good, and beautiful, and truthful; which give joy;  
which you and I love as the best of life...  
and name them, praise them, to our children's ears  
as all the wonder that they are...

I have a fear - I may be wrong:  
that even seeing this world as sweetshop of delights  
we never look to see  
some unity.

I have a fear - I may be wrong:  
that we may miss the mind's pure joy  
of stepping back to see  
beyond what shows itself,  
a greater and more glorious view...

I have a fear - I may be wrong:  
that though we have a hazy view  
of 'Creation' and 'Creator',  
we do not seek to play Creation's part -  
as species disappear; as world pollutes...

I have a fear -I may be wrong:  
we know the words; but miss the song.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Ika

Ika,  
I'd love to write a poem  
I'd be proud to write a poem  
for you which would be  
about you because  
you deserve a poem

which would be about  
you of course but also deeply, deeply,  
about the tragic, comic, farcical  
ironies of skin colour, history, earnings,  
empire, class, prejudice, sheer  
human thoughtlessness and cruelty; and yet  
the essential goodness  
of mankind

and it would somehow  
have to cover  
your proud Jamaican family,  
stalwart, respected  
in the community and then

the way that Britain invited  
its fine colonial soldiers,  
airman, sailors, who had  
fought and lived and died  
for a land they had never known,  
for an Empire shortly to break up,  
to come to Britain and  
continue the proud record  
of colonial servicemen

supported by our web of aristocracy  
which knew and served and loved its Empire  
full of human beings, humanity -  
so that you, now retired  
from the services, are  
a hospital orderly who is  
on nodding terms with lords and ladies,

millionaires and nobodies  
and friend to everybody, who has

suffered the irony of being  
mugged by white guys  
disguised as joggers  
because you dress so smart...  
I think you've never quite  
recovered from this  
wound they'd never guess at...

and all this human thoughtlessness  
and more, you turn upside down  
by shopping at Harrods food store  
on a hospital orderly's pay;  
while your nephews and nieces  
educated in Jamaica and the States  
are so magnificent, and well-off too...

there's so much I'd like to put down  
on paper, because I'm so proud  
to have you as a friend, who  
also represents  
more recent human history  
than a book of history  
could contain; and yet  
you've never lost your dignity  
thank God

so

this is just to say,  
you deserve a poem,  
Ika,  
and I'd be honoured  
to write it but  
I can't even begin  
you know how it is

yes indeed you do



# ! Imagine Angels

imagine angels.

imagine a bolt of lightning  
out of the blue so blue  
striking a tree  
a few feet away

imagine a thunderstorm  
remaining overhead all night

imagine a summer dawn arising  
as if for the first time on the earth

imagine cats and dogs whimpering  
as the ground trembles  
with the approaching earthquake

imagine the equation for space-time  
there in the mind as you wake

imagine the death of children  
imagine the birth of children

imagine the first love  
of your lover

imagine a joy beyond detachment  
imagine a detachment beyond joy

imagine angels

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 10

I said to My Beloved

You have given me all Your love;  
I have given You all my love;  
what more can I give to You?

My Beloved said

If you love Me, then show your love  
by seeing, knowing, all  
that happens to you in your short life  
as gifts from Me..

all events, all acts, all thoughts,  
all seeming accidents, all illnesses,  
all that arises from your meetings with others,  
all their words to you –  
see them all as Me

I said to My Beloved,

O My Beloved, my love is great  
yet my will is weak;  
I love You as I love life itself -  
help me in this!

My Beloved said

It will not be easy; for  
this will be the measure of your love for Me...

My help is this:  
every time you see Me in some passing moment,  
in some passing event in your life  
be it harsh, or seem unfair— yes,  
especially in this, my fiercely loving love -  
you will know My love for you  
as you have never known My love  
for you so great, so pure

I said to My Beloved

This hard and lovely thing, O My Beloved,  
will be the measure of my love for You.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 12

I said to My Beloved

Tell me of Your nature

My Beloved said

I am like water

the spirit of water

the cause of water

the holiness of water

I flow

I bond

this is My nature

the nature of love

Michael Shepherd



# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 14

I will create you,  
I shall name you;

I will show you happiness; then  
I shall show you sorrow;

I will show you sorrow; then  
I shall show you happiness;

and in the one, you shall know  
the more about the other;

I will show you rest; and  
I shall show you restlessness;

and in experiencing one,  
you shall know more of the other;

I will show you all that is old; and  
I shall surprise you with all that seems new;

I will show you the Unchanging and Eternal, and  
I shall show you the changing and the impermanent;

and when you have tasted both of these  
you will know more of Me;

I will have you taste the One;  
I shall have you taste the many;

and when you have tasted both of these  
you shall know more of Me;

I shall show you every opposite that you or I can name,  
for I am, all opposites;

and when you have known all opposites  
you will know Me beyond all opposites;

I will show you love, and  
I shall show you lack of love;

and knowing these, you will become  
all the more the loving; and

although you will forget my love for you,  
I shall never cease to love myself in you; and

although you will deny your love for Me, or that I exist,  
I shall never cease to love myself in you;

but as lovers do, I shall tease you; for  
so lovers show each other their true heart;

and so, you will know, as lovers do,  
that you are Me and I am you;

I will show to you My smile of love;  
I shall speak to you My love's message.

And if you ask more of Me than all these,  
I will show you glory upon glory;

and if you ask yet more of Me than this,  
I shall brush you with an angel's wing

and pour out the honey of my love for you  
and show you, dazzled by the world, how you are yet Myself.

Michael Shepherd

## ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 2

Still, silent, radiant in myself I sat,  
all, in my knowledge; in my love, all things;

and yet I loved to play at love;  
so made my worshipper, my lover.

Now my worshipper, my dearest one,  
is become the mirror which we share

glancing, laughing with ourselves,  
laughing with each other's self

in the mirror of the memory  
which is the loving heart.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 20

I sang to My Beloved

O My Beloved –  
how could I sing of the joy  
of being closer to You  
than Your breath...  
than Your eyes...  
than Your lips...

if Sorrow had not visited me? ...

In the middle of the darkest night  
in the cold midwinter of the heart,  
a stranger knocked upon my door:  
it was Sorrow, wrapped in blackest cloak.

I greeted Sorrow; bade come in;  
ate bread with Sorrow and drank wine with it;  
then with a smile, sent Sorrow on its way.

Now the sun has risen,  
the dawn is like a world made new  
and I have woken fresh  
as if I had already washed.

[this one comes with a smile for Allie, who occasioned it...]

Michael Shepherd

## ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 21

Yesterday

I cried out in my anger

'Who are You, Lord? ...'

and the echo came back

like a winter shout against a cliff of stone..

'.....Lord.....'

Today

I whispered in my despair

'Lord, who are You? ...'

and the echo came back

like summer water over a pebble...

'.....You.....'

Michael Shepherd

## ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 22

My dearest one: tell me,  
why you always return to Me?

I said to My Beloved

In everything I do, I fail, fall short  
of what I would offer from my heart to You;

You see this; and say nothing.

But then you hide behind my eyes;  
and so I see with Your eyes,  
where I have failed;

Seeing all this with Your eyes,  
how can I not return to You,

O My Beloved?

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 23

I asked My Beloved

How may I know the secret  
of being a perfect Sufi,  
insan al-kamil,  
a perfect Friend of God?

My Beloved said

You will never in your life be sure;  
and that is just how it should be;  
that way, you will be safe in Me;

instead, seek always where My secret might be found:  
as you walk, look closely at all of nature;  
every flower, every tree, every lake, every cloud,  
every bird, every animal;  
look closely at them, to see  
if they hold My secret;

as you walk down the street,  
look into the eyes of each human being  
to see if they know My secret in their heart;

listen to every sound and every word  
in case My secret hides within them;

or in the scent of roses, or in the taste of food;

go to sleep with this question on your lips,  
wake with this question in your mind;

and though you will never find the answer,  
one day the question shall cease to be a question  
and become the song which you have always known.

Michael Shepherd

## ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 24

'O My Beloved,

Only when I am close to You  
is the world in perfect order, and  
contentment enfolds me in warm arms;  
only then am I at peace;  
only then is my heart at rest  
and I am still within myself  
and know that heart to be true constancy...'

O My Beloved,

You heard me speak this  
from my heart, to You; and then  
You smiled.

And in that smile I knew  
all that I had written, to be but  
the faintest, pale reflection  
of Your love for me;  
for me whose heart You made,  
to be there as a mirror of Your love.

Michael Shepherd



## ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 25

I said to My Beloved  
Tell me the measure of truth  
My Beloved said  
Tell me first what you know of truth

'One and one make two,  
- as You and I'  
My Beloved said  
Tell me more of truth

'Love draws me to You  
as the white moth to the candle's flame'  
My Beloved said  
Tell me more of truth

'Love makes You and me  
into one single perfect love'  
My Beloved said  
This is the measure of truth  
which is immeasurable:

the greater the truth  
the less it can be measured;  
the greater the truth  
the deeper it may be experienced;

this is its measure: its experience.  
Truth has no other measure,  
for only love can measure truth.

Michael Shepherd

## ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 26

To My Beloved I said  
'When I am away from you, O Beloved,  
out in the market place of this world,  
I remember that I have forgotten  
one thing – but cannot remember  
what it can be...'

My Beloved said  
Is it yourself?  
'It is of myself, yet  
it is not myself..'  
'Is it Myself? '  
'It is of Yourself, yet  
it is not Yourself..'

'Then it must be that one thing  
which is most precious to you:  
that for which your life was bought in the market place  
at the price of a great jewel,  
which is your paradise;  
that which you love beyond all else,  
but have not yet found;  
that for which your whole life  
should be exchanged;  
find that one thing without delay,  
and you will have no more questions,  
only the joy of working at the work  
for which you were born..'

Michael Shepherd

## ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 27

'O My Beloved –

I lose myself in the world's distracting multiplicity,  
yet cannot find the One in my restless mind –  
I am in a desert place, a place of desolation... '

My Beloved said

see the reeds, gently swaying like swooning dervishes  
on the river bank, their feet in the water –  
a man could sit for hours and watch them –  
are they not beautiful?

See now the reed-flute, so carefully crafted,  
waiting there to sound out sadness, love and joy –  
is it not beautiful?

See the musician – how his eyes shine  
with the music in his soul!  
Is he not beautiful?

Hear the music that he plays –  
telling its stories of life and death, of heaven and earth –  
is it not beautiful?

Now watch him as he plays  
the music which is himself  
on the flute made from the willing reed –  
am I not the One you hear in this?

I am beautiful in My Oneness;  
I am beautiful in My multiplicity;  
Is there a greater miracle than this?

And you, the witness of all this in Me –  
is there a greater miracle than yourself?

Michael Shepherd

## ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 29

O Caliphs of the world  
who have executed so many saints  
for daring to say that 'I am God within myself' –

If you yourselves are not God within yourselves,  
then who are you to pronounce punishment  
upon any other man?

And now, every man who carries  
a sword, a dagger, bomb or gun  
would think himself a Caliph,  
messenger of the Lord...

how wrong they are.

Yet Allah, the great, the merciful beyond our understanding,  
allows them to live on after their victims' death - gives  
a little time to know themselves  
as the wheel of the potter, Destiny, turns for them,  
before they return to Him  
as clay to be reshaped in the Potter's hands  
or dry and crumble into dust.

Michael Shepherd

## ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 3

My Beloved said

When, my dearest one, you were asleep,  
sleeping in Myself, I came to you

and looked into your mirror  
to see whom I might see

and when you wake,  
then you will see My breath

still moist upon  
that mirror.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 35 - Three Answers

I asked the passing strangers  
in the fine street of the wise,  
'Tell me about your Self itself'

The first man said to me  
'It is like a rose garden  
planted around a fountain –  
it is always beautiful,  
changing, yet unchanging;  
it is the very centre  
of my peace and rest...'

The second man said to me  
'It is like a treasure house of riches –  
full of more sparkling, deep-coloured jewels  
than anyone's imagination  
could ever begin to describe;  
as beautiful as anything  
in heaven or on earth...'

The third man said to me  
'It is like a mine of gold and silver  
where you only have to dig  
and there is always more to find...'

To the first man I said  
'You are indeed blest,  
O noble sir... and must have earned yourself  
this great honour...tell me,  
do you invite every passing stranger  
to walk and sit in that garden with you? '

He said  
'Yes; I am a poet.'

To the second man I said  
'You are indeed blest,  
O noble sir... and must have earned yourself  
this great honour... tell me,

do you invite every passing stranger  
into your treasure house, saying,  
take all you need -  
to make rich their life, too? '

He said

'Yes; I am a poet.'

To the third man I said

'You are indeed blest,  
O noble sir... and must have earned yourself  
this great honour... tell me,  
do you invite every passing stranger  
to come and dig whenever he so needs? '

He said

'Yes; I am a poet.'

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 36 - The Rose Told Me

In the garden,  
I look at a rose and wonder

Is this rose  
laughing with God?  
Is it God's smile, and message, to the earth?  
Does it tell  
Of God's goodness, truth, and beauty?  
Of God's stillness? Peace? and silence?

Or if you gazed at it long enough  
and carefully enough,  
perhaps with a laugh or smile,  
in stillness, peace, and silence,  
would it tell you everything  
that God would have you know?

\* \* \*

For even if you are  
a cynic, locked into your own mind  
by your own key  
and say, oh, it's just  
savage, ruthless nature, competing  
with all the other flowers, for the bees –  
for nothing but its own selfish ends -  
you must admit  
that Whoever allowed, invented, made, decreed  
the laws for the construction of  
such complex, simple beauty (which a bee may never know?)  
is pretty cool.

Michael Shepherd



# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi 36 - The Rose Told Me

'If all men already knew my message, saw my smile  
then there would be no need for me to speak; or to exist.

If all men already knew my message, saw my smile  
then they would treat me like the grass; like the sand.

If all men already knew my message, saw my smile  
I would be a noun bereft of any adjective  
like grass; like sand.

If all men already knew My message, saw My smile  
they would already be God.

If all men already knew My message, saw My smile  
none of them, or all of them, would be poets.'

I Am glorious unity;  
I Am glorious multiplicity;  
Enjoy Me.

[for Ghada, with thanks..]

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 41 - Prayer

In the street outside the window  
a beautiful young maiden passes;  
only her eyes, looking straight ahead, demurely down,  
are to be seen of her, above her veil, below her headscarf; and yet –  
around her, as we draw our breath, transfixed –  
around her, all the air is radiant with the light of love...

and in the following days, for hours each day,  
we, love-smitten, wait in hope to catch her  
as she passes; and the more we see her passing,  
the more we seek to snare her attention;  
hoping for the day when, as she passes,  
her lovely eyes may glance so briefly, glance this way...

and on that day, the day of days  
which we have waited for, for weeks and months -  
then, it is no longer all we want:  
how to ensnare her gaze? so that, one day,  
our burning ears and lips may draw one single word from her...

\*

Wise men say in the ancient tongue, the word,  
to pray, meant, to incline, to listen – and, to snare...

and so for every one of us, our whole life is prayer:  
from the first moment to the last,  
from the first time when the baby's eyes  
meet those of loving parents, until  
the last moment when our eyes turn upward...

we bow in adoration of the Beloved,  
of whom we are not worthy; yet...  
then listen for the first word breathed  
by child; by parent; lover; ruler; God...

And, lover and beloved both alike,  
set snares to catch our Beloved to ourselves...  
that Beloved who is outside us, yet within...

that sleeping beauty who is our very self.

and, since prayer is love, our Beloved  
sets snares for us also, to test our love;  
this is the lovely game of love...  
God plays it too with us:  
to test our faith, to test our trust, to test our love...

Prayer, O Beloved, is pure love.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 42 - How Far Is Far From God?

Why, O dearest to Myself,  
do you try to hard to run away from God?

Your body cannot run away from Him,  
for He who made your body, runs with you..

Your spirit, your soul, cannot run away from Him,  
for He is your very spirit, your very soul..

Only your mind can run away from Him;

and then his brothers, soul and body,  
weep for him, wait for his return,  
in stillness and in silence - which they know  
by nightfall, he will be unable to resist..

Why do you try so hard to run away from God?  
When did He ever run away from you?

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 43 - The Poet

And they often said,  
'O poet, as you call yourself –  
why are all your verses  
to your divine Beloved, full  
of 'as' and 'like'? ' –

'Her lips are like red rubies, or as strawberries'...  
'Her neck, as slender as that of a running young gazelle'...  
'Her smile is like sun after rain'...

'Why do you tempt us with these earthly things? '

The poet said

'Like' and 'as' are the keys to heaven, no less:  
there is no language spoken yet by men  
equal to the language of Her presence –

my truest poetry is spoken in the moment when  
I look upon her beauty, but stunned to silence –  
but how then to praise her, tell of her  
to those who never saw her beauty yet? ...

and so, I take those things most familiar,  
most dear to the senses of all mortal men,  
saying, is this not beautiful? And yet, beyond all this  
her beauty, which yet comprehends all sense,  
all mind, all spirit, all love, all lovers, is her love...

and even when I do not say those words,  
but, silent, let an image come of her:  
'A gazelle ran wide-eyed through my dream; and I awoke  
with the taste of strawberries on my lips...'

then, I know myself to be blest by her,  
and yet, the image but a teasing veil;

this is her immortal gift to poets –  
to know their mortal failure, yet

to sing to men: I saw her but in passing...yet...  
now, I am possessed of her, and sworn  
the Beloved's servant all my loving life...

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 45 - The Lily

In the gardens of the world  
as the world and seasons turn,  
in a thousand thousand gardens,  
in a million fields and valleys,  
the lilies grow.

the lilies of the field – proud  
yet modest in the grass, proud  
that Jesus spoke of them;

lilies of the valley – proud  
yet modest as their scent  
sings and calls, amongst all  
the heady scents of nature,  
the scent so close  
to the wild cyclamen  
in the hillside grass;

the regal lily, sharing with the rose  
the Caliph's and the Sultan's gardens,  
listening all their lives as lilies do  
to the plashing fountain in the fragrant courtyard;  
laughing quietly as the kohl-eyed beauties  
round the Caliph in the evening garden  
vie behind their silken veils  
with perfumes mixed and strange..

each day, one lily in the bed  
reaches its perfection, glows,  
exults in its day of unique status,  
as every lily has its day..

What honour then, can God bestow  
upon his creatures, so magnificent,  
so thunderous in their praise of Him  
for those with ears to hear?

His most precious gift, which even men  
rarely earn with all a lifetime serving Him –

a glimpse of His perfection..

And the regal lily, full of the humility  
of the lily, Mary's flower,  
bows its slender neck  
yields all its beauty, bowing low,  
folds its curled petals, as Mary  
submitting to the will of God;

and we, walking in the garden,  
glance and say 'Behold,  
that lily which, but yesterday, was perfect,  
is fading now already...' and in our heart  
passes, is discarded, the evening chill  
of knowing ourselves to be that lily..  
pride, humility, the gifted glimpse of God's perfection,  
barely acknowledged as they pass..

Michael Shepherd



# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 47 - A Confession Of Love Withheld

Now with surprise and sadness, I have realised-  
I do not love you as much as I thought...

When you are beside me  
in the bed when I awake  
I whisper with my waking breath  
to your open or your sleeping eyes,  
'I love you'...and in that,  
I find myself...

But when you are far away  
my first involuntary waking thought  
is not of you, or love, or God  
Who guided me through the night,  
Who taught me to enjoy  
His great invention, sleep...  
but of myself...  
myself and world as two  
and I am lost to myself...

and know, I have not yet  
surrendered all my mind and will  
to God...

O My Beloved  
how can I love you fully, as God loves, when  
I do not yet see God  
in every waking moment  
in myself?

Michael Shepherd

## ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 5

Yesterday, my dearest one,  
you who are so dear to Me,  
you walked so slowly through the public park  
carrying your sorrow with you

and as you walked, you cast a glance  
at that red rose whose scent waylaid you on your path,  
wondering if its beauty  
might somehow lift your sorrow from you.

Walk in the park again today,  
you who are so dear to Me,  
I shall be waiting in the rose,  
waiting in the rose's beauty

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 50 - One Thing

Oh the pleasure, the happiness,  
the delight, the joy, the bliss,  
of doing just one thing above all!

When I was a child, I did many things;  
that's right for children – there's the world,  
go play in it; ask, what's a horizon? but what  
lies beyond? and why can't I see angels  
if angels can see me? ...

When I was a young man, I did many things;  
that's right for young men – which one will I love?  
which one will love me? And when we've together found our love,  
oh what then? and oh what then?

But now I'm older, there seems less time  
for many things; they will look after themselves  
without my help... so, what delight  
to give oneself to just one thing...  
one thing at a time; and then  
one thing...

and it seems, it doesn't matter what;  
roses need an expert to collaborate  
in dreaming up new beauty from an older stock;  
dogs need exercise, and a two-legs to look up to;  
grandchildren are born to love grandparents  
in a special way..

and, duties done, and hearts served well,  
one thing...it might be poetry,  
in which to say, look, all this  
I've received: here's recognition,  
acknowledgement, and gratitude...

and the other things, like sleeping, eating,  
become day by day like living in someone else's poem;  
someone else committed to one thing...

and then one day, perhaps,  
life's curtain twitches; and some great being  
looks in the window, the very moment you look out;  
and 'one thing', in the most natural way,  
becomes...

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 51: Beyond Artifice

Because I am a poet  
and you are a poet

I would like to talk to you today  
of how when My Beloved  
smiles at me with that open smile  
that asks nothing but the freedom  
to express itself

then I can only think of  
that white rose which this morning  
took my breath away with its  
innocent whiteness, its pure whiteness  
with just a hint of a blush as if  
it astonishes even itself

or I could speak of the white rose  
which reminds me of  
the smile of My Beloved

but in truth, the likeness  
of these two becomes one  
not in my poem but  
in myself as I gaze with wonder  
at white rose; receive  
the smile of My Beloved which asks nothing;

and God, looking at me looking,  
God who is all three of us

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 6

My Beloved said

O my dearest one  
what may I give to you,  
ask of me what you may

I said to My Beloved,

O my dearest one,  
give me whatever  
may bring You closer to me  
bring me closer to You

My Beloved said

Tell me O my dearest one  
that I may give you that  
which brings Me closer to you

I said to My Beloved

Send me pain and suffering  
for when I cry out to You  
then I am closest to you  
O my dearest one

My Beloved said

I shall send you what you ask,  
O my dearest one

It is called the world

and we two shall be one in it  
and know it as our dream of love

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 62 - Religion

The witness said  
this is what I saw

no other witnesses were present at the time,  
none of the jury were there of course,  
the judge was not there

some of the jury said  
if he says so I believe him,  
some of the jury said  
how do I know that's the truth

they listened,  
his eyes shone;  
their hearts listened,  
their eyes shone;

yes they said,  
that's true

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 63 - One

bee,  
said the flower

flower,  
said the bee

rain,  
said the seed

seed,  
said the rain

earth,  
said the sky

sky,  
said the earth

man,  
said the creator

creator,  
said the man

do they know  
they all speak the same language?

Michael Shepherd



## ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 64 - Language

It's a misty morning,  
clings gently to the skin,  
it's pleasant like this,  
let's walk

oh here's an apple tree,  
you can touch the mist on the apple's skin

ah, it must be a whole orchard,  
how the mist makes it such an adventure

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 64 - One

bee,  
said the flower

flower,  
said the bee

rain,  
said the seed

seed,  
said the rain

earth,  
said the sky

sky,  
said the earth

man,  
said the creator

creator,  
said the man

do they know  
they all speak the same language?

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 65 - The Housefly

So small,  
such a tiny eye,  
yet sees, has seen, so much

to be a housefly  
in the house of the Lord,  
a house without walls, without ceiling,  
without floor?

I wonder.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 66 - The Dervish As A Doorway Turning

When the music calls to the soul's hunger  
the matzub begins to turn like a shy maiden;  
then faster, faster; centrifugal force  
will throw him out of kilter, off the dance floor,  
if a single thought  
takes the balance of his mind..

then, faster – faster – the centre grows stiller, stronger;  
while the mind strengthens its own emptiness,  
the emptiness that is so full of surrender;

into that great space enters  
what the one at the centre of all things  
wills;

the blessing,  
not to know that, until one knows..

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 67 - To Rumi

I'm not too proud to say  
please write a new poem through me  
and I promise not to claim that  
I wrote it myself...

or if that's too much to ask,  
just a line somewhere, that I'll watch  
as it writes itself and know  
that you, not I, write it

or if that's too much to ask,  
open an old book at  
a page that smells just faintly  
of attar of roses, and know that  
Rumi read this page too

or sitting quietly waiting for a poem,  
or after a poem, and there'll be  
a slight breeze for a moment  
carrying the memory of a rose  
from an old Persian species  
mixed with the faintest scent of wild herbs  
after desert rain

or if that's too much to ask,  
just the occasional memory  
that you lived, and wrote,  
and a poem comes to mind  
as if you're reading it first to a friend

and I'll smile and look at  
the rose in the blue and white vase over there,  
neither of us caring about time  
while your book lies open by the window,  
the breeze turning the pages gently  
as if it knew which poem to choose

Michael Shepherd

## ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 7

'My Beloved,  
what can I give you of myself,  
that I have not given? '

My Beloved said

'O my dearest one,  
in all places, at all times,  
remember Me.'

'O My Beloved,  
how can I not do that? '

\* \* \*

In tears, I returned to My Beloved  
and said

'O my dearest one,  
a week has passed, and the world  
pressed hard upon me...

'The next day, I remembered You  
three times each hour;  
the second day, I remembered You  
but once an hour;  
on the third day, I remembered You  
in some hours, once; some twice;  
some not at all... and so it went...

But O My Beloved,  
each morning as I woke  
I remembered through my tears  
how I had forgotten You...'

My Beloved said

'In the remembering of the forgetting  
there was a feast of sweetest honey for Me,

hiding like a new young bride  
laughing with her bridegroom,  
laughing with her eyes on Him,  
in the silken tent of love.'

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 70 - Grace

Like a fine cloth for the table:  
its strength, its appropriateness,  
the twist and spring of its fibers,  
the love and care of its making,  
(and how eagerly it launders!)  
all reveal themselves even while  
you're unfolding it, shaking it out;

while you're laying it with a graceful gesture  
like a magician whisking away the magic cloth  
to reveal a transformation... like  
a bullfighter dramatically spreading before the bull  
the blood-coloured illusion of a prey...  
like a mother quietly prepares a meal...  
like the morning or the evening mist  
rolling over the edge of a mountain plateau...  
like a gentle rain in Spring falling as mercy itself...

it gives up the air trapped under it as you laid it down,  
like the heart's lungs surrendering to peace  
with a grateful sigh;  
and as you smoothe it out on the table  
it murmurs love to your hand;  
and as you stand back,  
it shines; awaits whatever may come to it,  
waits as if it had always been  
just where it is now  
grace

Michael Shepherd



# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 71 - In Praise Of Metaphor

It's not a playground where  
you run around shouting  
without noticing whether  
there's a listener

or a playgroup where  
there's paper, paste, scissors,  
all over the place,  
thoughts pasted on thoughts,  
without noticing anyone else

no, it's some specific calling,  
saying, see that far-off other?  
we're related; see us as together,  
your surprise may tell you  
about that vastness –

maybe, awe, wonder, beauty,  
wisdom, truth...goodness...

so treat me, metaphor,  
as if god's priest:  
respectfully, sparingly, carefully;  
as you would look at twins,  
each sleeping, but holding hands;

love requires that

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 73 - Whose Duality?

I saw you, and became empty;

then I saw you, and became full;

then I saw you...

why should I choose  
when you made both?

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 76 - Poetry

But is it an activity for  
grown men and women?

A kind of stocktaking:  
sit quietly, begin to feel grateful  
for something, maybe your family,  
your life even;

remember how your grandmother  
said, count your blessings  
and you at the age when  
you couldn't wait to find them first  
and then maybe remember them, maybe not.

The list grows; a feeling that  
you should give something back.

It seems a small gift; just words  
on paper. So you wrap it  
more carefully than other gifts,  
write the name of the recipient  
carefully, watching the ink  
make a thin river like a vein  
along the paper.

Can you still remember  
how to spell the name?

The address seems  
sometimes very far away; sometimes  
very close.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 77 - Fullness

When I arose from prayer this morning  
and the dew had made the whole world new,

I was full of fullness;

full of observation as  
an angel, as a bee; and yet  
no need to observe anything,  
save that which called to me;

full of rest, which rests behind  
all the day's activities;

full of alertness, as an eagle  
glides on the warming morning air  
and watches for what wills;

the mind as clear as morning sky  
waiting for what will pass across it;

full of a goodness which awaits  
to know what might be asked of it;

full of truth, which waits for a question  
to be asked, the heart to move,  
eager ears to listen;

full of a beauty beyond all words,  
yet to be praised in words;

full of poetry, which awaits  
to be spoken when the moment  
calls for words.

When I arose from prayer this morning  
the Lord's mercy had made the whole world new.

Michael Shepherd

## ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 8

O My Beloved

when I first cast eyes on You,

if You had looked as I expected

I would have greeted you as an old friend

whom I had waited for,

knowing I would recognise You from afar;

but instead, you appear to me

so unexpectedly, in so many new disguises -

as a baby; in the face of a passing stranger,

as a new flower; waiting in the shade of a tree -

that, taken by surprise, I see only You

before I see all else.

This is Your greatest gift to me,

beyond all old, beyond all new,

O My Beloved.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 80 - Meditation

To the Lord, my Beloved, I said,  
my Beloved: often I pray to You,  
but more often, I confess,  
it is to ask from You;  
less often, to thank You or to praise You...

teach me, then, about meditation,  
which men say to be a way  
to be near You,  
even beyond thanks or praise...

the Lord, my Beloved, said,  
O you whom I love dearly as Myself,  
whose praise and thanks are dear to Me  
in ways that only I may know...  
such is My nature, and is that of yours,  
that only meditation may teach you meditation...

but this is all I ask of you:  
that twice a day – and best,  
at dawn and dusk, which are  
the times I can be known to walk  
in My garden of the world,  
in the stillness of the morning,  
in the stillness of the evening,  
when My nature wakes or sleeps in peace...

that twice a day, you spend some time  
saying – as if it were only once, and always once –  
My name for you; your name for Me;  
this will be our time of love;  
this will be My test of your true love for Me:

and if at any time, your thoughts  
stray away from Me, wandering in  
the byways of the world –  
that will not diminish My eternal love for you;  
it will only mean, that you have forgotten  
for the time not being, My love for you –

but if you truly love Me, then you will return  
as a straying son returns,  
and if you truly love Me,  
you will then, know My love's increase..

this will be our daily time together,  
you and I; that is all I ask of you;

yet if, in all the other hours of the day,  
I seem to you to stay  
so much the nearer to you, close to you –  
then that is but the mark of My love for you,  
O you whom I love dearly as Myself;

so, together, let us speak each other's name,  
as lovers always shall.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi - 9

O My Beloved

I looked for You  
everywhere, and in all things;

I looked for You  
in all that lives, in all that moves;

I looked for You  
in bodies, minds, and hearts;

I looked for You  
in beauty, goodness, truth;

You had been in all these things  
but had moved on..

I could not find You in the seen;  
then found You in the seeing,

O My Beloved

Michael Shepherd



## ! In The Spirit Of Rumi 30 - Sufi Haiku

No then, no soon, no here, no there  
in this fountain  
merrily splashing, enjoying itself

Michael Shepherd

## ! In The Spirit Of Rumi 4

In the war-torn city, O My dearest one,  
I hear a voice,

louder than the gunfire,  
louder than the bombs

calling to Me; it is  
a man who kneels in prayer

he does not name his nationality,  
he does not name his faith,  
he does not name Me as his god

how clear his voice is  
as he calls to me

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi 49 - The Mind

O Mind, where are you this morning?  
I really need your help...

God bestowed on you His most precious gift –  
He gave you the ticket to roam  
the length and breadth and height of all His lovely Creation  
- as much as any mind can know what's there  
behind what's there –

you use this ticket all the time,  
but have you ever thanked Him?

When it's time for you to come home  
because you're needed there  
you send a message saying,  
I'm busy here – I'll be back later –

and then, what happens?  
You dream up ideas of 'me' and 'mine',  
and then like a dog, bury a juicy bone  
because you don't trust your Master  
to feed you every day...

My body was made by God, and  
fed by Him every day, but  
it's always here at home; and  
it would love you to be home...

My soul was made by God, and  
fed by Him every day, but  
it's always here at home; and  
it would love you to be home...

O Mind, you were made by God and  
fed by Him every day, and  
given this freedom pass by Him;  
why can't you be here at home when you're needed?

You're supposed to be my servant;

Did I not train you properly?  
loved you perhaps too much?

I have urgent errands every day for you;  
when you've done them, I'm happy  
to let you off the leash, laughing, barking,  
leaping, panting, your tail wagging like mad  
at the fun of being you...

Please, Mind, be a good dog..  
we'll love each other all the more..  
I promise...

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi 53: Immersed In Poetry

Weary with the day,  
it called to me

as if someone said, here...  
I've run you a hot bath –  
jump in!

I jumped in;  
the waters settled round.

This is exactly what I need..  
there must be truth here.

No need to read a book  
and seek for truth..

This is so good, that  
I do not need to ask, what is goodness..

Now I know what beauty is  
without looking for it.

I felt cleansed of all  
that was not myself; stepped out the bath.

As I dried myself, I knew that  
I had found myself again;

sighed with pure contentment; and  
laid the poem gently down.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi 57: Grace

But what is grace?

By grace we were as we were.  
By grace we are as we are.  
By grace we shall be as we will be.

That's grace.

But what is grace?

Grace is what it does.  
Catch it as it acts; smiles; passes.  
That too is grace.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi,52: Where?

I looked deep into my past, but  
could see nothing that told me  
more about God.

Only a name. Only a word.

I looked deep into my future, but  
could see nothing that held out  
hope of knowing God.

Only a name. Only a word.

I stayed in the present moment  
and there was nowhere and nothing  
that God was not.

In every name. In every word.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi: 55: Patience

Patience

turns mulberry leaves into silk  
through the silkworm

Patience

turns water into wine  
through the grape vine

Patience

turns a man into a beloved teacher  
through stillness

Michael Shepherd



# **! In The Spirit Of Rumi: 56: The Possibility Of Happiness**

If a wise man can be happy,  
then happiness must be possible.

If a simple man can be happy,  
then happiness is possible.

If a happy man can be wise,  
then wisdom is possible.

If a wise man can be simple,  
then happiness is possible.

How light the clouds,  
how blue the sky, today!

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi: 60: Eachness

allness smiles  
on eachness

you're not surprised?

if I were allness  
I might want to keep it to myself

but this allness is smiling

it must see itself in eachness

now that's really something

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi: 61: P R A I S E

Observation, acknowledgement,  
gratitude, praise, a friendship –  
call it what you will -  
language is generous;

maybe it starts with, every birthday,  
a fleeting touch of all this;

it could spread, every morning  
an acknowledgement that love  
wakes each morning with you  
in the bed, in the air,  
in the sunlight;

you could become as a Buddhist  
and each breath would be  
like that; the Compassionate One  
saying, yes, that's how it is, this moment;

then there's the heartbeat –  
each time the heart pumps again,  
the Lord renews His faith in you,  
says yes, I can still see Myself  
there, just keep going...

the Lord smiles at you; and  
maybe you smile back;

that's friendship.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Rumi: 74: Bliss

and they asked him, master,  
tell us about bliss...

and he smiled as if  
within himself, he heard the  
angels laughing at the blameless  
comedy of human life

bliss, he said, is where you find it...

as, when one day, you're so hungry  
that a meal fit for gods and kings  
is a loaf of warm, fresh-baked bread;  
a jug of wine that doesn't ask a label;  
maybe a piece of local cheese, why not,

the meal which in olden times,  
was called 'short commons' in some tongues,  
that every innkeeper would offer free  
to the weary, dust-stained traveller  
as one would offer to one's god  
in thanks for life and sustenance...  
saying, there's a shady tree out there,  
go and sit beneath it in the cool...

A loaf of bread, a jug of wine... and Thou..

Thou who appearest in so many forms  
always beside me;

Thou who made the bread, its daily freshness  
as if the morning made it from the desert dew;

who made the wine's slow miracle;  
who made the jug – the metaphoric clay of life  
made moist with love, fired hard by love...

who made the tree which shades you as you eat;  
who, the meal finished, waits for your gratitude

so as to know that all He made, is good...

and who then offers - as silently as sand beneath your feet,  
as silently as cool air moves around the tree's light shade,  
as silently as ripening figs blush on the branch above you,  
as silently as roses live their scented life,

as still as morning dawns, or evening shades -  
Himself, as bliss; where for a moment as you sit,  
there is no thing in all His world  
to be desired; for All is here..

there in the heart, the sweetest taste of His  
so intricate and jewelled simplicity.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Spirit Of Shabistari - 1

When I was young, I dreamed all day of travel

When I was old enough, I spent all day travelling

When I had travelled much, I called myself a traveller

Now I sit here, still and silent on the cushions  
while the roses release their perfume,  
the peacock cries upon the wall,  
and in the courtyard, the fountain plays;

and all my travel has returned to me,  
all my travelling is within me,  
travel, travelling and traveller are one;  
and my mind travels to places I had never imagined  
and I sense the world turning on its axis,  
travelling around my self.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Steps Of Rumi 81: Grace

You see the word 'grace'.  
It's just a word. You don't use it,  
don't really know how to  
think of it; whether it's real,  
what it does, whether you'd notice it  
somewhere.

That's OK. So,  
are you missing anything?  
Make it quick, I'm busy...

Right. Think of appetite.  
That feeling in the stomach  
that it's high time. Mm, maybe  
something's going on in the kitchen;  
smells good.

Everything on the table looks  
good enough to eat...  
this pear: so perfectly ripe, the juice  
running down your wrist yet  
even more of it contained.  
It's almost too good to eat..

quick, stop the camera right there:  
subliminally, one single frame: grace.

Animal appetite,  
observed by human,  
divinely created.

Remember it. Grace.  
In some languages, the same  
word for the gift of it, and  
for thanks. Gracias, amigo..  
Deo gratia.. that's gifts  
from God, not of God.  
Or, thanks to God.  
Does that matter, when it's matter?

Possibly.

Beautiful, isn't it?

Graceful.

Michael Shepherd



# ! In The Steps Of Rumi 82: Ignorance, Obstructions, Devils

Ignorance? Don't worry. It's light..

Divine light. Frozen. Waiting for the day when -  
isn't that a little lightening on the eastern horizon?  
Do you see it? Now I look, it's definitely there..  
it's growing as I look...  
this could be the beginning...

Obstructions? Don't worry. They're light...

Divine light. Hidden. You see them, and -  
now you see them, now you take a good look at them,  
suddenly you can see round them, over them, above them...  
oh, they weren't obstructions... they were  
signposts, here's a big black nothing  
standing as a sentinel across the path...

Devils? Don't worry. They're God...

It's God saying, how strong are you,  
are you ready to see me yet, or  
will the brightness be too much for you?  
No problem - take your time...  
invent something - ignorance, obstructions, devils -  
... feel a hero to overcome it all...  
I'll wait... I've all the time in the world...

They, those devils, don't like you to know, of course -  
it's fun playing with people; but  
it's no fun knowing you are bound  
finally to lose... God has to give them  
a reason to work hard, to enjoy themselves... like you?

Don't worry. It's all light..  
have a bright day...



## ! In The Steps Of Rumi 83: Watch And Pray..

Sages of the east say,  
the first cry of the new-born baby  
and the last breath of the dying  
together make up the divine Name..

in the meantime...  
remember, and listen..

sages of the west say,  
birds fly, fishes swim, and man prays..

remember what it was  
you should be praying for;  
listen for the answer...

maybe a sage will pass tomorrow;  
maybe you'll be at the window.

Sages like questions;  
never enough.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Steps Of Rumi 84: Crucifixion

When love is crucified every day,  
why waste time  
arguing about religion?

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Steps Of Rumi 85: War

War?

Far harder than the battles of men  
is the battle to surrender  
to that which was there  
before all battles.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Steps Of Rumi 86: The Mirror

This mirror.  
She has stood in front of it for many minutes;  
this; that;  
finally asked the mirror silently  
its opinion.  
The mirror agreed with the perfection  
that she saw in herself now, in front of it..

Now she leaves the room.  
The mirror has nothing to reflect.  
While it's reflecting nothing,  
steal up to it from the side,  
admire it. Maybe praise it  
by polishing it. Wonder, how it is  
that it has an in front of it,  
yet no behind it.

Wonder how it is  
that it never lies,  
always tells the truth,  
yet agrees with all we see in it..

Wonder too, how it brings  
all who stand in front of it, to silence..  
bestows this rare blessing upon all,  
which is beyond the ability of men,  
of books..

Somewhere where ideas emerge  
from nowhere into somewhere,  
then roam anywhere and everywhere,  
mind and mirror were given a secret which they share.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Steps Of Rumi 87: A Windy Day

Isn't it a windy day?  
The wind gets everywhere,  
loves especially to have fun,  
enjoys rattling loose doors as if it would come in,  
to become a quiet household pet,  
or just disappear up the chimney  
to meet itself again...

loves corners especially,  
piles its toys up in them;  
loves robes, veils, laughs, exposing  
forbidden body parts;  
sweeps the streets clean of plastic bags  
then just for fun, blows them around again;

loves especially, laundry on the line –  
fills out men's shirts into dancing fat men;  
would wind like to laugh at man?

then from fun play, can get serious –  
tests whether that corrugated iron roof  
to your makeshift shed is really secure..  
later, you may be glad it did...

then from serious to boisterous:  
takes on the sea itself, which  
likes a bit of fun, but then  
gets angry when provoked too much...

then when it's gone, it's gone  
back to wherever wind comes from...

before it goes, let's wrap up, take  
a laughing walk and tussle with it;  
come back, cheeks glowing,  
eyes sparkling, laughing,  
light-hearted... what did we meet out there?

some say, that wind is really fire,

which stirs our blood like that;  
that fire brings life; that life brings spirit;  
that spirit is but love; and love,  
the breath of gods, of God;  
the wind blows where it will.

Michael Shepherd



# ! In The Steps Of Rumi 88: Metaphor

Simile – what looks like something else –  
that’s a fun game for the senses,  
for the mind: oh look Dad,  
there’s a scarecrow in that field  
that looks just like a man, does it  
really scare crows?

Oh look Dad, there’s a beggar in the street  
who looks just like a scarecrow,  
I wonder if the same crows  
see him too?

But metaphor – ah, that’s something else:  
explanations don’t quite explain it:  
you see something; it brings to mind  
something very different; maybe  
you just forget it, pass on; maybe  
you’re a poet, and you think,  
that other thing casts a subtle light  
on this first thing, I’ll see if others  
find the same.. and, sometimes they do,  
sometimes they don’t...

Metaphor brings the whole universe,  
world upon world, to the mind:  
you could write a poem full of metaphor  
as long as the circumference of the world,  
and when you’d written it out, you’d find yourself  
right here again just where you were.. but  
what a lot you’d seen on the way...

We’re so used to some metaphors  
because by now, they’re shared,  
written into language (lucky the people  
who inherit languages such as these,  
they’re born into poetry...) :

take ‘bread’: you walk past the baker’s shop  
in the early morning when the air is clear –

or better, go in to buy your breakfast rolls:  
the smell couldn't be more wonderful,  
more promising.. the bread's so delicious,  
and best eaten today..

ah yes, 'daily bread' – that becomes a metaphor  
for all that each and every day brings –  
waking up, new thoughts, new experiences,  
all that brings life to life..  
that covers so many subtle things...  
where does it all come from?  
that's for you to say...

Sometimes it seems that the whole world  
is a metaphor for something...  
for what? For its own unity,  
for its very creation,  
for that which we call God,  
for our very self?  
that's for you to say...

Metaphor. When you meet it,  
does it make you think of  
English class, another boring  
poem, another boring question  
to answer as you chew your pen –  
'What does the poet mean when  
he speaks of, lies like oyster shells  
to be penknifed for their pearls? '...

or - does it fill your heart with joy  
as if someone had given you  
a golden key to a secret garden  
which is all you ever hoped for;  
more than you could ever imagine...  
and yet you recognise  
it's all really just yourself? ...

In the corner of your room  
there's a little girl curled up  
in a large armchair, reading a book.  
Don't disturb her.

The book she reads with all her self today,  
may never read again, doesn't need to -  
is a metaphor for  
all she needs to know today  
about the world, about herself;

she finishes the book,  
closes it thoughtfully,  
looks up at you;  
she knows herself  
a little more today.

Michael Shepherd

# ! In The Steps Of Rumi: 86: Here, Maybe Now..

Maybe there really is 'somewhere else'.  
Maybe there isn't.

Travel agents tell me there is.  
They even suggest that I'll be someone different  
while I'm there...

but suppose I was? Would I  
remember to come back?

Or stay there, be someone else..  
until I'm sure, I stay here  
and practise just being here.  
It sounds simpler that way.

Then when I'm expert in being here,  
and go somewhere,  
I'll still be 'here' there..

Really? You think that sounds dull?  
But I'm happy to be me, here...  
Maybe I'll be happy being 'here' there, too..

And when I'm expert at being here,  
then I might try being now..

no past to worry about,  
no future to worry about;

It sounds simpler that way.  
I'll let you know.

\*

[to Rumi and to Ronberge: poets of the light heart,  
the light touch.]

Michael Shepherd

# ! Islamofascists And Christofascists (And Israelofascists Too?)

Well, you'd expect them to hate each other,  
since it's the nature of the beast  
and deep down they hate  
all human beings, and hate themselves...  
those who would impose their 'righteousness'  
upon their fellow men...

but the God who's mercifully beyond all names  
must look down in stunned incomprehension  
when the faithful make division in their faith...  
Catholics and Protestants, Sunnis and Shias...

for perhaps this is the greatest crime of all  
against God: and if so, the Popes and Archbishops  
should have said to their faithful a century ago,  
love those who love Me, whatever path they take...  
or My penalty shall be, that – plague on both your houses  
in My house of many mansions – both your so-called 'faiths'  
which are but faith in your own human judgments rather than  
your faith in Me – both shall be henceforth declared  
apostate, infidel – oh ye who lack real Faith...

or if God could, would, should not interfere  
as His inexorable laws work their justice out  
and the 'faithful' slaughter one another  
in a new Massacre of the Ignorants –

if not God Himself, then some latter Solomon  
who might say the same; or devise  
some sharper stirring of what's left  
of reason in those warring idiots –

something on an unreasonable par  
with his threatened halving of that disputed babe,  
such as, if you haven't sworn brotherly love  
on every holy book and holy shrine  
within a month, I'll toss this coin

with Allah's name, or Jehovah, or Fid. Def. upon it ...

and declare one party forever infidel  
within my holy realm...

how obvious all this seems, to those of us  
born free from ancient hates: they, bound  
to man's so foolish, idiot pride.. and the great betrayal  
ever threatening, the treason of the clerics...

Michael Shepherd

# ! 'It's Joost Not Furr! ...'

From my extended family,  
the indignant cry rings out –  
'It's joost not FURR! '...

Whingers all? Ah – but listen  
to the sound behind those words...  
this is not the 'Yokshire' voice,  
standing square on the earth  
as if it always owned it...

this is the sound of centuries –  
two at least - of men's sense of injustice:  
forced off the herding on the lovely hills,  
the fresh cleansing air, or  
the market gardens of Lytham and the coastal plain,

down to the water-valleys and the foggy, smoky air  
of the mills; the cotton dust into wheezing lungs  
shortening their lives as they listen bed-bound  
to the clatter of the morning clogs:  
the single early steps to set up the mills,  
the rush, then the single hurried latecomers...

or the starving Irish, seeking work a bare potato's throw  
from the ships they came in, to the Mersey docks...

But listen again to that whinge, confident,  
in its sense of injustice: hear the 'good news'  
brought by Nonconformist preachers,  
Wesleyans and Methodists and Baptists too,  
and all the shades of freethinking men and women,  
in tiny 'tin tabernacles' as they were called,  
out on the moors beyond town boundaries;  
bringing the good news of a God  
who was classless; beyond the reach  
of ruling class or politics; a liberal God,  
who dwelt in our joyful inner tabernacle...  
and who was, it seems, on good terms  
with the local 'poor' lodge as it was called,

of non-religious, and non-political Freemasonry:  
bestowing a benevolent, right-thinking and all-seeing eye  
on those proud 'working class' who understood  
the virtue of good deeds for the poor,  
by the poor...setting up the Co-operatives  
to sell unadulterated food at decent prices;  
in the room above the first one in Toad Lane,  
attending evening class – now washed and tidy –  
to, as they so proudly said, 'better themselves'...

and on Saturday, before the endless prayerful Sunday,  
attending, first, the classless 'Rugby' football,  
playing in the 'Hornets' or some such team,  
or later, 'Soshie' as they called it,  
abbreviating 'Association' football...

cleansed on Sunday for the soul's new week  
while wives cleaned the house on Monday, washing day..  
and in enlightened families, were free on Tuesday evening  
to attend the same classes that their proud husbands loved...

towns who wore a badge of national pride  
that after Robert Owen and John Bright and t'Co-op,  
pioneers of a just society of work,  
'Scott of th'Ob' had gone on from  
the local paper to become the great editor  
of the Manchester Guardian, voice  
of liberal Britain..

I generalise... but listen to that sound  
behind the voice of Lancashire upraised –

'It's joost not FURR! ...'

Michael Shepherd



# ! It's Time For A Little Timelessness

I said to the stone,  
What time is it?  
The stone was silent.

I said to the eagle,  
What day is it?  
The eagle looked fiercely at me,  
Then turned its head away.

I said to the oak tree,  
How long were you there?  
Silently, the oak tree grew.

I said to the worm,  
How long will you take?  
The worm continued on its way.

I said to the river,  
What takes you so long?  
The river ran as ever.

I said to the sun,  
Shall we meet here tomorrow?  
Shining, the sun gave no sign.

I said to the milk,  
When was I born?  
Flowing, the milk had no answer.

I said to the earth,  
When will you expect me?  
The earth held its peace.

And Pooh Bear looked at me very seriously  
and said,  
'It's always time for something..'

Michael Shepherd

# ! Jewels Of The Beach

Plash...keesh... plash...keesh

the waves throw themselves  
onto the pebbly beach,  
but as if they regret their own angry generosity,  
pull back a sieved undertow of finer pebbles  
mixed with rough toe-grating sand;  
their generosity the swathe of larger pebbles  
which gleam like jewels, before the salt-water  
dries them into centuries of scratched, scoured surface,  
dull as familiarity.

That swathe of jewels – magic to a child;  
but now I'm older, yields a mental miracle  
of nature ceaselessly at work:

green bottle-glass pebble – rounded to a smooth, safe shape  
for the child to spot and pick up –  
that's easy to trace: from fishermen's magic globes, the net-floats,  
or bottles thrown carelessly overboard  
on some romantic cruise..

white chalk – that's easy too: final shape  
whose roundness may resist at last the restless sea  
chewing away at Dover's so emotive cliffs;  
just the right size for a tiny fist  
to write on concrete; it could write but scratch  
that slate or blackboard with its ABC.

a gorgeous mottled red: as if from pillar  
of some exotic Eastern temple; a closer look  
suggests some mighty compression of the earth  
that's left a substance just about halfway  
between soft Devon clay and harder granite;

and here a softer red; shaped from some brick  
the sea has stolen from some poor defence;  
but that will write too, stir a first artistic effort  
setting off the white; but leave a trace of itself

on that small, tight fist;

now the shades of green – the hardest stone,  
serpentine, which glows when wet or waxed:  
how long did this stone take  
to shape – and then to roll on ocean floor  
from distant shore and ancient mountain range?

a whole range of semi-transparent yellow-browns,  
agate and suchlike, best when wet; their structure  
easily breaks down, too small for fun;

but here's a slatey grey, veined with white, as if  
some modern sculptor had seen its possible potential,  
smoothed it with a loving hand; nature,  
says the aesthete, meeting art..

the occasional alabaster sparkler just survives;  
so dull now, that you'll need to smash it first;  
but here's the pride of all this sea-tossed mile of treasure trove:  
a ravishing, smooth, moon-white marble, maiden aristocrat;  
how long, how far, to roll and sieve this  
like some ageless prospector sieving for gold or diamond?  
what Greek palace tipped by an earthquake  
into a blue Aegean sea? Into the crummy pocket of the shorts  
that one goes, to line up with its kinsfolk  
on the window-sill..

a sea-shore (you can hear it in the word itself..) ,  
a beach, a child with blowing hair and eager eyes;  
these two spell happiness; live nature's most compatible.

Michael Shepherd

# ! John Of Forde, His Exculpation

What I say and what I write  
may seem to you – may seem to me –  
as foolishness and folly; for  
I talk of boundless things, and of infinity;

which by their nature, are beyond  
the human mind, the human pen;  
should I then not and never speak of such?

Or are these boundless things  
just what mankind should talk about –  
seeking the laws of atoms, or of space, only  
to find the boundlessness yet further off  
than men of yesteryear believed?

and if I talk and write – beside those things  
invisible as once the surface of the Moon –  
then, of the boundlessness of love - which is yet bound  
into Creation's very substance – and  
those other boundless things which seem to us  
to be Creation's - even the Creator's - very nature...

then my exculpation is but simply this:  
the motive force for what I write,  
the theme of what I write, which is  
my boundless love for you, for all,  
demands, must win, forgiveness  
from Boundlessness itself...

there is no more, there is no less  
than love, which is true boundlessness.

[adapted from Sermon 43 of John of Forde, 1145-1214]

Michael Shepherd

# ! John Of Forde, His Witness

John of Forde

Kneeling there, the candles living flame  
in the darkened abbey, brother monks  
still and silent at the golden altar rail,  
kneeling there, clearing that inner space  
into which may enter what God wills –

sometimes He takes me unawares;  
murmurs like a gentle thunder  
some clear message beyond words  
yet winging into crystal sentences,  
and that, a treasure-house of joy...

why do I call it sweet, this moment  
savoured, indescribable? Because  
there is no other word... why do I say,  
ah, He has called me to the marriage feast..?

How else to tell you how, at that,  
everything becomes delight,  
everything becomes a glory?

and the glory is delight;  
delight, in truth, the glory.

[adapted from Sermon 43 of Abbot John of Forde Abbey, c.1145-1214]

Michael Shepherd

# ! Joy Enjoyed With Or Without Hope...

Joy  
gets a bad press  
from poets and divines –

it's fleeting, can't  
be trusted, brings  
a downside;

better far they say  
is bliss: quiet, indifferent,  
that is, beyond all differences  
that sadden; divisions  
that steal our perfect,  
timeless, spaceless I guess  
unity

this poem looks  
with joyful hope  
or hopeful joy  
well joy and hope  
or would joy or hope be enough,  
Paul,

to a future bliss  
which when found  
has no past or future but  
only the perfect present  
of the perfect present.

[another one with acknowledgements to Eckhart Tolle and 'The Power of Now'...]

Michael Shepherd

# ! Just Another Rant

There are things which we all know  
but pretend we don't  
as we watch them with amusement wriggling publicly  
out of their public bonds..

1) You can always buy your way  
to 'honours' – but not, ha, to 'honour':  
not with a cheque by return of post, of course;  
just by more subtle 'charity' of the sort  
which inevitably involves  
large sums of money gratefully received  
by the genuinely honourable. But of course  
you'll be the only one who confuses  
honours with honour.

2) The buck – with honourable exceptions –  
never 'stops here' – it stops  
at the guy one below 'here':  
you're in charge – so, you don't say  
'Go kill Thomas á Becket' etc.. you say  
'Who will rid me of this turbulent priest? ' into the air,  
kinda rhetorical question.. and, surprise,  
there's a scrum of posse at the gun cabinet..

3) There are certain countries and no I won't  
where bribes – often to those who don't need them –  
are like thank-you letters – you don't have to,  
but everyone expects it.. and don't be surprised  
if you're off their seasonal greetings card list next year..

just one suggestion: that if blackmailed trade-wise  
by a foreign country to break your own code of honour  
and you stand up and say 'It would not be  
in Britain's interest in terms of  
commercial and diplomatic good relations  
and employment in skilled industry  
to pursue this matter through the courts'  
you should have your British passport and nationality  
taken away; after all, you've already forfeited it

in the court of honour..

OK that feels better. How was it for you?

Michael Shepherd



# ! Lakshmi In Her Silken Veil

Lakshmi, in her silken veil  
of modesty, walks unrecognised,  
free as birds are free, around our world...

veiled in stillness; her lovely arms  
bestowing, secretly, invisibly  
her wealth;

her step so light, her being so, so still...  
she passes you every day;  
has never forgotten you;

so if you think she has neglected you –  
consider, instead, her reasons:  
she may be holding back to teach  
(do you hear her laugh so lightly?)  
pure grace, pure gratitude,  
tomorrow, or the next day...  
humility, she teaches, is the greatest wealth..

so disguised, she walks so freely through our life:  
she loves to walk in markets, and the scents  
and colours, tastes, of her wealth;

she loves to walk in fields, in Spring,  
her arms as gentle, careful, generous,  
as a sower casts the seed;

she walks in hospitals, loving care  
distributed without a holding back;

she walks in schools, sits with the pupils,  
bathing in the wealth of knowledge  
that flows from spring to river to the ocean;  
sometimes watches hand in hand  
with her sister Saraswati;

she loves princes and their consorts  
decked with jewels that all can wonder at;

she does not like dark treasure hoards  
or locks, or keys; or those who think  
her wealth is somehow, theirs...

and where she walks, a trail of golden dust  
dances in the air; if you do not see her,  
go to the temple where she loves to rest  
among her own; for if you thank her there,  
you'll see her everywhere; say nothing,  
smile; share her modesty, her generosity,  
that only her own devotees understand:  
those who love her wealth, but never for themselves...

this, this, is her beauty.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Laying Down The Psalms

The book sags open on my lap  
as I cease reading, stare into blind space,  
gaze into a history that answers not;  
lost in the troubles of an ancient people  
whose hearts are not, yet could be mine..

I need to talk to the Psalmist: now:  
for I cannot carry all this burden;  
for despite the burning poetry of faith,  
my ears, my mind, my heart  
find neither mercy nor sweet justice  
running to you, arms outstretched, ...

this God of sin, of wrath and retribution  
whom you seek to appease, to praise,  
to beg support of, against those enemies  
who will never let you live in peace,  
who afflict your soul, steal the sacred tents you pitch  
beside sweet waters and the grazing flock...

this God who seems to have a personal interest  
in putting your nation through tests, more tests,  
like twisted cloths slapped on flat wet stones  
beside the black river of sadness by women without hope –

this God to whom you raise despairing hands,  
cry prayers, shout to the skies, list grievances –

can this God be – as wise Greeks say He is –  
a god who ever lives, sleeps, wakes,  
within your very heart – not in some vague  
somewhere way out there...

or as the wise Hindus say He is –  
the very same within you as He is 'out there'? ...

and so, is all your raw outpouring of the human heart  
an artifice, formality, figure of a poet's speech...  
you, knowing all too well that by this means

you call upon those vast reserves of human spirit  
deep, deep inside your very self; from where,  
eternal springs of healing mercy  
pour like rushing waterfalls of love,  
like the tender-guarded flock of sheep  
who graze the grass of peace..  
who never fails to hear, closer, so much closer  
than the skies whose very fabric now you rend  
with cries that sound so fruitless...  
closer, close; for He's your very self? ...

-and of necessity, shares that same inner self  
with all the woes which your own 'unripe deeds',  
as Aramaic calls what we call 'sin' –  
have brought upon yourself; brought down  
the heavens all about your ears...

Is all this a metaphor for faith  
put to the ultimate test to win  
the crown, the seat on the right hand? ...

tell me, Psalmist, that this might be true; to salve  
the hearts of your tormented, God-impassioned people  
for whom history has yet in store  
more tests than any mouth would want to tell?

Michael Shepherd

# ! Leaf

It was one of so many; an army  
of greenness; anonymous footsoldier  
in the cause of nature's greater good.  
It was tree.

First, as summer lingered into autumn,  
it laid down its arms; the days of empire-building  
over; no longer did it need  
to fight in serried ranks for space.

Then next, laid down the need to breathe;  
lingered strong upon the branch  
as old soldiers do, before they fade away;  
boasted now, beyond loyalty, all pride.

Now, its fire of life turned to new arts  
in pensioned, eased retirement; learned  
a new palette of colours,  
yellows, reds, browns; how to shade  
from one to another; how to take  
the breath away with contrast.

Then, as it relinquished hold  
on water, took up further skills;  
learned precious, porcelain fragility;  
discovered sculpture,  
curled like a dancer's sway,  
found arabesques and curves of beauty  
beyond the finest human artistry.

Finally, submitted to relinquish even earth.  
A last curling fall at a moment's puff of wind  
all beyond its knowing  
brought it onto the gatepost,  
level with my eyes, just as I passed the gate;

displayed like some ballerina in the last pose  
of some tragic, swan-necked dance, that time  
could indeed stand still: so that even beauty

held her breath and waited...

in that moment outside time,  
told me all unspoken things:  
thoughts that rest too deep for tears;  
there where tears meet joy.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Life Can Be So Surreal

When he first clapped eyes on her  
you could have heard the clapping  
in the next ballroom.

Then his eyes danced.  
They disengaged themselves gracefully  
as from a group of friends,  
cut and coiled their stalks  
as if some umbilical cord,  
and danced.

They danced at eye-height, which seemed  
appropriate, considering;  
you'd have thought they'd danced together  
all their lives, they danced so well together.

They danced the quickstep first, then  
the foxtrot; then a sparkling jive. At  
the end, they bowed to her, respectfully,  
yet in a way as if they knew the score,  
had an eye or two to the future.

Then, quite simply, they returned,  
picked up where they had left off.  
No hint of what had gone on, except perhaps  
a whiter shade of white around their irises,  
and still clearly lit up from their first fill of her;  
for she was, we all agreed, an eyeful.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Love And Understanding

Who today would praise  
consciousness itself,  
which brings new life and thought  
every morning, opening  
our minds a little more,  
making the light seem brighter,  
everything more vivid,  
life itself more worth living?

This morning, I read the words  
'Love itself is understanding'...

and in the mind, doors blew open,  
windows rattled, a wind  
that smelled of spring and grass and rain  
blew through the mind

and the word love  
blew off the dusty shelf  
along with the cobweb  
but lay unbroken on the floor  
waiting to be washed and put back  
next to understanding

and the silliest, biggest gift of all  
is to know for the first time  
what you've always known

and which nearly two thousand years ago  
Gregory the Great  
also recognised for the first time,  
maybe felt the same way, as if  
he was entrusted with the key  
to a large house on a windy day.

Michael Shepherd



# ! Love Is Difficult: Isaac Of Nineveh

Love is difficult  
until it's easy..

How to write of this,  
unless, until, we're like him.. old and wise and  
blind with reading and austerity,  
speaking of what he'd become;  
so that we, enfolded in his love,  
become a little, that of which he writes?

On his painful, joyful, great adventure  
to become the world,  
seen as Creation sees it,  
his heart so loved the mind,  
his mind so loved the heart; that  
these two walked together,  
climbed hard mountains,  
washed in cool, fresh streams;  
were compassionate of each other's failings;  
rejoiced in each other's purity.  
Call this what you know of it.

First, he sought the body's freedom  
to be the tool of what was asked of it;  
call this what you know of it.

Then, he sought what the unconscious mind  
threw up from depths yet still not deep enough:  
'logismoi' was the name some gave:  
those seeds of action which he learned to listen to  
to know whether they brought light,  
or that darkness which is hard, agitated, cold,  
these all at once..  
call this what you know of it.

Then, love was easy: nothing was profane,  
nothing sacred; he, sanctified,  
sanctified the world around him;  
his soul, when you were near him,

seemed to exhale a subtle, joyful fragrance  
which changed the air around him;  
embraced you in unspoken prayer  
for all the world in mind: even devils,  
serpents, sin, were thus embraced;  
is this purity, compassion?  
Call this, what you know of it.

All things then revealed to him  
the secret of their being;  
the visible, teaching the invisible;  
the manifest teaching the unmanifest.

It's said that Isaac was described  
as 'priest of all the world,  
celebrating at the altar of his heart';  
call this, what you know of it.

For love is difficult  
until it's easy.

\*

{Saint Isaac of Nineveh was born c.625 AD/CE  
at what is now Qatar on the shores  
of the Persian Gulf; especially beloved  
in 19th century Russia.}

Michael Shepherd

# ! Love You

Dearest T...,  
Great to hear from you!  
I'm glad the hospital didn't confiscate  
your mobile and your laptop  
this time...

but – what can I say?  
I'm sorry to hear that  
your break-up with the new bf  
was so violent – well, at least  
you're highly trained in law h h h...

but I'm glad to hear  
that you changed your mind  
when you got to Zurich...  
I'd like to know more of that;  
but won't ask just now..

and I'm touched that the two poems  
on the riches of the self  
were the first poems that you read  
when you came back into the ward...  
should I be glad, you silly girl,  
that they 'made your mascara run'...?

Oh dearest T - whom I love, as the self in all;  
who's stretched the love of parents, friends,  
beyond all reason, to that place where only love  
is left... to do what love can, may, might, do...

you'll go on testing the – let's say –  
Absolute's – God's – love for you  
with tests that only someone so loving,  
so intelligent, so aware, so stubborn for the truth  
could devise, as self-destruction...

until the day, when you'll accept  
within that sober, loving self we know so well,  
that you, yourself, are but that absolute, that self, that love

which you have no need still to test; nor can;  
until that day when, out of love,  
your self tires of your tricks...

keep me in touch? for there are some of us  
who know that love is boundless;  
useless, T, to test our love for you;  
and you're too bright (alas?) for me  
to tell you yet again  
the consolations of philosophy..

I'll simply write,  
Look after yourself;

and look, then, at those words  
as if I'd never seen or read them once before;  
fall still; wish you, too, stillness;

there is no more for words.

Michael

Michael Shepherd

# ! Love's Light: The Philosopher At The Window

The eyes, it's said, are windows of the soul;  
and when I see your eyes so sparkling bright,  
I see there beauty, truth and goodness; all  
as one; the radiance of an inner light.

But I who, standing, gaze though windows here:  
what does my own soul see by its own light?  
Is what is seen, seen through dark glass, or clear?  
Is others' radiance that of my own sight?

Strange fact: the outward play's less bright, less clear  
than what I see to shine in others' eyes;  
there seems less love in me, from me; less dear  
the loving, than the love I see and prize!

These windows teach clear lessons to my soul:  
first see my own self's light, to see the whole.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Love's Perfection

Oh I am so fortunate.  
In the past and in the present.

We fell in love, and loved  
and it was total  
and unexpected  
and revelatory  
and unique, of course  
and consuming  
and falling in love with the whole world too  
and with life itself  
and a compass  
and the possibility of a map  
and lacked nothing  
and was everything.

And it was so perfect  
that now  
when I see your double around the town  
who looks just like you  
and was you

there is no need for nostalgia  
or regrets  
or how-it-might-have-been-if  
or even self-congratulation  
because it was so complete  
and completed.

I am so fortunate.  
I would like to think  
(for we talk, easily, but never of the past)  
that it is the same for you

for that way, completeness is doubled  
and something, perhaps  
given to the world.

We are so fortunate.

Michael Shepherd

## ! Lyric 5: Staggered Assonance

the singing in the living, listening heart  
tells love in whispers; and the heart is always  
listening; for that heart is always bliss; all  
hearts in all ways, blest by ceaseless love;  
the blaze of bliss in life is our soul's singing;  
this peace, our life as winging gift that's blest;  
its light brings love, sings peace, and brims the heart.

(An experiment in assonance without rhyme: the assonances are in a staggered sequence through the lines)

Michael Shepherd



# ! Mariah Carey's Hideous Secret

Now promise you won't tell anyone  
(though what's the fun of having a secret  
if you can't tell anyone? ...)

Mariah Carey  
was never a member of the  
Mickey Mouse Club  
when young, er, younger...

to which

some will say, wow, don't you know a lot.  
some will say, who's Mariah Carey?  
or, who the chic black rock chick cares...  
or, smartipantsly, well you could guess couldn't you.  
or just, cool -  
...and go on with what they're doing.  
or, didn't know you had pub quizzes at your local.  
or, good for her.  
or dead straight like, I didn't know it was still running,  
I remember I was a member of...etc.

or something Village Jewish and TV-scripwriterly like  
and were you still dressed when she whispered that?

while LA insiders say, silly girl,  
all the big agents say  
sign up for Mickey whatever your age  
before you audition for Disney Corp's  
music side

or it's something deadpan and very NY so you don't know whether  
it's a joke or not, like  
is product placement in poetry a growing market?

or give you that look that they've perfected  
for sad losers and say  
get a life man  
it's a poetry site and you spend your time  
on that Minnie-quiz ha ha

how long did it take you to get that one right anyway  
when you don't even know the names of the other three

Michael Shepherd

# ! Mary Mary Magdalene

Mary Mary Magdalene,  
what do all those stories mean?  
Mary, Mary, is it true,  
Jesus had a thing for you?

Mary, Mary – He lay with you?  
Mary, Mary, tell me true  
Mary, Mary, red hair wild,  
did He leave you great with child?

Mary, was your love so steady,  
that you had had His kids already?  
Mary, Mary, at the Cross,  
did it feel a gain or loss?

Mary, Mary – on that third day,  
what was it like with the stone rolled away?  
Mary, Mary, running there with love,  
what did you think when He rose above?

Mary, Mary – what was it like, after?  
Were there tears or joyful laughter?  
Mary, Mary – the kids you had –  
did they turn out like their Dad?

Mary, Mary, whore redeemed,  
did it work out like you dreamed?  
Mary, Mary – your afterlife –  
was it mostly love, or mostly strife?

Mary, Mary, were you worshipped or despised  
As Mary's daughter-in-law, Mrs. Christ?  
Mary, Mary, did you stay,  
or feel you had to take the kids away?

Mary, Mary, with so much love,  
did you, too, rise to heaven above?  
Mary, Mary, in the sky,  
all we ask are the reasons why...

Mary, Mary Magdalene,  
What is really true? What does it really mean?

Michael Shepherd

# ! Massive Love Poem

I want everyone to know

yeah?

how much I loved you

yawn

and how much I miss you

y a w n...

which makes this, poetry

yy aa ww nn....

and me a poet

y a w...w...w...w...w...n

Michael Shepherd

# ! Maya

'And what of the gopis? '  
then I asked you -  
'Had they forgotten that they too,  
were Krishna? Or did they think  
it was more fun  
to pretend that they were not? '

And you looked long at me  
and smiled; and drew your silken veil  
across your lovely face.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Maybe This Is What Bliss Is

Those days when an invisible armchair  
relaxes you into a mood  
that's an exquisite, savoured blend  
of innocence and experience,  
which might even be thought to be  
wisdom  
except you don't even need to think it  
since you're simultaneously 7 and 70  
and thus invulnerable

days when I wish the house had a verandah  
where in the evenings I could sit:

'I'm here, I'm watching it all go by,  
you can stop and chat  
or wave and I'll nod;  
I'm here; I'm at home.'

Michael Shepherd

# ! Meeting Mister Blake The Poet In The Strand

'This is Mister Blake, my dear,  
he sees visions..'

and he looked down at me, this man  
who saw, what did that mean,  
saw visions? His eyes were just so blue,  
so blue, that they were limitless  
and I flew up and into them  
like a sky and wings

and the voices sang forever  
as if there were no repetition  
and angels with blue eyes  
looked at me out of everywhere  
seeing every thing

and Mister Blake the poet raised his hat to me,  
smiled the gift of always,  
and walked on his way  
down the Strand  
as if one and all things  
had never parted company.

Michael Shepherd



# ! Memorial To A Minor Poet

as poems go

his went

Michael Shepherd

# ! Metamorphosis

and with good fortune  
the experience grows itself  
into a poem; so that  
the poem then may seed itself  
into a new experience;

like two young lovers  
one the poem's beginning  
the other the poem's end,

looking, looking, in a crowd of thousands,  
seeing each other, running toward –

the crowd so alien  
then so soon, love.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Metaphysical Prayer

Come to me as nameless, Lord –  
and I to Thee!

come to me – I care not – as  
the Brahman, Krishna, Buddha,  
Adonai, Christ, Mohammed, Reason –  
clothed, adored, despised,  
in any of the names and forms  
by which men know Thee or profess to know,  
in the name of Whom they fight each other,  
and thus deny Thy very self –  
or as a nameless stranger, none of these -

come to me nameless, Lord –  
and I to Thee..

come as One clothed in majesty;  
come as a ragged beggar at my gate;  
come clothed in shining white as Love;  
come as a tempter full of hate;

come in the dazzling beauty of the day,  
come in the orchestra of sound,  
come in the velvet silence of the night;  
come to me in a crowded market-place,  
come to me alone among the hills,

come to me as slow as years of torture,  
come to me as quick as gunshot death –  
come to me as the girl next door,  
come to me as Magdalen or whore;  
come to me as Satan – if Thou must -

come to me as years of reading, thinking, reasoning –  
as the dust blown off an ancient book;  
come to me as years of yearning patience,  
hours each day of kneeling or cross-legged,  
come to me as years of weary factory work,  
or peeling vegetables all the day;

come to me as a long-awaited friend;  
come to me blooded, fierce-eyed,  
as enemy to be overcome;  
come to me in anger; or in submissive patience;  
come to me as tragedy, or comedy, or farce...

come to me disguised as one of these,  
or as many; or as none;  
or best of all, Lord,  
come to me disguised as all of these...

come to me in illusion or in ignorance –  
then come to me at last and joyfully,  
in Thy duality – Thy final secret joke:  
that not until we see in us some 'other',  
may we know there is no 'other' here..

come to me, then, as distant Thou  
to kneel to as the universe itself;  
come to me, now, as friendly You,  
who lived, and live, for ever in my heart;

come to me as one or many,  
come as All in all;  
come, beyond all comprehension - yet  
clear as writing on a wall..

come to me, O nameless Thou –  
and I, myself, to me...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Mind That Heart

Jane Austen's heroines –(ah, dearest Jane...)  
knew a thing or two –  
show a man you have a mind,  
and you may catch his heart..

and men –  
flowers, a poem, a compliment,  
something of beauty  
to show you have a heart,  
may bring you to her mind..

so poetry:  
meaning is beauty to the mind,  
beauty is meaning to the heart.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Mind That Mind!

Boundless... yet, it can formulate  
these things called words...  
to help itself and us; to call  
to our imagination, bounds,  
and boundlessness, in thought...

out of sleep and dream, leaps  
to our assistance as a faithful hound  
eager for the hunt; in a puckish moment  
offers us the world.. all that is  
and all that's not (and it's  
particularly strong on what is not...)

is it greater, then,  
than its Creator? No, that can not be;  
but greater than our image of  
the Creator – ah! now there's the rub...

what is its shape, this shapeless thing?  
as regular as a sphere – but of a geometry  
beyond all spheres; its co-ordinates  
beyond whatever is beyond...

yet almost as if it had (its centre  
everywhere, its circumference just nowhere...)  
imagined poles, joined yet held apart  
by imaginary axis – so that it can hold  
all opposites, all paradoxes;

so as you speak one thing, its opposite  
like shadow, like uninvited echo,  
haunts it as familiar ghost...  
see it, hear it, and  
you'll win a reputation for broad-mindedness  
or scholarly indecisiveness...you will walk  
with blissful universality..

this glorious facility, new-born to us every moment,  
to be ecstatic in our boundlessness...

and all this, before  
we've even rolled and staggered out of bed...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Miss Gertrude Stein Was As Light As A Bright

Gertrude Stein was on her dying bed;  
(i.e. she was dying, not the bed) :  
the doctor came in, Alice walking ahead;  
'What's the answer, Doc? ' said Miss Stein;  
that was what Miss Gertrude Stein said.

but the doctor merely shook his head;  
standing there at the head of the bed,  
side to sighed he shook his head.

Miss Stein was as bright as a bright bright ray  
of light until her dying day  
(i.e. she was dying, not the day)  
and there to the doctor at the head of the bed  
she said  
'Then, what's the question? ...' – leaving  
Alice laughing in her grieving

oh yes oh yes Miss Stein was bright,  
she, did not rage at the dying of the light.

Michael Shepherd



# ! Moments Like Knife Cuts

They're too silly to be serious,  
too serious to be silly...

those moments when your raw  
adolescent ego (and how long it lasted...)  
is hurt to the quick...

how you'd like to forget it,  
it's so trivial... but you can't;  
so then, you'd like to laugh at it;  
maybe make a jokey verse about it...  
but that doesn't work, either...  
and, as if it mattered...

when I was forever desperate  
for the approval of any stranger,  
let alone a friend,  
someone brought along to meet us  
such a stranger whom we all admired,  
all wished to be...

discreetly, we presented him  
with what we hoped would find  
some favour in his eyes...

the report on the two of us  
came back: 'One has a mean mouth;  
the other is a nonentity...'

the 'other one' reported this to me;  
could not bear to speculate, I felt,  
which, he, which, me...

fifty years ago,  
it's still rattling around in the memory,  
waiting to be erased,  
or to be laughed out of court...

adolescence, once, is quite enough:

I'm still wondering, which one to choose  
that would have hurt me more...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Monet And Impressionism

His last painting of waterlilies blurs and wavers;  
I think he should have gone to Specsavers.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Monk (1)

and in the half-light of the abbey church,  
candles flickering,  
a kneeling stillness

for years of days  
prayer  
so that to be is to pray  
to pray is to be and

to be is to love and  
to love is to understand for

there are no questions  
when silence holds all answers

candles flickering,  
a kneeling stillness

Michael Shepherd

# ! Monty Python Does Poetry Criticism

This poem is no more.  
It has ceased to be.  
It's expired and gone to meet its maker.  
This is a late poem...  
Bereft of life, it rests in peace.  
If you hadn't nailed it to the page,  
it would be pushing up daisies.  
It's rung down the curtain  
and joined the choir invisible.  
This is an ex-poem..

Michael Shepherd

# ! Mortal Thoughts In Advancing Age

I wouldn't recommend  
adolescence

or old age  
as permanent states

to linger in

Michael Shepherd

# ! Muslims And Christians

In the deepest deeps of the human heart,  
what separates Christian and Muslim,  
Islam and Christianity?

Absolutely nothing. How could it?

The God always close to us –  
as close as His blood, our blood –  
inside us, and outside us,  
whom, when we forget,  
then we must remember –

this, our God. In that holy place,  
we cannot entertain  
a thought of separation;

only when we seek duality, division,  
a foe to fight a friend,  
a friend to fight a foe,  
do we name our friends, our fiends, our enemies.

Mohamed, the prophet of the Lord,  
Jesus, son of God? Let those who will,  
play with such terms;

and if men insult their holy name –  
some in burning fury  
take it as a personal insult  
to the God who lives within them;  
some smile, and say,  
God is not mocked...  
His justice and His mercy see  
that retribution is His law of nature...

In the deepest deeps  
of one single human heart, rests  
enough love for the whole world, the whole Creation;  
who can measure that?





# ! My Father's Plato

And that's not a claim to paternity –  
it's the possessive case; though to what degree  
my father possessed Plato, or Plato, him,  
remains one of those unsolved mysteries  
stored in that little room of sadness in the hearts  
of children of that more formal, distanced age...

Like so many self-made men, he'd never read  
a novel before he retired; and then  
set out to educate himself  
as would befit the father of a son  
he planned – God unwilling, at first – to have,  
whom he would provide with all the advantages  
he'd never had... alas; alas for both of us...

He'd read of course, Smiles' 'Self-Help' – they all had;  
moved on to Carlyle, Ruskin (briefly) , Emerson; wrote  
in warm approval to George Bernard Shaw,  
who responded with one of his printed pre-texted postcards...  
then worked through those nicely-bound  
sets of Hardy, Galsworthy, Dickens, Scott, and ,  
offered cheaply by the Daily Mail or by Wills' Cigarettes...

then – Plato; or at least, his Republic;  
a yellow bound, standard Everyman; but this one  
- I discovered far too late in life -  
fiercely underlined in summary pencil lines...

and that was really, all he needed; busy  
with his hens and chicks, his toddler son (at last...) :  
later, novels of another sort crept up on him; he lived  
a – no, don't call it fantasy – a parallel life  
in volume after volume of those yellow-covered  
Wild West Club. (That's where he would have flourished,  
aggressive boss of bosses, if he had not been stone-deaf...)

So what was he to Plato, or Plato said to him?  
Are the underlinings an extension of that angry, abrupt man  
meaning, that's my experience; so he's right...;

or was there stunned admiration; or  
was there a humility I never saw  
until efficiency turned to eccentricity,  
eccentricity to dementia...

a humility, perhaps, that took him to another world  
of ancient Greece, and glories, virtues, and ideals,  
where Spartans from the wild wild East  
rode roughshod over democracy, and  
where a good man must be sought,  
to run them out of town...?

One day, I'll have to face the mist of tears,  
read those fierce underlinings made  
as if by the muzzle of a Colt  
guarding civilisation by the gully and the scrub,  
the horses tethered, (Indians, always the third estate) :  
seek in the underlinings to immortal thought,  
the man I loved but never knew.

Michael Shepherd

# ! My Wake, My Funeral, My Celebration

Death

could be full of surprises.

I'm not Irish; but if you were to do  
the full Irish thing - take my corpse out of the coffin,  
dance wildly round the room with it one by one -  
it'd make my day;  
I'd remember it all my, death  
and I bet you would too.  
Though perhaps the tango would be a bit too far.

The funeral:

the not-too-many invitations should say  
'Dress code: happy'. That I'd really like to see.  
So I'll be standing at the lych-gate  
like a reporter from the local rag  
checking you in.

But if you don't attend - that's OK. I wouldn't like to die  
a hypocrite; there'll be plenty of folk I shall be meeting  
whose funeral I didn't attend, believing as I do  
that funerals are for family and just those friends  
who wouldn't miss it for the world.

Forget the flowers - I'd rather see flowers live until they die,  
like me; not wither like day-brief memories,  
as floral tributes flat on the slab like beached dolphins.

Sing the old favourites. And if you don't know the tunes or words,  
I'm gently sorry for you - it's good to have them to remember, somewhere back  
there in the mind.

And if you must have little speeches,  
I think I'll just take a stroll round the graveyard during that bit;  
praise only makes me regret more what I didn't do.

Then if you're so busy that you leave after the service,  
that's OK - but I'd like to think the best were still to come -

the 'do' afterwards - ah, I'll join you for that:

make it a good one; no food is too good  
for the living. I'd like to be the one  
handing round the plates of goodies;  
whose forearm you gently touch in passing  
to murmur a brief word about being missed  
which may be truly meant  
or found to be true.

I'm not really conversant with this recent 'Celebration' thing  
though it seems an excellent idea, so positive:

I'd like it, then, to be like that of my beloved friend, John:  
where rather than just summon up memories and  
share them with each other,  
we seemed to be basking in the indescribable privilege  
of his friendship  
and his love;  
which I guess in my case as in his would thus be truly  
eternal.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Name This Teddy Bear

In the centre of the window at your local Kidz-r-Uz,  
all winking fairy lights, glitter, sparkle and buy-me,  
sits a bear. A Teddy Bear.

He's the soul of Patience  
in any and all religions – one paw held out  
to take you by the hand – that's, should you ask –  
he's Faith, Hope, and Love:  
he's Faith itself; he's beyond our grown-up limits,  
he's Faith like children know – real Faith;  
Faith that's beyond the breaking faith;  
he's every hope that Christmas promises,  
or Chanukah, or any other winter feast  
when parents give their children tokens of their love...

he asks nothing of you, but to receive your love,  
unconditionally.. a cuddly mirror of your love  
in which you'll see and know that love;  
to show you Love itself unblemished..

unlike all else in this changing world  
inhabited by changeable human beings,  
he wouldn't know how to let you down;  
deny your faith; destroy your hope; reject your love;

he'll be a part of your life, for life;  
and rightly so. Look closely at him:  
is he the one for you?

He will be your first taste of life's nobility;  
almost, you could say, divine;  
he will sit for you as your steady self  
in the temple of your heart;  
give him the name that honours  
honour itself – give him the Name  
that this world means to you; a name  
that none can take from him;  
honour him as that.



# ! 'No Cell-Phones During Office Hours'

'The Rise and Function of the  
Holy Man during Late Antiquity'  
might sound as dry as desert sand,  
or equally, excuse the pun, deserted...  
but no, it holds a lively story:

the Christian world, gearing up  
to tell the AD/CE world the bestest news;  
the fervent, eager converts, wanting only  
the time to cultivate their fledgling souls...  
so where to retreat for this – the monasteries, of course..

wrong. The monasteries became compulsory  
recruiting grounds for Church and for society:  
a deacon needed for a distant land  
to sort out heresies; an emissary  
from this Christian nation's court to that;  
monks dragged out into the world  
to rule unwieldy bishoprics...  
administer, endlessly administer...

so the totally devout had no option  
but to set off and become solitaries, hermits  
further and further into the desert..there,  
became holier and holier; then, accidentally, perhaps,  
miracles began to be spoken of, around them;  
they, half embarrassed, half amused,  
accepting this as God's strange requirement of them...

and then the wannabees and the true disciples  
trekked after them; bedded down, built lodgings  
for their devout B&B-ers, or  
stayed to tend to the submissive saint;  
consulted, questioned, hung around;  
until finally, the patient but exhausted saint  
took off for an even wilder place...  
that's why there are so many  
monasteries in the desert lands...

meanwhile, advice from their superiors,  
concerned for them, then followed them:  
black out your window embrasures; put up notices  
at the gate: 'This is a silent zone between the hours  
of 8 am and 8 pm'... (that should test their faith...): and  
'No talking during Lent'...

and when they trekked out to be in that sacred presence  
of the truly holy man, they naturally brought gifts;  
(and you can guess, there were lines which could be lifted  
from 'The Life of Brian' – 'I suppose a smallish miracle  
would be too much to ask...?')

It's said that when they excavate,  
those lonely hermits' cells out in the desert are found  
to be 'like well-furnished consulting suites'...

There's no joke like a holy joke...

Michael Shepherd



# ! No Comment

Factions  
lead to

fictions  
which lead to

frictions  
which lead to

afflictions

Michael Shepherd

# **! No-One Comes Back From War.**

no-one comes back from war

not the victors

not the vanquished

not the dead

not the living

just faces

with memories

no-one comes back from war

they come back

as someone else

to somewhere else

no-one comes back from war

why did they not tell us that

Michael Shepherd

# ! Not A-Mused

It's days when you've got lots to do -  
the Muse, she puts a phone call through...

You're back at work, and short of time -  
She's back again: some silly rhyme...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Not Quite Myself

A broken night; breakfast-table phrases  
assembled for a touch of sympathy:

'don't ask...! '

'bit out of sorts...'

'haven't really got going yet...'

'not quite myself...'

a familiar unpleasantness, discomfort, restlessness, unease –  
something's got it in for me, but what, and why?

but today it's worse than that..

so, run through the well-worn menu

of remedies: seek distraction,

play some music, read the paper,

connect the hands and mind - clean the gas-stove, ha...

express absorbing interest in the state of others...

or there are mental and spiritual consolations;

'these things will pass...

in two hours, you'll have forgotten...'

'these things are sent to try us..' yeah yeah...

(or if you're British, the dismissive joke,

precious personal illusion shattered...

no, dammit, this is just too much today,

let's play it out; just sit and watch it,

dive into this pool of misery,

see what we come up with..

on the surface, it's like some iron mask;

beyond that, the sense of body as factory,

producing unwelcome chemicals..

and down there in the depths,

monsters stirring; and the baffling sense

- sitting here, apparently unmoved –

that somewhere, disguised as yet as nowhere,

something unknown is resisting something else unknown...

what goes on, on days like this,

deep in the mind? Is it remedial,  
dark things playing out their roles?  
Will tomorrow bring some unsought sense of relief,  
as of some knot of being, secretly resolved;  
gratitude of a sort, yet none the wiser?  
The mystics call it 'the dark night of the soul';  
but even they cannot do more than say,  
it's deeply personal; call them demons if you wish;  
in there, there are battlegrounds – or training-grounds;  
expect this; this is mortality..

while the voice of sergeant-majors, who do not deal  
in introspection, when there are battles to be won (won?)  
ring out on this parade-ground of stern discipline –  
'snapaavit..'

ah well, there's always 'poetry'; thank God for that;  
believe/pretend, this is for the public good;  
that someone out there will say, yes, you've hit it..

now, will strong coffee or a morning's fast  
ease this burden of mortality? while  
on the doorstep, love, joy, praise, thankfulness,  
sheer joie de vivre - there, you can even name them...  
wait patiently to knock.

Michael Shepherd

# ! O L D F A R T H O O D

No, of course I don't...  
I mean, who'd want to be  
a mere two scornful words  
in a stand-up comic's  
patronising patter...

'The other day, at the ticket office,  
there was this old fart in front of me...'

...just you wait, young man,  
until your sciatica, arthritis and rheumatism  
feel the cold and wet today; your  
toupée (always good for a visual laugh)  
has blown off, your dentures have  
just cracked into a plastic cleft palate,  
the battery's just gone in your hearing aid,  
and you left your walking stick  
by your seat in the bus or tube in panic  
when you couldn't find that place  
no longer there, where you used  
to spend a penny...  
and you're hoping to clear up  
with that immigrant ticket clerk  
(not the best job for him, surely?)  
which of the wildly variant twelve fare systems would apply  
to the ticket to visit your married daughter, where  
you might or might not stay the night...

no of course I don't...  
but the camera, which never lies,  
has lost patience with me..  
its expensive self-focus system  
registers 'old fart' – quite possibly  
uses some built-in stock image...

and even if some prestigious  
occasion requires a photo credit  
and one goes to a 'studio photographer'  
of ever-increasing price,

hoping they'll catch some firmness  
of a feature, some line of wise concern,  
an eye betokening a life well lived,  
some profile signifying gravitas...

but no...often now,  
I see my face above some article  
in an in-flight or a waiting-room magazine,  
read it in self-congratulation or self-disdain,  
think, I don't remember writing that...  
then realise, it's by some other  
identical old fart, grinning vacantly,  
ingratiatingly, shapeless of any feature,  
devoid of any mystery of shadow,  
hoping that the editor  
will remember these wise words of age..

but no... so here's  
one old fart  
issuing another...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Ode On A Wedgwood Urn

It's a gentle green in colour,  
sits on the shelf, still, contained,  
containing, and content;  
around it, another world  
is playing out its immortal role,  
in constant movement which  
somehow conveys to us, stillness,  
peace; there's order in that world;

and yes, John, you could well call it,  
unravish'd quietness: (you said, once,  
in your romantic way, that  
you were certain of nothing  
but the holiness of the heart's affections,  
and the truth of imagination;  
here's the urn to prove it..)

erect yet relaxed in pose,  
hair in a chignon, one hand  
touching her neck, the other  
holding a rolled scroll, resting  
on what could be a reading desk;  
she's elegant, attentive, sensing, observant,  
yet full of sweetest silent thought;  
she's said to be Euterpe,  
goddess of lyric poetry;  
I should respect her, even beg.

Another graceful figure, also  
lightly draped, so that her body  
is an open yet modest secret,  
plays the lyre to some timeless tune of truth;  
another leans upon a rough stone column,  
absorbed in what another with up-pointing hand  
is telling of what reigns above;  
beautiful truth; truthful beauty..

a second lyre rests, unattended yet significant,  
upon the ground; as if music's secret musing



remains always there, even when unplayed;  
sweeter when heard to be unheard..

three dance together; their lightness,  
grace, and ease are simultaneously  
celebration and surrender; their breeze-played draperies  
tell us how ethereal our holy bodies are,  
caught in the breeze of time;  
there's more to them than meets the eye;  
but that's what eyes are for,  
they say to us: to see, to know, they're there..

trees throw out leaves, as if  
they hear the music, dance the dance,  
know that upwards is what they grow towards..

there's an elegant brazier burning there; the scene  
is evidently not complete without  
the significance of the sacrificial fire;

gentle green upon the shelf,  
contained, containing, and content,  
it plays out its destiny of gods and goddesses,  
muses, graces; unconcerned  
whether I should wish to look at it,  
admire it, perhaps ask questions of it;  
even, live a little of its life...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Oh To Be In England...

[The names and some of the details of this report have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved - Ed.]

Yes I'm afraid so.

Mr Smith and Mrs Jones from down the road.

Five years now.

It's Mr Jones I feel sorry for.

Though from what I hear...

But it's Mrs Smith who really miffs me.

We're supposed to be friends, I thought.

Not a word, not a hint, these five years.

I really feel - betrayed.

Of course the men and the women here have a different take on this.

Well you'd expect it, considering.

(My Jack laughed like a drain when he read the details.

Went out early to buy the News of the Screws he calls it.)

I think the bastard's envious.

Not a word, not a hint.

Even the vicar's wife didn't know.

At least Catholics have confession.

Though of course their parish priests don't have wives...

I'm a historian. Was. The village well,

the parish pump, market day, after church, coffee mornings...

'Social cohesion in rural communities'.

I B.A.- ed on it.

Say what you like,

gossip keeps a community together.

Five years.

No, I'm not going round to see her.

I feel - betrayed...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Oh Yes It Was

no of course  
I can't prove it

what sort of a  
question is that?

it flew through too quickly  
but right through me

leaving a memory  
of something

and so I said to myself  
that must have been an angel

well you have to try  
to put it into words

Michael Shepherd

# ! Old Age And Senior Moments

I'm still sharp on memories, and appointments,  
but don't remember names any more...  
at least, not until 14 hours later when it's too late...

My good friend on the other hand  
is sharp on names, and lots of them,  
but can't remember events or appointments reliably...

Perhaps we should form a consortium,  
have a permanently open line:

'You remember that friend you introduced me to  
who we arranged to visit next Tuesday?  
What's her name? '

'Jane Doe, of course -  
have you met her? ...'

Expect us when you see us, Jane..  
if we can remember who we are, or why...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Old Age Discovered

I guess I thought old age  
would bring some answers.

But no - it's rich in questions;  
and not all of them  
about Me.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Old Age Remembered

I never thought it would happen to me...  
so, I wouldn't have been reading this poem...

but now it seems it has. And now  
I'm writing it. Or trying to. Big mistake?

So do I have  
anything worth passing on?

You know, the Polonius Balonyus stuff:  
If I were your age, boy,

this is what I'd be and do, yawn zzzz....  
Let's think instead, of some more lively head

in Sunday supplement style –  
'Old Age – Tragedy or Comedy? '

It's just so personal, and the only one  
to really weigh it up is you. Or me.

I'm wiser, happier (on the happy days)  
than ever in my life; but then, who cares?

Well, maybe one or two. On the other hand,  
there are few illusions left;

would one have been glad  
to have no illusions, at, say, twenty years of age?

Or, to be almost beyond pain, or pleasure,  
or attachments of any sort -

this in some young man  
taking his vows as monk,

would be a solemn commitment for a lifetime; but  
when you're old – easier or harder then to bear?

then, short-term memory shorter, long-term memory longer -  
that's wonderful - provided you have no regrets...

the memories come flooding back  
of just how happy, happy childhood is...

barely remembered now, how adolescence  
is the most painful time of life...

To cut a long life-story short –  
the comedy's more comic; the tragedy's more tragic.

So I wonder how Shakespeare, having studied both  
and then thrown his books away,

living a comfortable (or was it?) Stratford retirement -  
a spot of bowls, a friendly pub,

grandchildren, his or of his relatives,  
to keep him young or tire him out or both -

I wonder what passed through his worldspanned mind  
as he passed passing time? As his time passed?

Michael Shepherd

# ! Old-Fashioned New Dedication

In all my mean and leaden days on earth  
I did not glory; lived in dismal dearth;

To sing life's glory now I'll seek, these days;  
to find a greater life through constant praise.

Michael Shepherd



# ! On A Wing And A Prayer

Icarus  
has had a bad press  
throughout history  
as some sort of moral metaphor  
for a man who challenged  
Intelligent Design  
and/or the gods  
and failed, in a narrow-minded view

A young man's ambition  
and perhaps devotion  
drew him towards the heavens  
why not  
and science had not developed very far  
so how was he to know  
except by experiment

I'd like to think that as he dropped  
out of a cloudless Greek sky  
out of mythology  
out of Breughel's painting  
out of Auden's mindfulness

he was caught before the third and last bobbing up  
by a bevy of compassionate mermaids  
and returned gently to land  
to live again perhaps under  
an assumed name

while the mermaids sang to each other his story  
across the seven seas  
who whispered it to men  
in the off-shore breeze  
as a moral story telling how

heartfelt prayer always reaches heaven  
there to be taken into account  
but science is dodgy, make sure  
you get it right and

it will be your servant

and when one day with heaven's consent  
you build a better vehicle to 'conquer' space  
though how untrue a phrase  
perhaps Apollo would be  
a safer name since Icarus Two  
somehow doesn't have that ring about it.

Michael Shepherd

# ! On His Deafness

'Speak up - no need to shout -I'm not THAT deaf! '  
- do I have real reason to complain,  
if years of partial listening have brought  
now partial hearing in their fateful train?

O Milton - isn't it curious: the blind  
evoke our instant feelings of compassion -  
while deafness calls some idiot state to mind,  
evoking, far from pity - irritation?

Those saintly mystics would just praise their God  
that He, to speed their simple saintliness,  
brings outer deafness so that inner Word  
in cloistered silence, bring a greater bliss...

So may I bear affliction in good part  
and hope to hear the louder in the heart.

Michael Shepherd

# ! On Not Sending Christmas Cards

Dear Friends –  
for friends you are, and friends  
you will remain –

I'm not sending any cards this year –  
so of course, I do not deserve to receive any,  
by the human law of tit for tat...

So if you're sending me a card  
because you sent me one last year  
and think I'll notice if you don't -  
don't bother.

If you're sending me a card  
just because I sent you one last year-  
I don't want it. Just don't bother..

If you're sending me a card  
because we haven't seen each other all the year,  
maybe we should arrange to meet? Or  
maybe we simply haven't anything more  
to say to each other?  
Maybe we're happier leaving it that way?  
Don't bother with a card..

If you're sending me a card  
because - it's part of Christmas fun -  
and open hearts, and memories -  
then, bless us every one...

If you're sending me a card  
because you never sent one before  
and feel the urge – I'll be delighted;  
and if you don't get one in return –  
rest assured, that I'll remember, and  
we'll probably soon meet;  
and know: you have enrolled yourself  
as my friend, anyway,  
by that warming thought..

If you're sending me a card  
because you have me so deep  
implanted in your heart  
that your love for me is beyond a printed word –  
then that's the way that I reciprocate your love,  
how could I not? Just don't expect mere words –

though there's a chance  
a poem may wing its way one day  
as whitest swans and downy doves  
know in the air and space above  
their heart's true home..

for, if ever, for however short a time  
you were my friend, or I to you – you are that  
always. Always. This  
is what the heart is for.

Michael Shepherd

# ! On Rilke's Birthday,2007

and since then,  
angels about their business  
know we speak their name  
more intensely; they, closer  
to a human cry;

words too,  
more proud to be themselves;  
know themselves to be  
closer to angels

and even Death hesitates,  
hearing your name.

Michael Shepherd

# ! On The Break-Up Of Two E-Poets

There is no comment  
submitted by members..

Better new kindling  
than raking the embers

Michael Shepherd

# ! One Of Each

To say the least  
about the most

and have it known -  
that's poetry;

one tear, one laugh  
may be enough

Michael Shepherd



# ! One-Word Poem: 'Hallowgoodbuymas'

One word...  
poetry in notion;  
reminds you of  
your deepest fears;

thus inferred,  
deep as the ocean,  
full of the dampness of  
disappointed tears...

too absurd;  
devoid of emotion;  
magic once; now far off  
in succeeding years...

that season dedicated to  
Mercator; from Halloween  
to the New Year Sales  
(invitation-only preview,  
Christmas Eve...)

worshipped in the faith  
that your Babe needs gifts,  
so wise up, don't be  
a dog in the Manger...

Hallowgoodbuymas...  
says it all really...  
except of course  
what goes without saying.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Oooh Grandma, What A Big Ovophil You Are...

My granma, whose skills are legend,  
taught me beside these skills  
that only granmas know

her secret name she uses when she writes her poems.

It's 'anonym'.

You'll need Webster for that.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Orfeo

Orfeo shone.

He shone as music shines.

His shining, not the beauty of his radiant body;  
it was the shining beauty of his humility.

And his humility – sometimes like gold,  
sometimes like purest, deepest Maryblue -  
the colour where the sky meets with infinity,  
meets with eternity.

His humility, like hers, drew all things good:  
and as you walked with him, all things were good:  
the mountains, trees, and rocks and stones –  
all things that do not move and cannot smile,  
sang music to the heart, which smiled;

all moving things were drawn to him:  
the wildest and most murderous beasts,  
and beasts that look like men, or men like beasts;  
some like vegetables that move...

all came to him, rubbed their heads against his legs,  
licked his hands (were there the scars of wounds?) :  
licked his feet (there too, the scars?) :

it was his fragrance that they recognised:  
in the memory of these wildest beasts  
deep in ancestral bones, the memory  
of Adam's fragrance, when he named each beast.

That fragrance is humility: that draws  
the music of all things in heaven and earth:  
draws heavenly space, and mountain air,  
and fire of Sun itself, and water sparkling  
as it springs from rocks;  
the fragrance of fresh-turned, rich earth;

Orfeo shines.

he shines – as music shines.

\*

{ from the treatise on the humble man  
by Isaac of Nineveh, c.620-680 AD/CE }

Michael Shepherd

# ! P O E T S

and the gift is not  
the writing, but the knowing,  
knowing poetry

poems come and go  
but the knowing stays  
and grows; ask them,  
they know that knowing.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Pain

Pain. Pain in the body.  
Pain in the mind.  
Pain. Feel the pain.  
Go to the centre of it.

In the centre, a flame.  
A cool, warm, steady, white, white flame  
so white, that  
it is more light than white.

Cool as detachment.  
Warm as love.  
Bright as enlightenment;  
burning the unnecessary.

The flame of healing,  
as old as the world.  
As old as olive trees and oil and sacred lamps,  
as old as wisdom.  
In the flame, an angel.  
That is what the angel said.

Michael Shepherd

# ! 'Perceived Insults'

In the list of human indulgences,  
'perceived insults' rank high in personal irresponsibility:  
it's when you take offence on behalf of another  
whom you hadn't spoken to, anyway, to ask them..

as for instance, insulting a teacher's intelligence  
by suggesting that she has acted out of malice;  
or insulting a small child by suggesting  
that his name 'Mohammed'  
given him by his parents,  
is itself an insult to the Prophet;

what a luxury for the holier-than-thou,  
the whited sepulcres, and those who use  
perceived victimisation by other faiths  
as a tool of their aggression...

well, you get the drift...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Poem As Baby

They emerge; and as they do,  
your whole world is re-shaped;  
you're stunned - as Adam must have been -  
with the miracle of birth;

They come as miniature perfection –  
who reads the small-print warning clause?  
'These goods come without a life-time guarantee...'

But you don't pause to dream their own world for them –  
except to count, in wonder, fingers, toes;  
they come as answer to your whole life up to now;  
right now, they laugh and cry as Love itself;

poems as babies in the heart and mind.

Michael Shepherd



# ! Poem For Danny And A Cliché For Jc

The poet sat by the babbling brook  
whence all but he had fled;  
the poet babbled on; the brook,  
dried up and long since dead.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Poem For David

The thing is,  
a poem 'means' what it means to each reader,

not your poetry teacher,  
not the guys who call themselves critics,

it's democracy come at last to the toffee-nosed  
haughty-cultural world of the arts

so don't ask me what this one means,  
you tell me, OK? that's if it means anything

oh did I forget something  
ah yes the poem

sorry I seem to have forgotten  
what I was going to say

Michael Shepherd

# ! Poem For Jc And Ajs

Yesterday evening, it rained  
cats and dogs. The night  
was plaintive. And even after  
we'd swept them all up and  
found homes for them,  
bandaged their paws, and  
got them down from the trees  
and chimney-stacks  
there were still  
poodles in the street.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Poem For Phillip

Sometimes there's <p>

</p> just a blank in the mind - no poem...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Poem Without A First Line

for no real poem has a first line  
any more than a real book  
has a first page

it comes out of a dark lost forest  
or a bright unknowing cloud

or an unbearable pain  
so unbearable that even  
if you wrote the poem on a piece of paper  
and threw the paper away  
it would ease the pain

or a childhood so miserable  
that only a complete change of life  
could recognise one single beautiful thought

or an astonishing moment  
when you knelt and prayed  
for the first time in your life  
to a god you did not know  
with words you did not understand  
for they were not even words

or the moment when all the horror of the world  
faced all the love and beauty in the world  
and both were so taken aback  
that they could only embrace  
and later, speak

or a nowhere and a nothing  
so stark that only poetry

without a first line

Michael Shepherd

# ! Poem Without Words For Mike

and after so long, a new poem from you  
and when I said how glad I was

you messaged back  
'I am afraid that' - and stopped there

and in the silence then  
the heart wrote a poem  
whose words only the heart knows

Michael Shepherd

# ! Poet Takes Count In Last Round

Sometimes the last line  
comes out of the blue -  
one to the solar plexus,  
an uppercut;  
you never saw them coming;  
you don't remember after that..

you're flat on the canvas,  
knowing you've been put in place;  
'Poet loses title-fight,  
clean KO in the 12th...'

When it came to the punch,  
the poem knew best - you, you were nowhere.

I'll say this - you know class  
when you see it.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Poetry As Bread - In The Spirit Of Rumi 28

Poetry is like bread – daily bread,  
like 'Irish' soda bread, best eaten on its day:

In the bakery of the heart and mind,  
the baker's woken early before dawn,  
refreshed and clear of purpose, full of the day's promise;  
brings air to flour, moulds and shapes;  
as the sun rises, so the bread.

Here it is, warm from the heart,  
smell it – this is the smell of goodness, isn't it?  
Touch it, both crisp and soft by turns;  
taste its goodness, beauty, truth, its very being;  
this is not yesterday's bread, with which you toy  
while waiting between courses, your head's straying mind  
in a thousand other places; this is here and now;  
coming warm from the heart; eat it with your heart;

this is the heart's nourishment; tomorrow it may serve  
tomorrow's mind; today, it is your daily bread,  
your nourishment – this poem, warm from heart to heart.

And when you've eaten it - the bread has disappeared -  
only your satisfaction remains, beyond all sense;  
as these words, already staling on the page,  
exposed to all the wanderings of the mind;  
only the love that they were made with, still remains;  
this, is your daily bread.

[from a metaphor in Rumi's writings]

Michael Shepherd



# ! 'Poetry Means...Uh...'

When I was very young,  
Poetry  
was written by  
AA Milne.  
and life was comfy.

When I was an adolescent,  
Poetry  
was written by  
pansies for pansies about pansies.  
though daffodils  
were lifestyle and exam-inable.  
and life was scary

When I was at college,  
Poetry  
was written by  
a chap in a leather jacket  
who glared at you angrily  
on his no-gear pushbike  
as he rode out to save the world.  
and life was a cold war and still scary.

When I was middle-aged,  
Poetry  
was in the assured embrace  
of the Arts Council and a chap at the BBC  
and the world managed quite well without poets  
but life was still scary.

Now  
I am old enough  
to swop lifestyle notes with Jenny Joseph,  
Poetry  
means that  
a poem's 'text' may be  
i h8 u  
BUT  
it's read right round the world

by lots of people. Like you.  
and life is full of promise...

Now that deserves a Metaphor.

'A what? ' said Pooh.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Portrait In Profile Only

How clear a portrait of you  
that he painted – that slight stoop  
of backbone; life has been heavy on you, yet  
has not worn you down; the shoulders say,  
I'm weathering it; the hair drawn back, and  
tidy; time's not for wasting on your hair;  
your gaze, I guess, is straight ahead;  
those lines around the corners tell us that;  
you promised that you'd sit for him;  
but when time's up, you know exactly  
then what's next to do.. you're living here,  
you're human; and we care...

and yet... and so... and yet...  
I want to look into your eyes;  
I want to know, what do you think of him,  
the one who paints this poem about one  
who may, may not, be you...  
what do you think? Do you think this is you?  
Does this surprise you, tell you  
who you are, or who you might still be?  
I'm greedy for the truth always –  
Lady – wife, mother, aunt, good friend,  
stranger from across the street,  
paragraph in the novel of his life –  
I'm holding back a world of love,  
it only needs a glance from you..  
tell me, why does his poem  
only paint your sideview? Whose eyes were missing  
when he wrote of you?

Michael Shepherd

# ! Portraits After Death; Rhyme After Time

and a poet I was reading yesterday  
said, have you noticed  
that portraits of people change  
after they die?

and I've noticed that portraits  
of Princess Diana  
now look to me as if  
she's a sad schemer

I don't like this at all.  
I feel dirty, as if  
I'd been manipulated  
when all I want to do  
is, to see the goodness and the beauty in her

It's the same with rhyme:  
when I see rhyme  
(hearing it doesn't worry me so much,  
as if the time of reading it  
heals it in some way) -

it seems like sad scheming  
as when Robert Frost  
has to take the road pre-planned  
by language and the rhyming dictionary  
and very obviously rhymes  
future with suture

I don't like this at all, either:  
It never used to worry me; now  
I start to look cynically  
at every poem that rhymes  
in the convention of its times  
(that rhyme was not planned  
deliberately..) -  
look cynically, to see  
which was the chosen word,  
the direction of the poet's thought;

and which the 'fill-in', like  
some silly puzzle; even if  
it stimulates the poet's imagination  
perhaps

I don't like either of these phenomena  
in actuality, or worse, in myself;  
both these dirty me to myself.  
This looks like being hard work  
for the insulted mind  
insulted, like some robot, by itself.

Diana, Robert, I am deeply, deeply regretful.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Presence Of Mind

Saints and wise men, so it's said,  
live entirely in the present moment,  
don't hang on to past things,  
don't plan for the future;  
live a life of here and now.

Jill, however, who also  
lives for the moment,  
gets invited to every party,  
loves to meet you,  
bubbling with life,  
never short of conversation,  
an ornament to society,  
a gift to hostesses;  
discreet, too, so they say..

can't remember if we've met before;  
makes an appointment for us to meet again  
in a certain pencilled tone of voice,  
betokening a friendship more eternal  
than one with a future,  
never quite keeps the appointment,  
the reason so charmingly explained,  
should you be so tactless  
as to mention it, that  
it's almost a compliment to you;

a little short, perhaps,  
of sainthood; but we love her...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Prosody?

Prosody:

it's about - it means - what poetry does,  
and how. I guess..

In Greek, it just means 'tune'. That  
should give a clue. In Latin,  
the word they used meant  
'song added to speech'.

So 'poetry' is pretty well  
indefinable. It's - well—  
whatever it means to you.  
And how the hell it does that. There  
are rules but,  
it finds its own. For  
one thing above all  
really matters: poetry is  
what it does. What it does. If  
it doesn't do anything for you  
that's it. No theories -  
just that. Be glad.

Aristotle tried to help  
with his 'Poetics'. Good on drama.  
But poetry? Let's fast forward to  
Ezra Pound: poetry's function is, he said,  
'to charge words with meaning  
to the utmost possible degree'.

Now put all this together and  
I believe it's saying,  
poetry's not - never was -  
shouldn't be - couldn't be -  
just words on the page, like this, but, it's  
me saying them to you, strongly, here and now,  
charging them with meaning  
to the utmost possible degree..

So if your child comes home with  
as homework, 'Analyse this poem by..'

- Angelou, Silverstein, Neruda,  
Hughes of both hues black and white,  
Milligan, Budowski, Pralutsky –  
tell them, go back tomorrow and say  
politely, 'Teach, Dad's a practising poet and  
he says, why not have a class comp in  
reading that poem aloud, and who  
makes most sense of it and keeps us  
listening down to the  
tips of our toes; and by the time  
we've all had a go and decided  
who's the best, we'll remember it  
for the rest of our lives and maybe, Teach,  
not need to 'analyse' it much and  
only after that? '

So here's to the next poem  
that you read aloud, or write to read aloud,  
charging it with meaning  
to the utmost possible degree.

Michael Shepherd



# ! Proverbs For Sellers Of Honours

Many pounds make knight lurk.

'Payed! ' comes before a fall.

Too many records spoil the broth.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Prufrock Agonistes

I am growing old,  
I am growing old;  
I should stop wearing surfing shorts  
below my belly fold.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Rain Is Never Blue

The rain blurs and beats at the window  
like mercy frustrated;

it has fulfilled its magic promise,  
bringing rice out of water,  
corn out of earth

yet cannot reach those human beings  
sheltering, unwashed by mercy,  
clutching their sad poems about rain.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Reciprocity

What you do not wish for yourself,  
do not do to others' said Confucius;  
'That which is hateful to you,  
do not do to your fellow'  
said Rabbi Hillel;

is reciprocity, then, all the love  
or charity, to use the fine old word,  
we need to live the life  
'in love and charity with our neighbour';  
the life we'd love  
the whole wide world to live?

Very nearly, most would say;  
but even in our age – especially in our age –  
a gentle voice should raise the thought,  
the whole Creation is one single act of love...  
that all around us  
offers us a godly smile, a goodly message;  
waits for us, so patiently,  
to smile back.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Remembering The Future

The Greeks said, those great Muses  
who civilise us, grace our dance of life,  
were once, before they were nine,  
just three; and before that,  
only one was named: and she was, Memory.

Does that make poets just regurgitators  
of what's already been oft said -  
and better, too, some would aver...?

No, it's more subtle than that; ask a poet:  
a poem that comes warm, hot, from the human heart  
demands a summary birth; won't hang around  
while you go out to buy more toys and frills  
to hang around the cot...

it is indeed, more like remembering:  
as if you step into a timeless place  
where all that's needful is to remember  
what the future poem shall, will, have said..

write it down; and maybe sleep on it;  
when you wake, you may remember  
two lines somewhere which you'd forgotten,  
but know exactly where that is...

That Muse of memory will then decide  
whether a poem that has a timeless birth,  
may have a timeless life... or not...

How can a poet claim a poem as his, or hers,  
when such a Muse? and yet, so close at hand?

Michael Shepherd

# ! Retirement

There's living; and then  
there's dying; and between,  
there's poetry,

introducing one to the other  
for the first time; giving them  
new names; sometimes seeming  
older than both.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Rock, Stone, Sand, Wind, Time, Eternity

the sculptor,  
called to the great task; through  
the huge columns, ringing echoes even with a sandal's tread,  
the stone chamber,  
the assembled court, gold, enamelled blue,  
eyes everywhere, walls, men,  
the Pharaoh's presence:

'show me as I am:  
man as lion,  
king of the living and the dead;  
show me as eternity'

the frail old man in heavy robes,  
the courtiers nodding, smirking...

more men than men could count  
whipped to task under a burning noonday sun;  
behind, a half-built pyramid;  
slaves chipped away the ancient bedrock  
according to the careful measurements,  
blocking out the figure, until the day  
the sculptor himself – and older now –  
mounts the scaffold to begin chipping  
the face of time that meets eternity.

'time says nothing but I told you so';  
which Pharaoh died before his monument?  
five thousand years before our own stone dreams,  
how many years of scaffolding?  
a temple hollowing between its long, long paws.

was it looked upon with awe, or  
as meaningless to children,  
to their children's children,  
as the frozen gesturing bronzes of our public squares? they,  
running off around the back of it  
to clamber onto its stone tail?

the night wind already piling up the drifting sand,  
night wind in palm leaves whispering of metaphor,  
green shores lost under dunes of time;  
wind and sand sculpting their own unanswered question:  
what is the reason we should ask of time?  
what is the question whose answer is timelessness?

Michael Shepherd



## ! Rose Poem For Was It Fran \*

The rose  
you may colour it yourself  
sang for many days  
about God  
for those who would listen  
then fading and dying  
or so it might appear  
sang to a passing poet  
who found a place for it  
and the rose spent the winter  
blooming in his poem  
while the poet sang  
about God  
until the next year came around  
when the rose  
took up the song again  
while the poem faded a little  
but did not die

[\*who didn't like the colour of the rose in the other poem]

Michael Shepherd

# ! Rumi Passed By Here Today

like a blank page, then  
gold dust lightly scattered over it

then a soft breeze blows it away  
but nothing is lost

for there was nothing to be gained;  
enough, that you were here;

for you don't need to pursue a metaphor  
when - see! - the metaphor is god, is world;

you don't need to convince us of anything  
that we don't already know

just a reminder that this is  
how it is;

a smile in passing;  
your gold dust scattered;

for a moment  
we are your beauty.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Rumi Was Here

It's his light touch.  
He's not trying to tell you anything,  
convince you of anything,  
he's not watching your face  
to see if you agree.

He's just mentioning something  
as if you were walking together  
someplace real nice.  
Already, his light mind  
is somewhere far elsewhere  
in this world of wonder,  
just mentioning it  
because there seems a connection.  
You too?

Rumi was here.  
The air is singing.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Rumi's Silence

Rumi wrote much about silence.  
Does that seem strange?

Poets live with silence:  
the silence before the poem;  
the silence whence the poem comes; .

the silence in between the words, as you  
drink the words, watch them glide through your mind,  
feel them slide down your throat  
towards your heart;

the silence which you share with the poet  
when the poem ends, sitting side by side,  
feeling one another being one heart;

the silence after the poem,  
when you are a different person  
from the person who started reading the poem,  
think differently, move differently,  
act differently; know Rumi a little better  
as a friend; know yourself a little more  
as a friend.

Rumi was asked, why do you  
talk, talk, talk, so much  
about silence?

He said, the radiant one inside me  
has said nothing.

And that's the silence which we listen to  
and hear in Rumi's heart,  
here, sitting in the cool shade  
which the scent of roses seems to love,  
while the fountain gently plays like a poet  
with sound and silence.



# ! Saint Augustine Cries From His Heart

Brothers – sisters – do our years last?  
Day by day, they slip away...  
those which were, no longer are;  
those to come are not yet here.  
The former days are past;  
the future days are yet to come...  
but only to pass away in their turn..

Today exists.. but only in this moment  
in which we speak, this moment now...  
already, its first hours have passed;  
the hours that remain do not yet exist;  
they will come, only to fall away  
into nothingness...Nothing contains  
constancy in itself.

The body does not possess being,  
it has no permanence; it changes with age,  
it changes with time and place,  
it changes with illness and accident..

The bright stars  
have as little constancy;  
they change in hidden ways,  
they go whirling through space...  
they are not steady, being is not theirs..

Nor is the human heart any more as constant:  
how many thoughts disturb it?  
how many ambitions now besiege it!  
How many pleasures pull it  
this way and that, tearing it apart!

The human spirit itself, although  
endowed with reason, changes..  
it does not possess being:  
it wills and does not will;  
it knows and does not know;  
it remembers and forgets.

No one has in themselves, the unity of being...  
so, after so many sufferings, diseases,  
troubles and pains, let us return  
to seeking that One Being;  
seek out, join, those who dwell  
in that city where Being itself is shared..

for a life without the sense, the sensing,  
the living-out of eternal Being, is unworthy  
of the name of life; only the changeless  
gives us meaning in and for our change...

only the boundless frees our minds of bonds.

[paraphrased from his Commentary on Psalm 121  
and his Sermon 346]

Michael Shepherd

# ! Saint Bernard In The Fields At Clairvaux. For Hilary.

That day as the sun set,  
its afterglow flooded the world with light  
like the meeting of heaven and earth; then  
the great bell of the abbey tolled the vesper;  
the workers in the fields lowered their scythes  
and bowed their heads or knelt on the sharp stubble;  
a grasshopper rested on the rough hem of my robe;  
nature held its breath and knew eternity

I listened as the echo of the bell  
took all my listening, and then  
was heard no more; but listening remained;  
the silence became full of all things, and  
all things were praise and  
all things were love and  
all things were understanding:

there I heard no other;  
there I saw no other;  
there I understood no other;  
but was infinity itself

love itself is understanding;  
understanding is itself all love.

Michael Shepherd



# ! Saint Maximus At Prayer

Sometimes, it's all humour –  
a divine joke shared between gods and men,  
a twinkle in the eye of the Creator...

seeing to it, that the man  
named Maximus, one day at prayer,  
-his eyes were open, for his soul was still -  
should notice the smallest beetle  
making its way across the open testament,  
minding, in its not so tiny mind, its own business...

and in its minimality, the man named Maximus  
observed that it had, within its tiny iridescence, being;  
watched his mind, learning of its nature;  
felt his own being share its life, its spirit, with that little thing;

and understood – the beetle unconcerned, or so  
it might appear, within our tiny world –  
that in that moment, he had shared  
the very nature of the Holy Trinity...  
being, nature, living spirit.

Or as the Indians say,  
from the Creator we receive  
a smile, a message...

Maximal in minimal –  
sometimes, it's all humour.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Saint Valentine On Tough Love

When those you most love  
die  
that's the time to speak in praise of love  
(said Saint Valentine) .

When those you have most loved  
up and go, without a word,  
that's the time to speak in praise of love  
(said Saint Valentine) .

When those you would most love  
want nothing to do with you,  
that's the time to speak in praise of love  
(said Saint Valentine) .

When you feel that all you need right now  
is a little love, to change your life,  
that's the time to speak in praise of love  
(said Saint Valentine) .

When you feel cheated by love  
because it's never come your way,  
that's the time to speak in praise of love  
(said Saint Valentine) .

Trust me. It's not easy to become a saint;  
said Saint Valentine.

.V.

Michael Shepherd

## ! Sculpting Krishna (2)

His parents guarded the temple,  
answered questions; the child  
wandered, looked, later read  
all that was said;

now, he selects the stone,  
listening all the time, hoping that  
he hears the voice of Krishna say,  
take this piece...

sharpens his chisel; prays;  
with each tap, a chiselled prayer  
rings out the question; magnified; or diminished?

chips away – outside himself, inside himself –  
all that is not Krishna;  
until finally, all that awaits  
is the faintest sound of flute, of lightest laughter,  
heard within the sculptor's inner ear:

stone pretending to be Krishna;  
Krishna, pretending to be stone.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Season Of Mists And Mellow Evening Class

There's a nip in the air these days.  
Time for self-improvement.  
In evening class, some nights  
will be fruitful, joyous, all you hoped.

Then there'll be nights when  
a diligent student has a 'problem'...  
could be a particular or worse, a general...

The class, who've been together  
long enough to bond,  
hasten to join him under that black cloud,  
misleadingly shaped like an umbrella,  
of his/her problem; we're not sure  
exactly what that problem is;  
but we all frown, look serious..  
who would think that silence could be so heavy?

only natural landscape would describe it -  
black cloud, boggy ground, slippery scree,  
fog descending; where's the compass point?

the tutor's seen it many times before.  
It's the underbelly of the learning curve  
shaped more like shark than jellyfish..

Michael Shepherd

# ! Senility - Now, Where Did I Leave That? ...

I wouldn't want to lend  
anyone my memory, these days -

they might forget  
to give it back.

Michael Shepherd

# ! She And She

they're 'close', we say,  
wishing to be fair, kind, just;  
wishing not to know too much;  
in case this clouds  
our mind's clear day..

they've been together since, oh, since  
the one she, had a bright career,  
the other she, just had a 'job';  
and now they're old;

it would be easy for the mind  
to label them... the which, the how..  
and yet we know  
(wishing not to know too much)  
that love flows as it clearly does

and who am I and who are you  
to say, to think, to guess,  
that any love is 'not quite love'; or  
whose love's just a second-best...

and as you see them walking slow,  
Darby and Darby, or Joan and Joan,  
your heart's heart knows, that as death beckons,  
how each dreads to die the second.

Michael Shepherd

# ! She As Life Itself

She passes through life  
with grace and ease and lightness  
like a fine bright silken sari  
caught by the gentle breeze  
on an early sunny morning

and life itself seems content in that,  
and smiles on her

and we who see her, feel ourselves  
graceful, easy, light of heart,

love her for it,  
and loving her,  
love ourselves.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Shop Until You Surface

It's the weekend – but  
you're feeling low – well, more than low...  
time, perhaps, for retail therapy...

the girls, the boys, go about it differently:  
with the girls, a sense of purpose:  
phone your Best Shopping Friend, arrange to meet;  
for the boys, it has to be covert, set up  
as accidental, just a diversion  
on the way to pub or café..

Your best friend senses that you're low;  
so gently teases you by dragging off the rail  
the most inappropriate; that's easy for the girls;  
it's all huge fun, around the serious stuff;  
for boys, even with your best friend – or perhaps,  
because he is – the inner world is hedged with image,  
self-esteem or lack of it.. a trip made best alone?

A new verse, now, for The Big Metaphor:  
is this how Life Really Is?  
You're feeling sorry for yourself, the victim  
of your own life, or that of others; so  
your best friend who's always there for you  
teases you: here, try on this droopy number  
labelled Sorrow; or here's this grey one, Misery;  
this mumsy housecoat which says Given Up;  
or this public statement, the ashy  
sackcloth dress marked down - Distressed Despair...  
or this loose-fitting one in charcoal, labelled Sin...  
or maybe, go right to the other extreme – here's this  
Life and Soul of the Party dress in vivid red? ..

The boys come out laughing – empty-handed,  
or with some trivial purchase for the sake  
of the 'right' bag...maybe he'll come back later  
and alone... the assistants raise their eyebrows,  
sigh with mingled disapproval and relief;  
a secretive male ritual has been roughly re-enacted.



The girls come out eyes shining; this has been  
total immersion; their past, their history, washed away;  
inside the crisp new bags, a light weightiness, like spun gold;  
or a silky something that slides snakily in the bag,  
a promise of a new life for a new you  
who is one step nearer to  
the real you, just waiting to step out...

Sunday morning; you awake with the soft contentment  
of someone who knows who they really are;  
a little nearer to that elusive self, which this strange Saturday  
had shown to you a little more, of what you're not..  
to see depression's black black low as blessing in disguise  
could be a gift beyond all market price.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Silent About That Night

In later years,  
seated around a huge fire,  
crackling and spitting on a snowy night,  
the best beer in Europe frothing from the jug,  
they'd ask him, jocular like but curious with it,  
how it felt to be remembered  
just once a year, all over the known world  
for that one night long ago?

' 'tis strange really: he were a right sod to work for afore that -  
never a word to me, as if I didn't be there;  
but that night, it were strange -  
it were the moment he stood there looking out of the window:  
there were summat in the room -  
wish I were a writer, like,  
to say what it were...

we've never spoken about it, mind,  
but we both know it's there unspoken, like..  
we haven't had a bad word between us ever since...  
that's what I'd like to write about,  
that's the moment...'

silence for a time, as they looked into the hissing fire,  
those woodcutters and their mates;  
then put their coats on, trudged out  
into the snow 'where the saint...'

well you know the rest...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Singing The Silences

It's almost as if we  
sing them to each other all the day  
to many tunes of silence:  
toss them, daring you  
to dropp them;

throw them like stones;  
say them over our shoulder,  
looking the other way;  
half-fill them, because  
the other does not deserve them –  
thanks, give you a call, see you...

sing them to the tune of  
a closing door;  
shout them as if we wanted  
everyone to hear them, say  
yes, you're right...

say them so thoughtlessly, that  
it's as if we've forgotten what we said  
just before we said them..  
and some words spoken  
not with the mouth, but  
from a shining eye, that speaks them  
calling to another eye;

or in the bed, said so gently  
and so softly, that  
it's as if, not you, but the other  
who is heard to say them; or is it  
both of you;

there's a music in all these;  
words, wrapped around  
with the music of our silences  
that sing unspoken words.



# ! Smile Enlargement! Free \*\*\*\*ing Offer!

Are you ashamed of your tiny smile?  
Does it make you embarrassed?  
Does it limit your social life?  
Wouldn't you like to draw all the chicks,  
have them eying you between the cheeks  
in trains, wink at you in the street,  
make a beeline for you at parties,  
increase your confidence in the office,  
be known as a 'big fat swinging smile'?

Wouldn't your partner – though she doesn't  
mention it, kinda unsore point –  
love it if you had a bigger smile? So she'd  
feel thoroughly satisfied every night,  
sleep better after, wake wanting more,  
boast about you to the chicks in the office,  
describe your smile to the other girls  
on those girly nights, before the stripper,  
- when she'd just smile and remember  
your own whopper of a smile...

We can promise you a smile  
that increases day by day, and  
painlessly; that will never shrink back  
and should see you right through  
to that what-a-way-to-go moment  
that you'll remember all your death...

It's called, Humour. You can get it  
in the slower prose application, or  
instantly effective, in verse. Act now!  
before you lose her to Leroy Jones  
down the road, whose big swinging smile  
is the talk of all the chicks...

Smile! Send to Poemhunter  
for a free trial – today!



# ! Solstice

This year, 21 December is the crucial day:  
Earth, Sun, in their ancient dance.

Do they need our help?  
The day, here in the North, shrinking;  
what should be, if any, our concern?

Offer up our Christmas gifts  
to beg exchange for longer days?

Hold vigil at Stonehenge,  
believing that all our being,  
all our attention, is what we owe,  
to earn a daylight that  
may not continue on the morrow  
to shrink to eternal darkness?

Feel so small, as we contemplate  
The mysteries of the universe?

Feel so great, as we participate  
in so vast a system?

Or just, a private moment's awe,  
then back to Christmas obligations?

How quick we'll be, though,  
to note the day's few bonus minutes  
in a week or two – post-Christmas gift  
that was delayed in some almighty post;  
secretly, we're sure that we deserve it;

yet, a lifting of the heart, while we forget  
December's heaviness.  
I have not mentioned love.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Some Applications May Be Denied

What's that noise, between a boom and a crash?  
oh of course – it's the computer, having a bash  
at trying to alert the next-room me  
that we're running out of virtual memoree..

the PC should worry – it's young and fit;  
this old microsoftie's in a far worse state than it..

Michael Shepherd



# ! Some Of My Best Fiends Are Critics

How easy, and how comfortable  
to sit on the sidelines  
of another's poetry!

You think you've paid  
for your seat.  
You haven't.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Some Other Poet, Some Other Poetry

and yes, since we can all dream  
some other life – but do not, cannot,  
dream its divergences, its accidents,  
its departures and arrivals,

I dream some other life  
rich in metaphor  
so that nothing seen, but  
draws into the mind its strange partner  
far across the world:  
food on a plate seen as  
a battlefield; a chair as atoms;  
a rainstorm as a marriage;  
a fieldmouse as an empire;

and across years, the whole planet  
drawn two by two into the arked mind  
meeting its metaphoric partner and  
questioning its own image of itself  
living in strangeness

and in after years  
a figure seen, in knee-high leather hunting boots  
striding through city streets  
seeing not a city but a world;  
living words as if meeting strangers,  
waking simultaneously in many heavens,  
knowing the unknown into its own future words

Michael Shepherd

# ! Some Poems Have A Vast Interior

Some poems have a vast interior;  
a deep, wild, impenetrable up-country,  
traversed as in some dream  
so long, no-one can say  
how long; before  
they meet the shore of love,  
merge into that sparkling sea  
from which, humanity;

how far has that so wild-eyed poet walked  
to find the sea?

Michael Shepherd

# ! Sometimes It's Good To Underwrite

'I never cease to marvel...'

Michael Shepherd

# ! Sonnet 59 For Dad

I'm thinking, Dad, that soon, maybe, we'll meet;  
at least, that's how it seems from what I hear;  
the info's not at all clear on this point:  
like, where exactly; and what will I wear,

and shall I bring you something; if so, what?  
I'm not too easy, Dad, about all this:  
like, am I sure to find you in that lot?  
And, will we treat each other like - we did,

or as we should now (God knows how you'll be...) :  
and, will we need to talk about past pain?  
( 'cos that's what's really, really bugging me... ) :  
or can we wipe the slate clean, start again?

Dad - were you proud of me? You never said...  
Dad - love you; are things better, now you're dead?

Michael Shepherd

# ! Soul's Soliloquy

It's said that universal single mind,  
as in a flash it flowers in our individual mind,  
hastens first in two directions: polar opposites,  
and then and thus, duality..

then, within these mighty parameters,  
all that we call our mind –  
all our imagination, and its limits self-imposed,  
all the great adventure of our human thought –  
watchmaker's intricacy, tumble-dryer, roller-coaster,  
battleground of warring factions –  
all that we call our mind..

and thus from time to time, one concept which I throw  
into this zoo, my mind, at feeding-time –

suppose the Hindu view correct – or at least,  
worth any animal's good chew –  
that our most inward part, call it  
the soul or what you will, is on  
an almost ageless learning curve of many lives:

each life as homework set by shrewd examiners  
of the last life's papers; homework set to test  
this candid candidate: we know your strengths,  
let's now work upon your weaknesses...  
and let's see, which family  
would best suit you, get you going  
one way or another...turn you out  
a better-rounded personality...

If this is so – and personally, I like  
the divine symmetry of this tiger  
in the night of destiny – I wonder why  
I should have no inkling of those past and future  
friends, so intimate – my past and future soul:

to say to one, you, my elder brother,  
are you proud of me? Have I upheld

our family's just pride?

and you, my younger brother –  
or should I call you, son? I bequeath to you  
the best I've got to leave you with...  
some things you'll need, I may have quite forgot;  
for that, I'm sorry; but here, take my loving wishes,  
have yourself a great, great time...

you'll never know, I'll never know, perhaps  
how much we three love one another..  
or, perhaps, we shall..

Michael Shepherd

# ! Sources Of Carbon Emission

beanz

meanz

fartz

Michael Shepherd



# ! Spring Afternoon

A spring morning – well,  
I only need to say the words?  
I'll picture mine, you picture yours –  
champagne bubbling in the blood and in the mind,  
hopes and possibilities flooding freshly in..

but a spring mid-afternoon... like today, like now:  
a subtle balance of the elements;  
the sunlight bathes the room, but gently,  
with its promise; yet,  
there's a timeless peace with it  
that's like a life surveyed; yet  
free of thought, of comparison, or of regret:

the six loved paintings that adorn the walls  
bought for a song, when art was like a song –  
they love the gentle sunlight, and it in turn loves them;  
five artists painting their sunlit peace, their happiness;  
(two very different ones from the man  
who lives so humbly halfway up  
the mountain hills he rambles every day):  
three oils; one gouache; one watercolour; and one pastel;

they all but two have clouds in them  
as they're all landscapes;  
one that hasn't, has a haze as if  
the painter's painting the summer wind, in those high hills..  
the other is a cloudless morning's peace,  
the bend of a river in mid-France;  
the river...it cannot be, just painted oil?  
it's water seen as by a pure clear soul...

and the clouds – caught in an impossibility of time,  
play out an endless drama of the elements;  
timeless in the peace of, now, a slightly later  
springtime afternoon; almost with a touch...  
but how could perfection ever regret  
its own departure?



# ! Ss For Ssnake

when it's the s tucked away in 'asleep'  
in its s for secret hideaway  
it feels s for safe and s for secure  
though you can see it keeps  
the s there just in case

now it's waking up, uncoils itself;  
it's an awkward way that it has to move,  
but it's s for strong, as you'll discover  
if you hold one

if it feels threatened, my how it can move!  
a rapid s for slither, or s for slip  
into a drain or a hole in ground  
quicker than an eyeblink

but if you catch it s for snoozing  
and s for sunning itself, as adders like to do,  
and it's too late to s for slide away,  
then it'll hiss at you with a long ss...

to let you know that that there's an s  
in 'fangs' and in 'poison'...  
(and also, by god's grace, in 'serum'...)

so let it be, like the s wrapped in 'respect'  
to enjoy its s for self, the s for same as you...

(Don't you wonder, if snakes themselves hear that s  
when they slither or slip or slide their way  
through the grasss or leavesss or stonesss  
and know, that's my own s for sound...  
because I'm an s for snake...?)

Now it's feeling s for strangely  
s for slippery, inside itself...  
oh look, it's going to s for shed  
its s for skin...why, I do believe  
it's turned into a... poem!

Now it can see and hear itself!  
ssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss  
there's a snakeskin belt for you

Michael Shepherd

# ! Ssshhh...Keep This Quiet.Ish...

I shouldn't really be telling you this  
since it was told me by a brother Freemason;  
but hey! what's the point of a secret  
if you can't tell it to anyone,  
or write a best-seller about it? ...

it seems, this guy says,  
that the descendents of Jesus and Mary Mag  
who are now spread over all the world  
though no-one knows until we do their DNA  
(maybe that tomb will yield it? we live  
in exciting times) –

They converted to Muslims, since  
that was the ultimate disguise;  
and also they could move around more freely  
in the Middle East, OK?

They were the founders of the Hashishim,  
the secret society of assassins  
(it's in Wikipedia, so it must be true)  
and that's why (and this  
has never been explained before now...)  
they seldom murdered Christians (real Jesus Christians, that is) :

then when Christianity dominated Europe  
they re-converted back to be the Templars  
who as you know, are still going in Scotland  
(where Zimmy recently moved, aha...)  
and you'll have to work out  
the Jewish connection for yourself...

and through the centuries, it's they  
who've done all the unsolved murders.. you name them...  
Lincoln, Kennedy –  
the media didn't report this,  
but they leave false clues –  
in that Book Repository, on the shelf but sticking out,  
a copy of the Bible in Sicilian,

signed by Frank Sinatra and Marilyn Monroe...

and yes, the Pope, but just to warn him...  
and that guy in Holland;  
and of course, Princess Diana –  
well, it's obvious, innit?

well that's what this guy told me...  
but you know I think –  
I think there's an even more secret secret society  
(authors' agents, spy novelists, wannabees,  
that sort of person)  
who every now and then, carefully timed,  
launch a tasty, juicy new  
conspiracy theory on the world  
while they get up to something  
even more occult  
(they're using robots now...  
triggered by thought-patterns,  
of course it's hush-hush..)

chizmite, niceta torkcha... seeya lya...

hurry up please it's time

Michael Shepherd

# ! Suppose A Smile.

Suppose a smile.

Suppose it always, with a smile.

Suppose the sun to shine,  
shine with a smile;

suppose the rain to fall and smile  
smile at the earth;  
the snow, with gentle smile,  
protecting tender shoots;

suppose the wind to smile  
mysteriously, about its secretwork;

suppose – that's easy – flowers  
to open with a smile; and  
smile as they fade and wave farewell,  
a smile that says, that's how it is...

suppose some patient smiles:  
as rain-forests say to those who cut them down,  
you'll live to regret this; here's  
your chance to learn;

suppose the desert sand to smile  
and say, you took the trees, and now  
I'm here; plant, call down rain, store, irrigate...

suppose the ice-cap, melting with sad smile,  
saying, I did not choose...

suppose that Abraham, Moses, Christ, Mohammed  
spoke their uncompromising, uncomfortable truths  
always with a smile; a gentle smile;  
a smile to say, I'm here, you're here to learn...

suppose the spear to smile,  
hammered into pruning-hook..

suppose smile met with smile.

Suppose.

Michael Shepherd



# ! Sweet And Sour

but some mornings  
while of course you'd like to write  
a poem, there's nothing there;  
so you read a poem that 'someone else' wrote  
though of course it's your mind reading it

and after you/I read it,  
there drifted into the mind the phrase  
'the sweetness of life'...

a phrase more common,  
even more evocative -  
'douceur de vie'  
(or even plural.. 'petit douceurs'...))  
in French writings..

how wonderful the workings  
of the mind: that first, tiny  
explosion of consciousness in the mind  
instantly offers in language  
duality; and opposites;  
take your choice,  
and be bound by it...

so, there was sweetness: which this morning  
seemed a mile away;  
and... sourness! Yes, of course!  
life has been... just a little sour... these last few weeks  
for no apparent reason – though of course  
I could offer reasons flattering to me...

Yet also, heavenly grace, as it may be,  
presenting duality, allows  
the glory of a unity to be seen:

this morning, knowing life as both sweet and sour,  
both and neither,  
I'll choose what's been lacking  
(which is the definition of pure desire...) and

without even the wish to elaborate –  
just to name it, in its beauty to the mind,  
the sweetness of life;  
it's like a poem in itself.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Synecdoche

Darling, we need to talk...  
no not here and now; in private..  
it's about synecdoche...

yes, I know you thought that it's just  
one of those things that poets worry about...  
but not any more...

it's like eating of the fruit of  
the tree of knowledge - now we can't forget  
that it's like it is, now, no longer like it was then..

synecdoche means, taking the part for the whole...  
like in poetry, 'living by the sword'  
when you mean, throwing a whole army into  
removing one tyrant, when in the old days  
you just sent in hired assassins, got on with life...

anyway the point is, I've been getting far too many e-mails  
about.. well.. 'satisfying' you... implying that  
if I don't keep up with Mr Jones down the road  
(and yes, we're on the same rugger team,  
I see him in the showers...)  
that if I don't - well, you know -  
Mr Jones may, er, extend his favours  
in your dire erection, sorry, mistyped that one...  
guess my Freudian slip is showing...

and now I see they've started e-mailing you  
with much the same message - that  
for Christmas prezzie, shared between us  
(that's one crossed off the list...) -

well, should it be the vacuum pump (gift-wrapped  
under discreet plain mailing cover) ,  
or should I try the old-fashioned weights  
( 'Sorry, he's not available right now,  
he's weight-training behind closed doors...' ) ,  
or should I go for patches?

Darling, you're so sensible about these things -  
how do you feel about this, considering  
our forty years of married life, and how you feel  
about the Mr Jones's in your future plans?

yes, synecdoche - taking the, er, part, for the hole  
(oops, another sp....guess it's getting to me...)

but let's remember, darling - synecdoche also says  
that he (and she) who just live by the sword  
then perish by the sword... should we consult  
the GP, in view of my heart condition...?

darling, I leave it all to you -  
yes, ask the other girls next time  
you have a Summers party...  
I'll check the new small print  
they've added to the life insurance policy...

Michael Shepherd

# ! T H E R E M E M B R A N C E R S

and it's difficult to say exactly  
what they do, or  
how useful that task really is

for like the ideal rulers  
of ancient China,  
the better they do their job,  
the less we notice that

you could say, they are  
remembrancers:  
they hold memories for millions of people:  
they remember people, good people, poor people,  
and honour them as we should wish to honour them;  
they remember heroes and the dead;  
they remember history; and how  
things used to be done, when they were done well;

it is their duty, over a whole lifetime,  
to remember what is so deep in all our hearts  
that we have forgotten that we know it;  
that we could hardly express it;  
yet, as those stories of every nation tell,  
as King Arthur is said to arise from the sleeping soul  
in times of need – this is what they remember for us;

they remember what it means to be a nation  
when others have forgotten  
but as they have no executive power  
they can only advise and consent  
when asked

they draw to themselves, good and wise people  
who help them to remember  
to remember for the rest of us

and such is the mystery of what they really do  
that we laugh about their private lives  
over our morning newspapers

while they set out for another day  
full of official engagements  
of being seen to remember something  
and we remember having seen them  
and how we waved our flags and gave them flowers  
but may or may not sense  
what they remember for us

and as they move around,  
in and out of cars and sometimes planes each day  
receiving flowers from children awed by the moment,  
shaking hands, receiving in a few seconds our clumsy response,  
respect; admiration; recognition for duty done; even, love;  
they must remember all that is unspoken, unformulated,  
in those clumsy moments of the heart and soul  
and that great mind which makes of human beings  
families, tribes, nations, humanity  
in those we walk with, through our life

for memory is not visible  
and what they hold for us, we seldom think about  
and we shall never know how much we owe to them  
unless they were no longer here for us

they are sometimes called to be called kings and queens  
and some are great,  
born great, achieving greatness, or greatness thrust upon them  
in the holy oil with which status is anointed;

but our gratitude is seldom shown  
until their jubilee,  
or in time of war  
or at their funeral  
when we, wearing black,  
may celebrate their life, their light,

the remembrancers

Michael Shepherd

# ! Tagore And The Cobra Of Illusion

Yes – we read the world wrong,  
and say that it deceives us,  
said Tagore...

just imagine, if the snake said,  
you can't see me... no, I'm just  
a stick of rotting wood,  
a length of old rope thrown away,  
mouldering in the undergrowth...

or the rope said, I'm reborn!  
I'm now a snake, I've risen in intelligence  
and consciousness – watch out, all those  
who treated me so harshly as a rope...

or the shell said, how beautiful I am!  
I'm mirrored all like silver;  
once I was a humble shell,  
content to be myself; now -  
how precious now I am!

Or the silver coin said,  
I'll hide here in the sand  
and look like mother-of-pearl, nacreous,  
and wait to give myself  
to some delighted beggar...  
how virtuous I am; and how  
rewarded I shall be!

no, Nature, prakriti, has never learned  
from Man, how to deceive...

ah, but mankind... how we deceive  
our mother, Nature... we promised her  
we would look after her in her old age...  
but all we did was steal her wealth,  
cast her into a filthy wilderness,  
pretend to others that  
she never was of our family

but an untouchable who works for us...

oh Rabindranath, what would you think  
of the behaviour of your grand-children...

oh Rabindranath, you never guessed  
how we've deceived our world...

Michael Shepherd



# ! Teenager Seen From Above

The teenager around the house,  
confronted with the suggestion that  
God smiles on him, would be  
rabbit-stunned beyond reaction;

but, inspect him thoroughly from toe  
to top (leaving aside his as yet  
creditable carbon footprint; cash-strapped  
is carbon-friendly) :

the trainers, sweat-made in the Third World,  
now look as if they're back there; they've been known  
to walk out of the room from under the bed  
in sheer self-disgust;

the forever jeans, customised with  
a designer rip just above the knee,  
are of that subtle shade  
where worn meets dirty;

the 'top' – at least there's some hint there  
of choice; sending out coded messages  
which groan-ups cannot read; could be  
footie with the boys; or could even be  
let's sleep together, no big deal..  
we'll just have to wait and see, or guess;

the face, now: that gets little attention  
first thing in the morning; but in the evening  
it's a different ball-game; Mum's facial things  
have even been known to be employed  
when rumblings of an imminent socio-visual  
eruption threaten;

but, the hair... thirty, twenty years ago  
if someone his age took this long at the mirror,  
we'd either be considering counselling,  
or buying him Judy Garland records...

eventually, he's out from there; the immaculately  
tousled gleaming wildness is a sennight's  
tribute to the week's Top Ten...

angels, passing over, smile to themselves  
at the view from above; murmur at  
what a well-groomed lot the  
humans are these days.

Maybe it's time to haul out  
Great-Granma's hand-stitched  
sampler from the loft, and put it back  
in the downstairs loo, where  
we used to think it such a joke  
in our first-house years –  
'God Sees All'...

Michael Shepherd

# ! That Bit Of Pinky Stuff On The Carpet

What is it doing on the clean carpet,  
that bit of pink something?

Not a curse upon the house-proud  
nor a criticising comment on the housekeeper,  
or retribution for the gap under the front door,  
or – it it's blown in from the garden –  
a hint of early autumn threatening poetic sadness  
or a reminder of the fragile evanescence of all things

it is a whisper from God  
which has eluded the debris whirling between stars,  
the heat of the sun, its solar dust,  
the icy-cold of atmospheres,  
airless space of ether,  
antennae of early-warning systems,  
hover of spy-planes,  
click and silent breath of listening devices,  
tick tick tick of incriminating tapes recording,  
unforgiving eye of spy cameras,  
the chatter of minds forever elsewhere,

it is a petal shed from the geranium outside the door,  
of the most delicate, almost transparent  
pink no rose no shell no just itself  
of a fine fine substance which no man can yet make  
on its long, long pilgrimage  
from beyond the whole vast cosmos of  
innumerable solar systems, beyond where  
space bends upon itself in homage  
where the mind of God dwells

to find itself again in my suddenly open heart  
as if it had never travelled from or to,  
this whisper of pinky-rosy-shell-like stuff  
on the carpet by the warm bare foot.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Afterlife Of Death

Why should mankind not face  
the thought of afterlife?

For half the world or so,  
there is no great concern:  
in time you just come round again  
to improve upon your last performance –like  
an athlete, daily training round the track

which if it's so, then, perhaps, how sad  
that we are not aware just how we've done this time,  
compared with how we did last time -  
it might be quite a spur!

of course, if heaven's way beyond  
all boundaries of time and space  
we can surrender with relief  
our picture of our tone-deaf self  
learning to play the.. harp..?  
or engaging in those activities  
(outside time and space?)  
which Islam seems to promise...

but if the whole Creation, as it's said,  
is all one single act of love,  
then let's imagine death, or afterlife  
a part of that same divine love:  
for if, as every religion expresses in its way,  
our god is love – then how can death  
not be a part of that same love?

so (as those who have nearly died, aver)  
there stand to welcome us, all the family  
and friends that we have ever known and loved;  
but with this difference: that seen  
with all the vision of that total love  
we understand all our, and their, apparent differences  
and see this from that heart of total love..

and if it's so, that once again  
we have to re-enter earth's burning atmosphere  
born into another life that we've now earned,  
our first cry and tear and heavenly smile  
may tell all

And if perhaps this seems all fantasy – then,  
perhaps, if all is love,  
love's sleep, love's dream, and love's awakening –  
and also, this, my fantasy of love in death,  
may all be samely, simply, love.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Couple In The Evening Class

As the new year's evening class  
filed in, in varying displays of enthusiasm or cool,  
discreetly summing up their tutor  
you couldn't help but notice them  
despite their modest manner –  
of equal height, and that a little under average

couples attending class together  
always catch my too premature thoughts –  
has he brought her? has she brought him?  
is this just a stage in careful courtship,  
attending a class together?  
where will they sit? couples tend to choose  
the front row or the back, I've noticed;  
often arrive at ease, as if they've met up after work,  
taken a coffee or a light snack...  
which will ask a question first? and when they do,  
will some slight frisson of emotional thought-wave  
pass between them? suppose after the first term,  
one leaves, one stays – will the one who stays, feel freer  
to ask more questions? or will I sense  
that invisible tug of apron-strings...?

over the weeks, although they gave no overt sign of it,  
they became a sweet, still place in the class,  
a perfect balance between individuality and togetherness;  
when he or she asked a question or gave an answer,  
the other radiated almost imperceptibly  
a quiet pride so pure that it was more, delight,  
as one might do with a son or daughter.

At the end of the year, our paths went their separate ways;  
and yet, after so many years, so many classes, so many students,  
they've left a quiet place in my memory;  
of humble simplicity, strength clothed as modesty,  
boundless possibility –

they, the silent tutor;  
I, the observing student.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Dark Cloud Of Depression

The dark cloud.  
It sits around your head  
or inside it, more like.  
Around your mind,  
or inside it.  
Around your heart,  
or inside it.  
Does it reach your knees?  
Seems like it, some days.  
Your toenails perhaps?

If you let it, it has a voice.  
Please don't listen to it;  
that's really dangerous;  
it makes general statements  
as if it knows you better than you know yourself  
like, 'your...' - no, it claims to BE you -  
so, it's 'MY life is pointless..'

Have you noticed, it's  
never in front of you,  
always somewhere behind you,  
whispering over your shoulder

so on a bad day, it's there in the bed with you  
the moment you awake; not of course  
in kissing range, that might be fun - but behind you,  
murmuring in a bedly voice  
'WE are really down this morning aren't WE? '

or it catches up with you in the bathroom  
or a bit later, like when you review the day's appointments  
or start out for work.

The First Aid for depression is of course well known  
(to everyone else, at some other time...) :  
put some music on, sing in the shower,  
sit in the brightest light,  
toast your hidden beautiful self



in orange juice; take some vigorous exercise,  
seek out good company in  
someone or something; be  
good company yourself, for someone else..

they all work, for a time; but don't you wish  
for the classic fairy tale encounter –  
there you are walking through the dark wood  
of the dark cloud, and suddenly  
the monster springs out in front of you  
in all its horror; for the first time  
you meet it face to face; it's  
terrifying, but a curious relief:  
now you know it's not you after all,  
but something else; you look it in the eye,  
you don't retreat, but march towards it,  
say Boo (for linguistic reasons, rather abstruse)

and as you get nearer and nearer to it, the monster  
gets smaller and smaller, until...

and then, marching back  
triumphant with a spring in your step,  
you may feel like  
nailing it with a poem, to say  
wow I've survived;  
have a great day!

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Dark Night Of The Soul

Not death - no poem's yet been writ  
on that - but that dark door and passage  
where everything, all that one knows of life  
must be surrendered, in the service  
of a brighter light, a brighter life...

Only those who apprehend the soul  
in all her glory, must submit  
when time calls time, and there descends  
that total darkness of the mind  
which wipes out any thought of things  
created; any sense of former life;  
any creature that might say  
I've done my best, so take me, God...  
no, there's nothing left, when hope  
is as it never were; or ever named;  
truth no longer means a thing beyond  
this total darkness, which could not be more true;  
eternity, pure timeless state of nothingness,  
nightmare without movement, frozen heart..

how can those with nothing to hold on to,  
no hands to hold, no reason to hold on...  
what can they do, but curl up in a ball  
like nature's creatures faced with stranger, death,  
that never spoke its name to them?

One thing only, mercy then will grant:  
you will survive... pale, humbled, weak,  
wondering what is left, to try to build  
a pale approximation to a life  
which now, you have no taste for...

and in the coming days, as if  
you tasted water for the first time in your life..  
you sense a strange new cleanliness..  
there's some new life awaiting, there,  
wherever 'there' is.. to be lived...  
perhaps a new created world

may come of soul's dark void..

Who can understand, prepare themselves for,  
this strangest blessing from the gods?  
But that's the package: unpreparedness is all..

Imagine, now you're high and dry,  
gasping above the sandy waterline, a shivering wretch –

imagine all the glories of a summer's day;  
all the stirring of the blood in Spring;  
all the miracles that burst from earth...  
an equal miracle, it must be,  
the miracle of winter, stealing from us, leaf by leaf,  
all we never owned...  
this winter's tale, the heart must kneel and praise;  
as marvel; wonder; see as holiest whole -  
this timeless, darkest, hopelost, night of soul.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Dark Night Of The Soul 2

Everything's going well,  
you seem to have everything arranged  
as you like it: you glance into  
the banqueting hall, the chandelier  
sparkles above the laden, enticing table;  
there's the scent of perfection

then the lights go out.  
Worse, there's a note  
in the butler's pantry:  
gone elsewhere; you're in charge.

No notice given, not a hint; it was  
all going so well.. where's  
the fuse box? Candles?  
Torches?

You remember, what they said  
but it didn't mean anything at the time:  
when you've sorted it all out yourself  
you'll be like a different person.

Then - everything becomes a delight;  
everything lit up and sparkling;  
fragrance and scent around all things;  
every single thing, its own special flavour.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Equation Einstein Couldn'T Solve

Defense = retribution = aggression

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Eyes Of Impressionism

Saints.

Like swans, gliding untroubled so it seems  
to us, lazing on the river bank  
of a Seurat summer Sunday afternoon,  
gliding over the surface of the waters  
as love perhaps, on that first day;  
they as floating symbols  
of the beauty beyond beauty;  
their work, invisible to us who watch

Painters.

Like waterlilies, resting in perfection  
on the surface of the waters  
as love rests, sure of their own beauty;  
painting just the sunlight  
falling on things, moving on  
more slowly than we see;  
the depth of the waters  
in the painter's mind and heart;  
his work invisible to us who watch  
his dabbing at the canvas  
as a dabchick bobs in the water, his mind  
moving as time moves;  
for him, sitting at the canvas,  
always time present,  
in the water-garden already on his palette

Cataracts.

How far a word from  
the stillness around him as he sits,  
his beard a little yellow from the nicotine,  
seeing the waterlilies as if for the first time,  
but each year the water seems to tell  
more about time itself... like Proust;  
where is time going in this painting?

Eyes.

Cataracts, yes; but perhaps over time  
they too have sought to serve him,

become themselves, impressionists,  
presenting him with images  
prepared like canvasses are prepared;  
gently watering inner gardens  
between the eyes and mind

yes, that's Monsieur Monet over there;  
don't disturb him; but if you stand  
a little way behind him, you just may  
enter the stillness around him,  
enter the stillness of his mind,  
see with his eyes, that work  
invisible to those of us who watch  
which swans and saints and artists know.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Eyes Of The Ikon

The door creaks as she opens it  
and the fall of the heavy iron latch  
echoes through the empty church.

The atmosphere inside, this cold day,  
is heavy, as such holy places are,  
locked now at night; heavy,  
with what? Anticipation? Memory,  
of all the human emotions  
that have passed through them?  
There's still the clinging promise,  
the fragrance of yesterday's incense;  
it could almost be a midnight forest  
in its wood-scented mystery.

She lights a candle, drops a coin  
slowly, as those do to whom  
each coin has a meaning.

She is small, shrunken as the aged are,  
wrapped into roundness against the cold,  
yet neatly; today there's an extra sense of purpose  
about her walk towards the glittering  
gold ikonostasis –

is it the anniversary of the day  
her husband perished in the labour camp?  
Or the day her son died fighting  
so that such as she might live,  
to mourn him, proudly, all her life?

Or was she, is she, that unmarried, famous  
junior lecturer who lost her job  
for speaking truth, whose students  
carried her shoulder-high and placed her  
on the tank outside the university,  
challenging its gun?

She kneels in front of the ancient ikon,



framed in gold; the ikon that tourists  
note with a glance, as 'Christ'...though when painted,  
it was known as 'Son of God'; now they call it  
'Son of Man' – that seems to suit it.

She looks intently into its eyes  
as she has so many times; each time,  
a new day, asking what He has in store for her.  
As intently as its painter, praying as he worked,  
that He might come and fill the painted form  
with His eyes, His heart, His soul; all that He brought to earth  
from That which sent Him...

She looks into the eyes of the ikon –  
or does the ikon look at her?  
In some other world, there is mighty sound,  
perhaps a word; the air is filled with soundlessness;  
there's fire that burns forever; great waters flow  
like grace itself; new earth is watered.

She sees, in some great where between  
herself and all things, love that cannot be measured;  
mercy that can only explain itself with itself;  
grace that's only known; her life  
opens itself to her clearly, soundlessly;  
all is revealed to the seeking heart.

The candles flicker; the door creaks,  
and the heavy iron latch echoes  
once, in the empty church. The Son of Man  
in the form of an old woman wrapped against the cold,  
steps out into His kingdom. A few snowflakes;  
a pale winter sun. Look into her eyes.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The First Bike

Do you remember  
that your first bike  
with all its magic,  
had a smell?  
Do you remember?

Do you remember  
when you first saw it  
and all your senses  
went on full alert?  
Do you remember?

Do you remember  
how everything about it -  
the scary learning,  
Dad's careful teaching,  
the moment he let go of the seat without telling you,  
the first time you went out on your own,  
all these filled a new world with magic,  
Do you remember?

Do you remember  
how you lived every moment  
as a child?

Do you forget  
how easily it's brought back?

Will you remember?

Michael Shepherd

# ! The First Photo That Memory Took

that moment when ...  
when memory first opened its treasured album  
and began to make our picture of ourselves -

it belongs to all of us, to each of us.  
it's where each meets all, and all meets each;  
more of ourselves than we have ever stopped to analyze:

that blurred, out-of-focus moment – was it  
the pattern on the hood of our pram,  
the strap around our kiddicart,  
the turn of the stair,  
the pattern of the bricks around the fountain in the park,  
the memory of our first fall;  
the lion's head fountain on the wall?

was it not a person, of  
those who peered into our cot, or lifted us,  
simply because  
we could already control those beings around us  
with a dribbly smile, a vague wave of our hand?

was it the first thing that we remember  
because it paid no attention to ourself,  
but simply, was... was, outside our favoured world?

whether we ever open the album, or do not,  
it sits there, unexplained,  
holding some secret of a consciousness  
beyond the theories of scientists and philosophers;  
inevitably, ours

to be followed – some years after –  
and this, we may deny at first –  
by that moment of a further consciousness:  
when - as equally mysterious, unforgettable,  
and often unremembered to this day -  
we knew that we knew something  
but did not know what it was we knew.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Forum

It's like trudging home after  
a heavy day at the workplace,  
you open the front door  
and the house is rent with upraised voices -  
all the children adding new wounds  
to years of grievance; your eldest daughter  
threatens once again to go live with her boyfriend  
although she's under age; your eldest son  
despairs of girls 'not being able to argue properly';  
the cry, 'that's not f a i r..' rings through the house;  
the younger ones still seek adults to be on their side,  
- for the moment - to dispense justice  
to the aggrieved, comfort the broken-hearted...

Are you glad you came home  
without your usual stop off at the pub?  
It's all so familiar...dammit, you know very well  
you'll miss them when eventually  
it all goes quiet... but at least  
they certainly know about justice  
when it's not there for them...  
they'll be vigorous employees,  
trade unionists one and all,  
if and when they leave the nest..

Were the 18th century coffee houses  
from which emerged those tracts  
of endless literary abuse,  
sharpening their language on each other,  
just like this? 'A polarity of poets'  
might serve for a corporate term.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Girl Who Was A Waiter

'We never care for the present moment. We are so foolish that we wander in times that are not ours, and never think of the only time that belongs to us; we are so frivolous that we dream of the days that are not, and thoughtlessly pass over the only one that exists. We never live, but hope to live; and since we are always preparing to be happy it is inevitable that we shall never be so.'

- Blaise Pascal

(1623 - 1662)

French philosopher and mathematician

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Not a waitress; just a waiter.  
Though she sees herself as  
a planner; a Girl With Plans.

Mid-January; travel brochures  
all over the sofa; and not decided yet.  
But it's just such fun – she's been like that  
since she was a little girl – the future's always  
golden, shining, full of possibility...  
the present simply doesn't compare..

She'll take an early holiday this year; and then,  
a whole summer of café tables, clubs;  
she, tanned and glowing, sharp eyes skinned  
for – no, not Mr Right – that's silly chick-mag stuff.. but  
a Truly Meaningful Relationship...  
oh she just can't wait. Though wait she will.

Then, it will all fall into place; glowing  
with life, she'll get that new job  
which must be waiting for the glowing her, and with  
more money, then that sure success which she knows  
is just waiting in her to surge out;  
feeling that good, how could people  
miss the potential sparkling dormant there?

She's in good shape for a girl  
in her late 30s; and what is that these days?

She doesn't throw herself at men, more  
than a girl looking for a TMR has to do;  
looks them long and straight between the eyes,  
letting them know that here they've met  
a Girl With Plans; and that, soon  
sorts them out..

Time to look at those brochures again;  
she just can't wait to begin to live;  
until then, what to do but wait?

Her much-loved cat is wiser in its way than she:  
living only in the present, and well content with that;  
while she just waits her life away.

[based on a character-sketch from Ernst Tolle's 'The Power of Now']

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Grace Of Metaphor

When a metaphor on blessed wings  
flies to the heart like Mary's dove

or when you seek it, you grimed with earth,  
in the darkest places of the heart

still you must examine it with a surgeon's skill;  
probe; bleed; question; diagnose

before you ask of it, consent  
to grace your magnificat.

Michael Shepherd



# ! The Guna Show

So much has travelled from the East to West  
that it's surprising that those three great forces  
which the Indians knew so well, are not  
in Western consciousness; they tell so much;  
and seen for what they are, we are prepared  
for their perpetual play – their ceaseless game  
which plays a merry hell, a merry heaven  
with all of nature and our mortal lives..

They're known as 'sattva' – all that shines, enlightens  
and uplifts; 'rajas' – that's all energy,  
that gets things going, keeps things on the move;  
and 'tamas' – that's inertia's purest form...

these three are said to be divine, in that  
they're pure of nature – as when joy bursts out,  
and feet join in the dance – then rest, and sleep;  
while tamas the divine mysteriously  
renews us from within to face new day..

yet, if we live a life where these great three  
are out of harmony, then demons lurk –  
false dreams seduce; or curséd restlessness;  
or sloth brings ruin and darkness in its wake.

These mighty three respected, life is easier;  
and like some party game, they bring surprise;  
they keep us on our toes; yet serve, mysterious,  
some greater purpose beyond mortal eyes;  
when huge suns burst, stars cool, and life arrives,  
they play their part; rule, here and now, our lives.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Guy Who Ones Us..

and there's this guy,  
hits my poems every day  
devotedly  
that's a lot of poems

doesn't read them,  
just hits them  
to drop another 1 in the voting box  
on new poems, or ones he's already oned, alike

he or she no surely he  
girls have better things to do  
saw some poems had rated 10  
naturally assumed that this was faked  
because he's like that, decided  
it was time to take me down a peg

but adding his comments – no,  
too public, better do it secretly  
then announce it publicly  
as an act of holy justice..

if a poem's got no rating – bliss!  
a very public 1 like a steaming turd...  
if it's already got a 10, a 1  
will bring that down to 5.5..

and there's always tomorrow..  
a 10, two ones make 4.0..  
a 10, three ones, make 3.3.. and so on...  
alas for him, he can't ever reduce my score  
with 10 plus 1 to the xth, to lower than 1.0...

funny, I still feel the same me in my poems...  
I hope there's only one of him,  
it's an awful waste of time, chasing  
a paper power, a passing screen...  
fun though it is, to spread childish smears  
across the adult world...

needless to say, his many weeks of work  
have served to elevate our hit-rate...  
and as we sink on one list, then we rise  
on another... the injustice of it all...  
now the real false figures are his, not ours...

and then, he thought, it's time for Frank..  
and then, for Tara.. and who next?  
maybe some I haven't spotted?  
That high scorer above all,  
Nikki, so far, has escaped his attention...  
But then, Nikki has no poems to one!  
last year, he was called Joe Fazio or some such,  
this year, he's called 'Poet Watch'..

if only... I'd be happier, as a poet,  
if he had read the poems he oned...

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Heroic Carrot

The floods have ruined the British vegetable growers.  
Tough. But  
the supermarkets will just buy elsewhere,  
we'll hardly notice, apart from TV's brief comment...

This week, what of our organic vegetable bag  
whose carrots are usually a joyful memory  
of what carrots, pulled yesterday, used to, still can, taste like?

- so this week, just one, huge carrot. The Great Survivor.  
Gnarled, a giant among the pretty, washed, and fashionable ones  
smiling under the golden light of supermarket shelves -  
it looked as if it had fought battles, come through wars  
which of course few want to be reminded of  
by those old veterans with their tales of times  
too testing of mortality for us to think about...

eaten later, it would have a subtler taste -  
of gratitude, of praise.

A kitchen; a carrot; a man holding a knife,  
on the edge of tears.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Hunger Without A Name

The hunger, even felt  
by the adequately clothed,  
the adequately fed, the  
adequately housed..

the hunger without a name,  
a smell, a taste,  
without an image, without  
an advertising agency  
to shape it for us; quietly  
whimpering, whining at the door  
to be let in and fed;

is it something we've never had?  
distantly remember  
like a childhood happiness?  
or have, but want much more of?

and if a good fairy passed  
and said, I can offer you only  
one of these three things:

to be almost always happy;  
to understand almost everything;  
or to live almost forever...

which one would we choose? and  
would the hunger be assuaged?

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Kite The Wind Took As If A Poem

You bought the kit,  
couldn't wait for Mum to clear the table  
to spread its bits and pieces out

didn't your Dad help you? Yes, of course –  
those were the good times..

'your Dad'... do we ever really realise  
they had a life of their own,  
not merely extras in the drama  
of your life?

the wooden struts cut to length,  
the careful, don't hurry Michael cotton wound  
around the glue, and then more glue,  
put the top back on again Michael  
or you'll be sorry when you come to use it again...  
what's again, in a boy's life? ...

that special waterproofed paper  
finally in place; Mum's hair-dryer  
cautiously used to tauten  
the bright kite's sail  
not too near Michael,  
read the instructions...

it's alive now, the kite,  
the two of you waiting  
to learn about wind, even  
what you thought a mere light breeze...

what strength! on that first outing  
on the beach or in the park;  
the mere light breeze  
which as your kite sailed up there in the sky,  
dipping, soaring around the other kites  
like a half learned, half graceful dance  
which the wind wrote

but you did not listen fully to:

a sudden pull of wind, a parting  
somewhere between string and kite...

no longer your kite; now  
it's the wind's kite  
sailing off into the blue  
to meet the clouds perhaps

was it your Dad, after  
he too had been silent-sad,  
or was it Mum as she wiped your face who said

the wind, the sky, loved it too much  
to give it back

and so with poems.  
Throw away the box and stuff  
but keep the glue, it may, like memory,  
come in useful  
next time

and so with poems.  
The wind, the sky,  
deserve them for their own;  
they can go further, faster, they're more strong  
than you;

let go the string, now, as it falls to earth;  
watch the bright kite  
till it's out of sight;  
was it ever yours?

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Last Shower

The radio, first chattering companion of the day,  
timed its cold shower of the mind with lethal precision  
reminding as I stepped into the warmth of water  
of those who stepped into the 'shower'  
and never stepped out  
those many past numbering  
but each one a one

and a gentle Scots Quaker voice  
conducting this Holocaust Day memorial  
to the indescribable  
spoke the phrase  
'the dignity of difference'  
offering the heart some way to walk  
the path of grief with human hope

the dignity of difference –  
an empty form of words  
like poetry,  
like grief,  
poised between nothing and everything  
waiting to be filled  
with tears and joy  
with love and sorrow  
with memory and hope  
with prayer and promise  
with mercy and resolve  
with humility and lawfulness  
with life and the memory of death  
with the memory of death, and life

Michael Shepherd



# ! The Library Of Memory

and then in between remarks,  
you fall silent, still, the eyes  
not far away but rather,  
seeing the faraway right here  
and those who know you  
or who know the feeling of themselves,  
know where you are

how describe that place  
where a lifetime's memories are stored,  
clean, precise, waiting, neglected, seemingly forgotten?  
is it a castle; a linen closet; a box room, that place in the inner mind?  
rather, it seems a library, of the books that life writes

and there comes a moment in between remarks  
when the present offers nothing, so it seems;  
and your mind leaves the assembled company,  
walks into that quiet room, its shelves so carefully arranged  
by someone unknown to you, a librarian  
who knows you better than you know yourself;

I sit down in that green leather armchair, quietly;  
but such the power of the memory of you  
the pure essence of the memory of memory itself  
that I need not reach to take that well-read book down again  
but simply glance towards that place; on that shelf; where it rests;  
sit, for a minute of eternity; rediscover myself;  
then rise; walk, the back erect, dignified;  
the stature taller for the memory of whom I am;

turning the smooth handle of the door as it closes, and  
beyond all love, the watching;  
freedom that makes the whole world live anew

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Life Or Death Question

You could guess from the crowd  
converging on the Memorial Hall  
and on a Saturday night, that  
the speaker must be world-famed in his field,  
making his first visit to the college.

A French scientist of renown –  
cognitive theory or some such –  
turned Buddhist monk these thirty, forty years,  
he carried the blessing and the curse,  
the burden of responsibility not only of his vocation  
but his fame. The hall was packed.

Serene – ‘together’ has to be the word –  
he spoke for an hour; enthusiastic applause;  
then question time.

There’s always that tense silence before  
the first question...how will  
the hall respond tonight? Will it hold the level  
of the speaker’s mind? ...we knew all too well  
those ‘first question’ students – the one  
who had to wrap a compliment in  
confectioner’s sugar, eliciting an inward groan –  
as if the speaker were unaware of his own ability...  
she’d marry rich, then live a life of patronising  
complacency bestowing well-publicised charity...

or the one whose ‘clever’ question blatantly advertised  
to whoever might be impressed, beyond herself,  
that she was already on the speaker’s wavelength  
before the lecture and before the rest of us...  
she’d commit herself to a future academic life  
of maintaining this self-superiority,  
exhausting herself, losing friends and influencing few...

but no – tonight it was that wild and self-abusive student  
who seldom attended any lecture except to challenge –  
‘Can you give me one single reason

why I should go on living? '..

You could have heard a cliché drop..

a pin; a paperclip; but loud, the universal thought –  
how could the speaker know, this was the brilliant boy  
of already three serious suicide attempts...  
representative of the rite of passage greatly magnified,  
sex, drugs, rocknroll, and whatever lay beyond...

'No... I cannot...'

This was the boy we detested, despaired of, tried to befriend,  
hated for his disruption, but almost feared,  
feared for the wild openness of his mind...  
the hall united in hushed, waiting silence...

'... for you have given yourself the reason –  
you have asked the question few of us  
have dared to ask... and a question  
sincerely asked, brings its answer with it...

'..when you hear the answer that your question  
holds in its heart, like some golden lotus,  
you will have the answers to all questions,  
and you will be a wiser, happier man than me...'

only Buddhists and their like can smile  
with such detached serenity; with  
a space that's full of meaning. The hall  
broke into the laughter of relief; great laughter;  
the unqualified love of five hundred students  
poured like a mighty river on that boy

who was still standing, wild-haired –  
and I saw that he was laughing too  
and through my mind flashed the thought,  
the air is full of angels..

where had those angels who laughed  
so lightly with us, where had those angels been,  
before; and would go, after?  
The boy, still laughing as he left.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Lovebirds

We used to call them 'the lovebirds':  
you couldn't miss them -  
they were like some miniature, but very human, sculpture;  
in their sixties I'd say,  
neither much over five foot, the same height;  
he stolid, compact, focussed; cap; sometimes a pipe;  
she, always nicely - quietly - dressed,  
different hat each day, in careful rotation,  
different dress each day in summer, likewise;  
and they walked, arms so tightly linked  
as if they were discovering each other's companionship  
each step of the way  
and had done for - what - forty years?  
They walked like a couple  
striding through the world together  
even though their strides were small, like them.  
I reckoned they were Polish, I don't know why.  
I'd see them from the pub window in the morning  
walking quite fast for arm-in-arm;  
then in the afternoon, he'd go off alone  
walking slightly faster but stolid with it,  
I guessed to see his old army pals at the Polish Hearth  
under the wide painting of the Pripet Marshes;  
sometimes I'd see him returning, impassive as ever  
later in the afternoon, as if from a meeting well carried out.

And you know how it is with people like that,  
that you see and notice every day -  
you don't know whether you really want to talk, make their acquaintance,  
or not -  
they're so complete, self-contained,  
content  
and been through a lot together, I'd guess.  
Children? Sometimes you can guess, sometimes you can't. Dunno.

I missed them for a time.  
One day, the local charity shop  
had a window full of hats.  
I recognised them, all so gaily displayed;

and felt somehow personally offended.

I missed him for a time.

Now I see him walking past in the afternoon,  
unchanged in manner;  
stolid, focussed.

The only difference

is that every day he puts a plastic bag of domestic rubbish  
into the small street bin that's not meant for domestic.

I don't know why that affects me so much.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Loved Stranger

I remembered I'd promised my Aunt Adele before she died  
that I'd get in touch with her family in Oz  
just to put matters to rest, since they'd not spoken for years  
since she upped and went off with this Pom  
and left the family without its clever high-earner...

I wasn't looking forward to it with all that bad blood -  
'Enough for a vampire's transfusion' said my uncle, the culprit -  
but a promise is a promise. I had Auntie's old phone book;  
worked out the time here that would be Sunday afternoon in Oz.

The voice was open, strong, friendly - I guessed I'd hit  
that great moment when they'd had the barbie,  
the few beers after the few beers,  
the guests had just gone off  
and the washing-up could wait until after a beer...

He was really glad I'd phoned -  
he'd been away from the family most of his life, one reason and another -  
so we didn't have much to try to piece together  
which was probably a good thing, could've been  
a pretty forced, stilted conversation -  
so we got chatting about one thing and another,  
our different lifestyles, our families -  
and you know how it is, strangers on a train and all that,  
got quite carried away, about how much we enjoyed life,  
loved our wives and families, wouldn't change a thing,  
what life had taught us - almost anything, everything really  
like we were old friends who hadn't met up for years..

It was quite late on in the conversation, when we were working out  
if we couldn't fix up a family visit, and he'd said,  
no, they'd never lived in Adelaide (after which city  
Aunt was proudly named - 'greatest city on earth' they said,  
not having travelled further than Sydney -)  
when I realised I'd phoned the wrong number; but  
felt good and he too I guess.  
So I had to choose the moment  
to laugh and say hey this is an expensive call,

talk to the wife and call you back, Jacko...

I've never known my family so bloody merry  
as when the story got around.

Michael Shepherd



# ! The Mind Revealed

and wouldn't it be weird  
if we could click on our name page  
and see - our mind!

spread out in all its random,  
untidy, crossed-out, raggedy,  
contradictory, half-chewed,  
etc.

it just doesn't bear  
half thinking about

how clever of, let's say,  
Providence,  
to keep it like it is, invisible; we,

letting it out under supervision,  
teeth clean, polished shoes,  
opinions prepared  
for the lunch-break  
and water cooler  
and photocopier

and under supervision even more strict,  
maximum security,  
'association hour', when  
it mixes with the lifers,  
the condemned,  
the emotions,  
the instincts;

yes, better keep mind  
behind closed doors;  
there's only so much space  
for the untidy,  
savage,  
so busy,  
inconsequential,  
vulnerable,

rutted,  
God-given so they say  
mind.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Monk And The Tree

At dawn each day, as  
the monk awoke upon the polished floor, and  
rolled his bedding mat, the Way –  
the way things are, the way they follow –  
walked its way beside him.

Later, he would take his brush,  
the ink-block, paper, and the water-pot  
he filled each day with water from the river,  
and find a place, among the woods,  
or by the river bank; where the Way  
would teach him old things, seen as if now new.

Most often, he would sit near an ancient tree  
which had so much to teach him;  
its trunk and branches gnarled and twisted  
with the wisdom of the Way.

The tree was, as great trees are, the most  
adventurous of artists: every Spring,  
it would put forth new twigs,  
as awkward as a newborn deer on  
stick-like legs, trying to stand and walk;  
the tree would let the Way make it  
as awkward, unsymmetrical,  
as inartistic as could be...

then slowly through the year, the tree, the Way  
would make of this, a new and daring beauty;

and the monk would learn of it,  
take up the brush, moisten the ink-block,  
and – brush gently swishing black on white –  
draw his daily lesson through the year...

and because he was so loved and famed,  
connoisseurs of that most ancient art  
would beg his paintings; find their breath  
held, at his daring; their eyes would learn the Way.

When the monk, now old, joined the Immortals,  
his many students gathered near that ancient tree.  
They said, the tree did not seem sad at all;  
threw out new leaves, seemed to rejoice;  
as teachers do, whenever pupils shine.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The New-Born Poem

Of course, it's yours  
so you want to love it,  
want to believe that  
though there are other children,  
yours is special

but when it first appears,  
there's a moment....  
should it look like that,  
is that the way they look?

then it's cleaned up and  
looks better...but there's a part of you  
ready of course to fight for it,  
but still slightly wondering,  
how will this miracle turn out?

then somebody who has to say it  
because they're on duty or  
because you've invited them to see it  
says oh what a beauty

and now that just one other person  
has looked at it, it seems already  
blessed by the looking and you say

yes isn't it, isn't it a miracle...

Michael Shepherd

# ! The One Who Simply Looks

In the mirror, as the shadow falls across, then  
for a precious fraction of a second,  
The One Who Simply Looks  
looks at itself...  
then - whoops -

it's old familiar Me...

if you're curious,  
remember this.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Parsing Of Senility

The names go first. That's not  
uncommon, and even among those who  
are younger.. psychologists say  
(how discomforted this couch, Professor Freud..)  
it's sheer selfishness; we don't want our friends  
to know our other friends..

The names go first. One learns the dodges –  
'You'll all know each other, of course..';  
names, they're nouns; so how far will it go?  
how well can I live well, when without nouns?

Spirit lives in all things; the self exists in all;  
perhaps I'll manage with this thought.  
Then, what will be next to go ? (The nurse sighs  
as the impatient patient cries, '..want..THAT...')

Ah, there's the clue: pronouns simply stand for names;  
first person, second, third, will merge  
into one selfish self – 'want.. that! .. hungry..! fetch!  
no.. not that... that... when shall see...? '  
I'll need a patient nurse...

So in the this nameless world, where all things are as One,  
what then, the next to go?  
Conjunctions would be no great loss –  
no ifs or buts, as Nanny said, when an all too similar  
frowning plaintive child tried bargaining...  
re-punctuation, editing, those shorter sentences  
which editors would beg of me – yes,  
'conjunctivitis' was my writing's curse...

Prepositions have had a chequered history  
in languages: sometimes on the end of words,  
sometimes going before them with a flag;  
immigrants were never very strong on them;  
I'll pretend I'm fresh from Ellis Island...

And Mediterranean and Near Eastern hands

could learn to play their part; who would spot  
if adverbs, or those adjectives so dear to poetry  
turned into grand, expansive gesture? 'Such  
an effusive man..' they'd say.. maybe I'd turn  
into an opera star; the words a little blurred...

And like the poet Elisabeth Bishop, I'd have to learn  
how to surrender things, with joy... and read, maybe,  
with ecstasy, every printed word as new, unspoken, magical...

...And the last age, lean and slippered in  
those hospital pyjamas and blankets with that rough kiss  
that Rupert spoke about; ruthless, toothless age,  
sans words, sans lips, sans native tongue, sans...  
..now, what was that word ... Oh, Nurse! Nurse! ...  
oh damn, damn, damn.. oh yippee! .. can still curse...

Michael Shepherd



# ! The Philosopher's Study

A very average room, in a standard terrace house:  
the welcome sunlight- ruthless though -  
truth itself come down to earth -  
reveals that the windows  
could be cleaner; yet,  
could be dirtier;

shows up the gentle layer of dust -  
gentle in its fall, not gentle in its mercy - and  
not rising from the earth, but  
falling invisibly over time  
from the ceiling whose last decorator  
used a paint less than the best;  
who ever invited dust?  
But here it is, inviting in its turn  
a passing twinge of guilt; it could be  
a metaphor for the philosophic:  
dust the mind occasionally,  
time brings complacency  
and thoughts grow stale,  
minds decline...

to a stranger or interior designer  
or feng-shui expert, all too cluttered;  
too many books for home improvement mags;  
not books horizontal, but books vertical;  
one could remember how each comes to be there;  
for its owner, convenience; occasionally  
the slight annoyance of a book urgently sought  
(I mistyped 'ungently' there..)  
requiring the careful craft of extraction  
from far down in some tottering pile...

here's beauty of the mind  
for those with mind to see;  
and today, the early pale green leaves  
from the trimming of the Japanese maple,  
every single leaf looking as if it had been bred  
by centuries of Japanese devoted to the belief

that man and nature, hand in hand,  
may reveal a beauty beyond both –  
each leaf tilted delicately towards you as if  
as a host bowing modestly in welcome at the door –  
these few leaves take your humbled breath away.

In this place, the world itself:  
'infinite riches in a little room';  
as above, so below; as without, so within:  
here, heaven and earth, all, open to question;  
here is the human mind at home;  
meditating; dreaming; waiting in patient hope  
like those humble maple leaves  
for some new idea to enter,  
to expand the loved, mysterious,  
boundless glory of the world which constantly  
threatens to shrink all to a tiny, wizened, unwise thing;

while unexpectedly at any time may come  
a poem, interrupting the philosophy,  
to say the things that have not yet been said.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Poem Called

and when the cat had finished drinking  
and he had watched that delicate pink tongue  
lapping as carefully as any lady  
and had wondered whether cats enjoy this patient method  
or whether they long to pour it down their throats, carelessly  
and savagely, as they live wildly in the nights

then he heard the poem call  
faintly, almost indifferently, the sound unmistakeable  
yet always different  
this time it came from a far distance  
beyond the cat, though the cat was somehow part of it,  
beyond the yard where he had once and never forgot  
put a bullet into the old dog that  
could not stop shaking

beyond the barn, beyond the field  
where he nuzzled his favourite of the horses  
and it allowed this intimacy, patiently;

so far beyond, so faint, the cry that poems make  
as they, like cats, like dogs, like horses  
who know nature so much more certainly than we  
the sound that poems make as they wait patiently  
to be found

he walked towards it but many times was lost,  
he had to stop, stand still, listen,  
and wait to hear that sound  
recognisable but different every time

and when he and the poem had found each other  
they were for a moment, silent, still,  
then both turned to look over his shoulder  
to where, yet further still,  
the next poem had begun to call to him, faintly, almost indifferently,  
the sound familiar, yet never quite the same



# ! The Poem That Got Away

I started a poem with a serious intent...  
but who would ever guess the mess, and where that poem went?  
I'd barely writ a line so fine, when the poem turned to me,  
looked me in the eye and ear, and laughed demonic-lee,

pranced around me, singing, boo! you can't catch me!  
ain't no rules nor grammar for the boldheart and the free!  
race you round the chocabloc, poetic chairbound fatty!  
you're just like every pompous poet, thinking always that he

can control a poem with a life that's its own!  
tries to rhyme each couplet up, as if lines were circus clones...  
tries to measure poems by some rules about their feet, or  
wants to match my singing lines to some archaic meter...

'cause I'm a poem!  
I've got my own life!  
I want to dance around the streets,  
I want to join a band!  
I've got so much to tell you,  
I want to lift your heart...  
I want to make you weepy too,  
If that's the way I feel..  
I want to talk to children,  
or to live in fantasy;  
I want to feel much bolder  
than this sillybilly world,  
quick and slick and fancy-free;  
and sail past time and space;  
or wonder what it could be like  
before the world began...  
I want to shuffle words around,  
like books upon a shelf;  
I want to be all bold and free –  
I want to be – myself!

So boo to all your metered rhymes,  
you faded, jaded poet...  
poems are the masters now...

it's much more fun,  
it's just begun...and  
it's time for you to know it! ...

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Poem's Flight

A poet, far from his beloved,  
wrote a poem full of meaning  
and, calling a carrier-pigeon from his loft,  
sent it as a white dove to his beloved

It was a long flight  
and by the time his beloved read the poem  
under the lamplight in her room  
its meaning had changed for her  
with the course of time and the human heart

If the pigeon, midway on its flight,  
had rested in our loft  
to drink a little rain, eat a little grain,  
and we had read the poem - would it have  
any meaning for us?

Where does meaning go  
when it is not here?  
How does meaning change,  
between a smile, a tear?

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Poems I Love

There are poems that I envy,  
poems that I admire and respect,  
poems that simply sing to me,  
poems that I puzzle over...

but the poems I most love -  
they may be jewelled and adorned  
with adjectives and adverbs,  
similes and metaphors, (but  
they must be enlightening, relevant,  
making mind and heart to expand  
in sheer exhilaration)

or they may be so quietly, humbly carpentered  
that they say, I'm simply here to serve you...

but they all say to me with  
shining eyes, as if  
the world made new in that moment,

'Yes, I was there!  
Join me there! '

and their 'there' is here and now  
and as great as the universe  
and the heart that yearns.

Michael Shepherd



# ! The Poetry Student

Wonder  
is a philosopher  
is a poet  
looks with awe  
upon all things  
sees one in many  
praises one,  
delights in many  
loves  
reasons  
wonder is a poet

Barely a year ago now  
what was he?  
an adult student whom I scarcely knew,  
self-contained (and what  
an epithet that is...) ,  
a human being with a warmth,  
a keen mind for profounder things, but  
not burdened with over-education,  
still an innocent guarding wonder with a hidden strength;  
who turned up one day  
for the occasional poetry session

not much to start with  
but he kept at it

and then it seems that the Muse,  
so much wiser than poetry teachers,  
casting around for messengers  
as she must, to tell her glory to the world,  
decided that he just might fit the bill

and now he's hers. Love,  
and the knowledge of love  
pour unpretentiously from him, with  
a depth of insight expressed with simple clarity;  
the choice of words seems to come from purest instinct;  
beauty, goodness, truth flow through him unimpeded

very soon he'll wonder just who wrote these poems;  
the answer, as the Muse must know  
is in the wonder. Yes, she chose right.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Present Is A Present, So Be Present

Always, behind the known,  
the greater unknown...

behind the tedious Latin translation,  
the struggle to find French elegance in French -  
the private joys of the translator...  
that rare intimacy, as a soul to soul  
across the divides of language...

'Laetus in praesens' says Marsilio Ficino  
in his Renaissance colloquial Latin  
written up around the wall  
of his Academy, such as it was...

The translator – half mechanical,  
half philosopher, scribbles down  
'Rejoice in the present'..  
and presently, pauses, contemplates...

Is it, was it, as easy as all that?  
Sounds good, but is it practical?

In another age, Eckhart Tolle will expound  
The Power Of Now – how joy  
will follow presence, as the night the day...

The translator, cautious in his guidelines,  
contemplates 'Be present, rejoicing..''  
as a poetic alternative... thus satisfying  
philosophy as the study of causes...  
checks various manuscripts; ah,  
it's written in one as 'impraesens'...  
almost adjectival; as a necessary state:  
'rejoice, being present' then, perhaps?

Behind the shoulder of the translator,  
stands as always, just as does  
the unknown at the shoulder of the known,  
(not quite nudging, sometimes, the writing arm)

the author...so close, this present moment,  
is his presence...

the translator, gifted with a present by the wise,  
the presence of the wise,  
is wholly present; and that almost  
imperceptible joy – recognised only  
by the absence of all other things –  
which the wise call bliss,  
steals like a blessing  
from the eternal, timeless, unblemished,  
perfect now.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Presents On The Gift List Yet Unread

and there's the presents  
which we don't talk of  
which we secretly wish  
for ourselves; wondering  
whom we might ask for them;

or whether they were already ours,  
bestowed by fairy godmother  
there beside the cradle; in which case,  
where did we hide them  
from ourselves? ..

to wake each morning,  
not to depression and the lack  
of any sense of personal self-worth..

but to praise and gratitude and joy...

unwrapping the world,  
loosing its knotted golden cords,  
easing its sticky tape,  
folding the paper neatly into memory,  
discarding all the packing which defends...

or must we posit a god so just and merciful  
that time to him or her or it, is but an experiment  
to give us time and freewill, to remember  
where we hid those presents from ourselves?

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Professional Poet

and of course it was wrong  
to label him as that – in just that tone of voice;  
a touch of envy there, no doubt

implying a comfortable life,  
a smart careerist, older poets youthfully  
cultivated, poems in the right magazines,  
editors gently kept in touch with;  
keeping on the right side of his peers,  
'interesting' reviews of their poetry skilfully woven,  
professional favours quietly exchanged;  
academic posts gracefully filled, and  
moved on from; leaving grateful ex-students  
recommended for the vacancy;  
and an acquired ability  
to write just enough, but not less;

so it should be rather, a lifelong devotee of poetry,  
and when he started to read to us I felt mean  
for assuming him to be some artificial thing  
a professional poet;

I wanted to inhabit his poetry, the  
house of his poetry; but some doors  
to rooms were open, some were shut;  
would I give the time to find and love the key?

He read his own poems  
as if they were step-children –  
proud to show them off, and yet, not really his;  
the audience, taken aback by this,  
hesitated to applaud.

But when he read the poems of others,  
he read them as though they were miracles  
to stun and to admire, yet he was, we were, barely worthy of;  
dropping as fine mercy, as the gentle dew of heaven; he read like  
an amateur would read the great, in awe; as -  
a lifelong devotee of poetry. He shone.

In each of us, a poet was born and lived.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Ripe Pear

Quartering this ripe pear  
- a knife-and-fork job; it gave little away  
except a slight softness around the stalk,  
yet seems to contain more juice than  
any work of man could hold -

quartering this ripe pear,  
I'm caught up in wonder:  
this is almost too good for human beings -  
it should have a religion built around its praise;

as if it wishes to tell us something  
that we might have overlooked  
about such mouth-worn phrases as  
Nature's bounty and God's grace..

or as if, two thousand years ago,  
it had leaned, heavy on its branch,  
from the wall of Plato's leafy Academy,  
saw him writing of ideals,  
and smiled;

and now I've written that,  
I can eat this pear,  
tasting it and what I've written;

this pear, I swear,  
now tastes even better;  
as if I had submitted  
on some altar, to be consumed by praise;  
praise that tastes of pear; pear that tastes of praise.

Michael Shepherd



# ! The Sad Story Of Happiness

Statistics tell. You can be independent of them, but you cannot deny them.

Though white Americans are freed from many of the hassles and indignities that affect black Americans, yet, on average, they are only very slightly happier.

Men have more power and freedom than women, yet, on average, they are not any happier. (Women experience more depression, but also more intense joy..)

Though the young have so much more to look forward to, than the elderly, yet ratings of life satisfaction rise slightly up to age sixty-five, and for some, beyond..

People in colder areas of the USA might expect Californians to be happier. They are wrong.

Surely people who are more attractive are happier than the unattractive? Not so..

If you're adequately housed, adequately clothed, adequately fed, then wealth will surely bring you greater happiness? The rich are only a very little happier than the middle classes...

So is this the end of The American Dream – Joe, José, Leroy, Yusuf, Gianni, Johan, Boris, Ivan, Ravi? isn't there a happy ending, over the border,

over the ocean, over the rainbow?

Yes, there is...

happy people grow rich faster..

(thanks to Jon Haidt for this)

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Secret Society Of The Suddenly Quiet...

This Christmas, as ever at this time of year,  
there's a worldwide brotherhood and sisterhood  
whose numbers I cannot count  
and would not wish to know;  
who seldom know each other;  
and perhaps, that's just as well..

who, in their dressing-gowns on Christmas morn,  
amid bright wrappings hasty torn,  
and exclamations...  
fall suddenly quiet,  
are far, somewhere else for several moments;  
return, and look silently in thought, deeply,  
at partner, children; their eyes  
now a little more shining than they were..

or who, at a lively dinner-party,  
fall quiet for a minute,  
look around the table, thoughtfully; or  
squeeze a hand, secretly; then  
return as if they'd never been away;  
return perhaps with new vigour  
in their conversation and in response..

or even, acceptably alone at Christmas,  
celebrate it in this quietness;  
if you knew them, which you don't,  
you might say something to them;  
or, just might not know what you should say..

who are these, suddenly quiet  
for a moment, far away,  
celebrating something in their quietness?

they are those whose quietness would say,  
this is what I never knew, when I a child;  
longed for, never thought it would come true;  
how fortunate I am, that I've survived  
to feel like this...

Indians might say, this is the story of your present life,  
which you wrote with your previous life..  
the drama of separation now transcended...  
that may be so, explain a lot; or it may not... but,

look at them- when they don't see you doing that-  
look at them deeply with the eyes of love;  
saying in yourself, yes, yes, yes...

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Secret, Treasured World Of Metaphor

True, I can rhyme – endwords, and inner too;  
fangle fine assonance, like thought made new;  
march to a metre –regular in tread  
or cunningly disjointed – silken, the thread  
then sharply pulled, to wake the reader's ear;  
rhythms, I can dance with a magic, laughing twirl;  
play like the ringlets of poetic curls;

but metaphor – ah, there's the sadness in my play:  
that golden box, its gleaming lid all joy,  
all mystery... if I only had the key  
to throw it open, cave with dark velvet lined,  
shimmering with jewels from rare and secret mines,  
flashing with colours never man had seen,  
thrown together as words have never been –  
making new language out of words grown old,  
sounding new sounds of tales that are not yet told..

oh that I had the gift of metaphor –  
that showering of gold from a land unknown heretofore...

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Shining. For Tara.

It shines.

It shines from the new-born baby;  
shines in the magic of birth.

It shines in first love;  
in lasting love.

It shines in laughter,  
in tears of sadness,  
in tears of joy.

It shines in wisdom,  
shines in goodness,  
shines as beauty.

It shines in the held breath  
of the peace of dawn about to break;  
it shines in the stillness  
of the hour of sunset.  
It shines as life.

There is no limit to its shining  
except the denying of it  
and even then,  
it shines

Since you know it so well,  
does it need a name?  
A name perhaps, to praise?

Nameless, known to all,  
beyond all praise,  
it shines.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Simple Person

and when you're a child, you learn so much  
of 'grown-up' life, of 'grown-up' values –

by the tone of voice  
in which they say things

my mother, saying of a particular person  
whom I'd never met – or if I had,  
would not have known what to make of them –

'She's a simple person'

and the tone of voice with which she said this  
was full of compassion, without a touch of criticism:

it meant, she has no mind with which to make complexity.  
Not a hint there of some label like mentally challenged,  
or mentally under-privileged;

rather, the purity of a soul untrammelled;  
indeed, a state of grace

for in her day, the honourable poor  
looked after, were at one with their simpler kin;  
while free to honour the skilled and fortunate

and I listening, wondered if I could rise to life's challenges  
as a simple person.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Snake Skin Scarcely Shed

Just before it happens,  
does the snake look forward  
with relief, or feel vulnerable  
to some strange force?

and when it's happened,  
is there a feeling of new freedom -  
that's got rid of that worn out thing,  
so battered, scratched, dry, and cut?

I look in the shaving mirror  
envying the snake  
with no mirror, to which to sadly say  
oh sss\*\*\* - it's much the same..

Michael Shepherd



# ! The Song That Mary Sang

In the stillness of the dawn,  
in the stillness of the dusk,  
then, my heart is most alive,  
there, my soul is most at peace.

In the freshness of the morning,  
in the coolness of the eve,  
the Lord God walks in every garden;  
be still, so to know Him there.

All day long I tend my garden;  
there, this evening, God may walk;  
I may see Him; I may not - but  
yet I meet Him in my work.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Sound Of Cities

Turn on again, that old, once new film of your life -  
it's called the 'establishing shot'; and as it pans  
across your once-favourite city, corny in the sunshine,  
arty in the dusk and rain, the home to all your dreams,  
the music slides in, takes the reins, the heartstrings of recall...

New York: for some of certain age, the needle hiss  
before the recording studio draws in, lung-deep  
the low lights, the clink of glasses, murmur,  
- the film's in blackandwhite, the evening suits, the faces too -  
as the silky rhythm, the syncopated beat  
tells the old old story of a love that's sour or sweet..

Pacific Coast: a background seethe of waves;  
the studio's Zen-silent; reminiscent saxophone,  
a dreaming horn, a rhythm barely sketched;  
is it the silence that draws out the sounds,  
or sounds (as in the haunting - plink - of Japan's films)  
that serve to paint the silence? ...

Paris: rooftops in the rain; and yes, its blackandwhite again:  
accordeon plays first, a cardboard lung  
wheezing out a memory of the dance of love  
or barrel-organ, cranking out a background  
like an old toothpaste tube; it's only half-believed  
like some street-beggar's story; but you both know  
that memory's longing for this sweet dipped madeleine  
of romance and the words of love, from that endless source  
and flow of Seine, its quays, its honest poverty,  
its silver-grey and words of love...

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Sound Of Silence

I'm walking down the street  
and I hear the sculptor in his house  
working on his statue of Krishna

and the chisel rings out on the stone  
like a bell that wants to tell you something:

the stone saying, I am perfectly made for this;  
the chisel saying, I am perfectly made for this;  
the sculptor saying, this is prayer;

Krishna saying, I shall enter this.

And I hear in the sound of the chisel on the stone,  
as sure as I know my own name,  
that the sculptor is listening to all this too.

The bell-like sound lingers in the air  
as if the air would keep it for ever  
as the air's prayer. It's music.

The clearer the sound  
of his striking chisel on stone,  
the deeper the silence

as if sound and silence between them  
know a secret: that sounds like this  
can do anything in the world;

even call Krishna with their music  
to play at being stone for us.

The stone's laughing also:  
playing at being Krishna.  
They're both laughing.  
The sculptor is smiling too.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Soundtrack To Our Life

...more than we or others ever realise, I reckon,  
the music of our younger years  
makes the soundtrack to our life -

there I am sitting beside the driver  
and the speakers correction stunguns  
in every corner of the car  
are belting out pomp-rock in all its triumph  
and I'm thinking christ if I'm deaf now  
what will they be at my age,  
and well-they-all-sound-the-same-to-me  
and I see the guy growing visibly,  
livin' the singer and the music and the song;  
and I take that in and feel a stranger to the world  
then ten, twenty years later  
I see a brilliant TV ad  
with that as background music  
and it hits me in the stomach or between wet eyes  
and I think christ I wish I could've written that, then, now...

but I'm marked too -  
the hiss of the needle on the vinyl  
as if it were the carrier wave  
of the first ever message from a new planet;  
then the saxophones,  
new york new world new life  
and the witty lyrics  
slick and silky  
sly and shady  
and the last outatune bars  
world weary but oh so sophisticated  
before the final hissnclick...

the music of our younger years,  
the soundtrack to our life.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Stone And I

By the edge of the mini-pond  
where I sit when the weather's fit for it,  
there's this stone.

I'd like to call it a rock  
because that sounds more dignified  
and metaphorical and carries  
more tradition, but  
it's a stone

and on it grows a lichen;  
not the vivid, flat, yellow and vermilion and red and black  
lichen that grows on stone walls  
by the seaside; this one  
has those colours at its edge  
but has a furry crop of tiny green fronds  
cropping from its mossy green  
which are quite vigorous in their tiny way.

I liked it so much that I tried  
to get the other stones around the pond  
to match, by douching them alternately  
with urine and yoghurt in the approved manner  
after dark for obvious reasons  
but they didn't respond;  
I guess stonecrop beautiful word  
knows its own field so to speak  
and won't be rushed, at least  
it makes me treasure this one more

If I had the money which I haven't  
and the patience which I don't  
I'd have a perfect, model  
Zen garden complete with sand  
which I'd rake with a wooden rake  
every morning into swirly lines  
with graceful sweeping Tai Chi movements  
until I got bored

but I just have this stone  
with faintly Japanese pretensions  
mine not its  
however I'd like to think a Zen master  
would quite approve of my modest intention  
and say, less is more, more or less...

and now I think of it, the stone  
has its own Zen garden; though whether  
you could call this an eco-system,  
whether the stone and the lichen  
have a relationship, is open  
to question, as is  
whether the stone so agreeably placed  
by the pool well OK pond  
has a relationship with the pond

anyway, on a sunny day  
the stone and I sit there together  
if together is quite the right word  
I feel we're together whatever it feels  
if it feels at all that is

and I guess it's even possible  
in an evolutionary view of things,  
lichen on stone, first life on earth  
and all that, that the lichen  
and I are really related, with  
a common ancestor  
which would account for a lot

and we sit there quietly in quite  
a Japanese sort of Zen-ness  
of being one with nature  
and I become don't laugh more stony  
and still; as for the stone  
I really can't say but  
It feels good

and in this state of relaxed contemplation  
which I guess is the point of those  
Japanese gardens

it occurs to me that the stone  
and perhaps the water too

have qualities that I lack –  
they know just how to be,  
to be still, to be themselves

so there may be a point to what  
we sometimes call with the trace  
of a sneer,  
communing with nature

since as Saint Augustine said  
the whole cosmos is our  
holy book; so why not  
open it

\*

[with a namaste to Augustine and Eckhart Tolle]

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Toad Not Raken

Now that the frost has gone its rimy way  
there's the matter of that long grass  
that meets the undergrowth  
at the end of the garden;  
time to take steps to tidy it.

two rakes awaited my decision:  
there's the metal one, which makes hard work  
but scarifies the moss and aerates the top soil as well –  
and the wooden one, slightly Japanese looking,  
its tines further apart, and easier on the arms,

which combs the long grass rather than removes it,  
setting it up for the strimmer when the grass dries off.  
But I remembered how last year's early raking  
disturbed a sleepy toad and, to my shame, partially dismembered it.  
These little choices make our road and name us.

I took the gentler wooden rake, and dragged it careful-slow;  
the reward, a scuttling movement in the grass ahead.  
Two rakes were there for me to make my choice;  
I'm glad I took the one less often used, the gentler one.  
Though looking at the grass, it's hardly made any difference.

(For all respectful but mischievous poetry fans)

Michael Shepherd



# ! The Tricky Area Of Sacrilege

'He has insulted Islam! ' they cry out,  
'Off with his head! '

Thereby, some might say,  
arrogating to themselves, Allah's work  
upon the jihad of our own true souls;

and 'infidels' might say,  
watch out that you don't use  
invented victimisation, for intolerance...

for shouting or whispering or even thinking  
ill of God, is surely first, to damage oneself;  
cutting one off from His mercy, justice, grace..  
how can one insult God?

Jews and Christians say,  
'God is not mocked'...  
meaning, He is all-powerful, has His own  
just, merciful and graceful ways  
of redeeming the lost soul...

perhaps we should cry  
God is not mocked, a little louder,  
that is, those of us who still believe this true...

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Two On The Road

In later years, this day came back to you  
as days of presence often do:

It's the end of the midday break, and  
the sun, already warm for Spring, is easing;  
the sheep are grazing on the new grass;  
two of them have jumped the low stone wall  
to munch the juicier grass of the roadside ditch  
which has spent the morning in dewy shadow.

Where the path to the stony fields  
crosses the track back to the village,  
you've found yourself walking just behind  
a pair returning to the village,  
father and son – or is it, grandfather?

You could overtake them, just to show  
you mean no harm; but something about them  
draws your attention; so you walk behind them  
at a distance indicating that you know they know  
you're walking behind them, yet too far  
to be listening to them...

which you'd dearly like to. They walk  
slowly, deep in conversation,  
this boy, this man; their relationship  
catches your curiosity. You,  
whose childhood was not always easy,  
watch them with delight, a little mixed with envy;  
you study their body language for some clues.

The man listens to the boy with such respect,  
he could be a young grandfather,  
marvelling that his son has fathered such a treasure,  
quietly enjoying that unique blend  
of bond and yet detachment which is grandfatherhood;

now and then, the boy touches his loose sleeve –  
not in the way a child clutches, when he demands belief

in some tale of fantasy; more as if  
the boy had discovered some gift  
in what he says, and wants to share it with you.

And now and then,  
the man touches the boy – as we do  
when our child has said something so mature, so wise,  
that we are speechless; and can only reach out  
and touch them; as if some new relationship  
had just been born; our touch  
a mark of recognition beyond our words.

Just once, the boy turns his head, looks back at you,  
briefly, but with that open look that village children often have,  
when every stranger is a friendly curiosity;  
you're glad for him, of what that moment tells.

You follow them back to the village,  
your curiosity aroused more than it should.  
They open up the wooden front  
of the lean-to where they ply their trade;

fascinated by their tender, deep relationship,  
you'd really like to come back in an hour or so,  
to look in on them, and hope to see the son  
working on the wood as lovingly  
as he has spoken to the man.. but  
you decide against it. One day,  
you might come back, request their careful skills -  
perhaps a new cupboard for your house.

Their tidy, ordered workplace needs no craftsman's signboard;  
if there were, the villagers tell you when you gently ask,  
it would be Joseph & Son.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Ultimate Hamburger

The great Hamburg football team  
is to lay out a cemetery for supporters  
next to its pitch – in the form, of course,  
of another pitch whose grass  
is eternal, whose goal is the final goal...

and then, the appropriate memorial inscriptions:  
'Heinz – the Referee blew time on December 15...'  
'At the end of the day, Gunther,  
that's what it's all about...'

'Joshi – scored his final goal on July 3...'  
'Fritz – took an early bath on October 14...'  
'Rikki – good to the last kick...'

'Alfi – now shouting in the terraces  
on the other side...'  
'Lorenz – always on God's first team...'

'Tomi – called to the great away fixture  
in the sky on March 27...'  
'Birgit – my beloved home supporter...'

'Denni – always in training...'  
'Klaus – hung up his boots on May 15...'  
'Kurt – a life without a penalty...'

'Bart – his final match drew to a close...'  
'My beloved Else – a Hamburger  
tasty to the last bite...'  
'Reinhold – he played the field until the last...'

I think we'll blow the whistle on this one now.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Unity Of All Things

The unity of all things  
is a belief which some  
would consider pointless;

others might regard,  
as insidious; suspect a lurking  
hidden agenda; some  
might say it's useless and unproveable,

declare pathetic fallacy, and hurry on  
to life's more pressing details and specifics;

I can only say that there are things  
so useful to the mind, although  
they cannot be proved;

I'll say that holding this concept,  
this glorious possibility, in the mind  
makes one more inquisitive, be it  
journalist or writer, or simply  
human being: seeking always  
the causes of all things beyond  
what they profess to be;

so too for poets, swimming in a sea  
of metaphor – of all things joined  
in one more radiant meaning which lights up  
the life of every thing; as when  
a housewife dusts and polishes  
a room into a home; bestows  
her being on our space;

the unity of all things  
makes space for all things;  
Creation promises some order;  
behind the smaller things, the greater;

a place for grace, for ordered life,  
for hope, and charity, and love;

a boundless place; a grace;  
a graceful space.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Un-Ked

Words are like unicorns –  
come from nowhere  
without any one's permission or request  
because there's a need for them.

Whose painful, sudden, desolate need  
called this word to be?

Market gardeners pushed further out of towns,  
their customers now too far a wagon-ride away;  
shepherds too, pushed further out of valleys  
to the barren windswept hills;  
refugees from starving lands across the sea;  
the many orphans motherless from too many birthings,  
childbirth fever, fatherless from cotton-lung;

all these knew what unked meant;  
but they had lived with it;  
it strikes with sudden, hope-drained emptiness  
the comfortable, too, when they least expect it;  
it can visit monks and other religious and devout,  
praying in their solitary cell;  
even parish priests about their rounds; or  
princesses, put into cold storage  
until that right dynastic husband is found;  
princes, knowing that they one day must rule  
after their hated father's hated rule...

the Psalmist knew it strike his heart;  
John of the Cross called it  
the dark night of the soul; Rilke said,  
leaning over the chasm of myself..

say the word, sound it, roll it round your mouth,  
savour its sour aftertaste; live it for a moment.  
What does it tell you?

A little like 'unfed' – and that they often were;  
'unshod' – and that often, orphans were;

'ked' – a short word with the certainty  
that it's known exactly what it should be;  
so when it's missing, we know just what's lost..

or maybe, just a curt, abrupt abbreviation  
for 'uncared for'... its suddenness  
beyond all family and friends then, in that moment,  
a desolation of the soul; no ease from god or man;

you'll know it; or you won't:  
unked.

[a Lancashire dialect word, which Mrs Gaskell found invaluable]

Michael Shepherd



# ! The Watchman Of Dark Christmas Night

The brazier's glowing coals lit up his eyes.  
I asked the watchman as he guarded time:  
tell me, watchman, of the truth of Night..

he said: when I had conquered all the tasks of day,  
I took night-watching as the sternest test,  
to seek the weakness, and to seek the strength  
which I might find there in my deepest self..

In darkest night, I lost myself – or so  
I thought I had: for every night,  
as the third hour after midnight moves  
into the fourth hour, there came a time  
when all one held as precious to oneself,  
all joy and consolation, all the point of life  
was taken from me... then I felt  
myself an abject, faithless wretch..

for it seemed that even God  
is in repose, in that abyss of time..  
taking from me, even faith,  
and hope, and love itself..

and then one day, I saw in paint –  
it could have been by Rembrandt's guided hand –  
the darkness, to be full of light..  
more full than day itself..

the light itself, as God, all in repose;  
and in the darkness are all things  
drawn back into themselves;  
so that they may awake at dawn  
the fresher; Diadochus, holy man,  
who knew dark well, for all his holiness,  
and welcomed it... gave it a name:  
'educative desolation' was his term...

for what mortal man would not become complacent  
to think he walked with God both day and night?

At that darkest hour, faith, hope, and loving-kindness  
may be withdrawn from human kind; yet,  
they cannot die, I learned; they must return..

And no one may tell – as shepherds watch,  
and angels fill the skies –  
what Mary feels, before her faith and hope  
are born as joy and love..  
what Mary feels, this night as dark as sin..  
what Mary feels, before the holy dawn;

only humility, for her, for us,  
will see us through the testing hours;  
will teach us in this darkest night  
the darkness full of brightest light..

We sat there silent for a space,  
I and the watchman of the Night;  
the brazier glowing warm and bright;  
the silence full of grace.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Week Between Christmas And New Year

These are the strange and dull and heavy days  
(in the Northern Hemisphere at least –  
we seldom spare a thought for what ordeal  
our brothers and sisters, basking in the summer sun  
are passing through in mind...)

For children, these are precious days, of course –  
waking each morning to the knowledge of new toys—  
(premature, by orthodox tradition – a birth, of course,  
but not yet the presents that are due  
to celebrate the Epiphany, the showing-forth of Love Itself)

but are there other gifts which grown-ups have not found,  
buried in the garden soil, the frozen fields?  
For it seems this week, as if the earth and nature  
are caught up in some mighty pull  
as this great globe itself rounds some vast narrow bend  
and we with it; as if we are nature, earth as well:  
aroused by some peremptory alarm clock  
at some ungodly, godly hour,  
to help push up the snowdrops from their roots  
and all other things that must be stirring in the earth  
to feed and flower.

Some esoterics say that these seven days  
are rich with some strange octave in the mind  
whose qualities are sensed within our music's scale:  
some universal starting power; reluctance; recovery;  
faintheartedness; a sunny strength; need for authority;  
yearning for completeness – these, they say,  
are to be lived through in the mind;

these to be lightly seen and sung in heart;  
best, in these over-eaten days, to participate  
in joyous activities in company..

Others whose star is in the East  
look for a sequence of twelve days of Christmas:  
wisdom has set out from Persian lands afar

on its journey to acknowledge new-born love;  
some old order gathered in the safe sheepfold of strict law  
knowing in its wisdom, it's now time –  
the law known and secure -  
to learn the new-born testament of love;

All this, buried in the Christmas tree's root and branch,  
the holly and the mistletoe, the alert, fierce robin  
sitting on a needful spade,  
the angel (wondering if it still has a place in our hearts,  
but knowing the powers that its wand  
may never lose)

In these strange and dull and heavy days  
all this, all these, the presents yet to find,  
we could not make or buy; lie wrapped in mind.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Wheelwright. For David

The wheelwright worked, as carefully,  
yet so fast, as a wheel spins.

One day, someone said to him,  
the centre of the wheel never moves.

Infuriated, the wheelwright worked night and day  
neglecting his other work,  
to prove this was not true;

he invented a wheel which was all rim;  
but it still needed a hub, an axle;  
but he had invented the flywheel;  
his business flourished despite him.

He invented a wheel with a hollow at its centre;  
but had to devise a radiating hub;  
yet he had invented machinery;  
his business thrived.

After many years, he sank back,  
beaten by philosophy; reduced to stillness.

Around him, a huge business enterprise;  
he, the hub, the axle,  
the still centre.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Wisdom Of Toys

That worn, stuffed bear you hide -  
have not quite thrown away

is more than your childhood  
seen through rose-tinted time -

toys that speak,  
toys that are talked to,  
toys that simply listen

are the mediators between  
the wisdom of the animal world  
which shares with us, a heart

animals who live a blessed life  
only in the present now,

and the wisdom that children bring  
from the heaven that lies all about us  
in our infancy, as the poet said;

toys are reflectors of our self  
that remembered what's our self;  
that remember what's our self.

Michael Shepherd

# ! The Woman At The Crossroad Who Laughed

As I walked up the pavement, up the slight hill  
to the traffic lights at the crossroads outside the station,  
I saw her waiting to cross.  
Or rather, I saw first, her laugh..

She held the hand of her son  
as she exchanged words with a passing friend  
and laughed..

and what I saw in her eyes, her whole face,  
as she laughed, was that as she laughed -  
(did she know this? How could I tell her, a stranger?  
Lady, lady, at the crossroad of our lives,  
I'm writing this poem for you now...)

as she laughed, while she laughed,  
I saw that she was in touch, the whole of her,  
with her deepest self – just that... all that...  
and as I saw that self, which was  
(Lady, are you reading this?)  
the perfection of perfection, all that's perfect...

it was as if – no, it was just so –  
her self looked at me, and so  
the perfect looked at the perfect;

herself and mine together laughed,  
laughed at imperfection

and as the perfect looked, it saw perfection  
spreading through my eyes from our shared self  
so that her son was perfect; and her friend was perfect;  
and all around us, every they and it were perfect..

(Lady, Lady, at the Cross's foot,  
was it like this for You?)

the light turned green. And we were free  
to cross the road; and

free to live; and  
free to laugh away illusion; and  
free to be ourselves; forever,  
in that time which is forever.

Lady, by my faith, this by my hand;  
and with my life I do yet swear  
upon my life, this to be true;

Lady, hear, in this my orison,  
there are no sins  
to be remembered.

Michael Shepherd



## ! They Also Loved

'We only love if we have first been loved.'

Aye, there's the rub.

The teenager, her room walled round  
with rock and pop stars who, it seems,  
all smile their open, deep-eyed smiles  
just for her... twists, red-eyed, on the bed,  
hammers the pillow with clenched fists...

the boy she loved has dumped her;  
she gave him all her love, and now  
he's taken it, so she's got no love left,  
not now, not forever, in her life..

Here in the tidy convent, where  
everything seems polished, even the faces,  
the nun kneels. Her veil hides her face; is she young or old?  
She is very still. We may not know her thoughts.

Not far away, the monk is praying too; kneeling,  
he's restive; from time to time, raises his head,  
looks to the crucifix. We may not know his thoughts.

Here's Saint Augustine. When he was young  
he was the member of a gang; did all the things  
that young men spur each other on to do;  
knew hot lust and passion to surge up, and fade;  
then took a longtime mistress; loved her, and desired.

So when he says, we only love  
if we have first been loved,  
his words sound many things to us:  
he's tearaway, lover, man, and monk,  
teacher, perhaps; and saint.

Here in a cell in Patmos, is Saint John:  
sees all things as clearly as the Grecian landscape,  
the sea, the sky, blue; the tiny boats down there,

white sails matching white summer clouds:  
takes his pen, writes daringly: 'God is Love'... the heavens  
do not fall in upon him; only cicadas and wild herbs  
sing in the silence: he sees Creation in its perfect order,  
Man made by God, and in His image; so, adds,  
with the certainty of which the stars and sun are made,  
' We love Him, because He first loved us.'

The teenager, given time, will dry her tears;  
time brings tears, and time wipes them away;  
given time, she'll give her love again.  
What love is, is for each to say.

'We only love, if we have first been loved.'

Michael Shepherd

# ! They Only Feel Real When...

'they only feel real when  
pretending to be themselves...'

sometimes, psychology and poetry and philosophy  
come close together; and like a dog  
meeting another dog for the first time,  
we're cautious – that statement has legs  
and claws and teeth ... do we want to meet it,  
might it be more fierce than it looks,  
is it that 'too much truth' which mankind - says poor Tom -  
cannot bear?

our tails quarter-wag, wag and stop,  
our weight's on our back legs,  
caution is advised..

we'll back away right now,  
wait for the next meeting;  
meanwhile, there's always the tree to sniff,  
a sharp reminder of the bone we'll gnaw,  
hide, dig up yet again, and gnaw...  
gnawing on our own blood not the bone,  
living a dog's life, a dogged life,  
mongrel, thoroughbred, alike:

.

only feeling real, when  
pretending to be ourselves.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Threats And Opportunities

Here's three cheers  
for Jon Haidt, who's reminded us  
in 'The Happiness Hypothesis'  
that our lingering primitive selves  
respond more quickly to a threat  
than to an opportunity...

and thus, a more powerful emotional weapon  
in the hands of politicians and journalists  
and others with an axe to sharpen..  
while astute moneymakers, more than the rest of us,  
look always for an opportunity...

so President Bush hastens to warn us  
that 'Iran remains a threat'...  
and so do you, George...and  
so do bananaskins, and wet leaves  
on a warming sidewalk after frost...  
and polar bears to garbage cans -  
themselves under our human threat  
from global warming...

It's a world of threats, and threats of threats...  
wars and rumours of wars, as the good book says...  
maybe I should stay in today...but then...  
was this, then, how the West was won?  
I think not...

Some say, still say, that somewhere out there  
there's One who made a world  
entirely of opportunities...

Meanwhile, pity politicians  
in a world of spin:  
if Dubbya-doh came out tomorrow  
all bright-eyed and Bushy-tailed (by security men...)  
and announced in upbeat tones,  
'Iran remains a golden opportunity...'  
we'd all turn to each other and say,

'What's he up to, then? ? '  
and oil shares would fluctuate...

well, there you are... if boredom threatens at this point,  
an ice-cold can of beer remains  
a golden opportunity...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Three Persons And A Dog And Loyalty

I, you, he, she, it...  
three distinct views of the world  
(though perhaps not to the Creator?)  
which seem so different. Which  
grammarians note, and writers write about.

A father who was all mine, I thought,  
waiting for a boy one day after school  
who was that younger me  
with a small and lively bundle of love and energy and loyalty  
straining to meet this stranger, as if I'd been a friend  
already all its life - yet whom he'd not yet met -  
straining at a brand-new brown leather leash...  
how well you remember it...

he said he'd bought it for that son, who was me  
but when, a childhood ago, he had to have it put away  
it was he who cried for, so mother said  
only the second time in his life.  
I just felt betrayed. Again.

so when they gathered at his, that's father's, funeral  
thinking of things to say  
that would not hurt too much to say  
they said, and he loved that dog so much he cried,  
for the second time in his life, Dorothy says,  
we never ever saw him cry...

and you remember that day and what they said  
so clearly

and though I've moved from there  
they may if they remember me  
say much the same of other matters about that boy  
who was me. For

memory doesn't distinguish much in the past  
between the living and the dead, in grammar,  
why should it

and you wonder, well I do,  
whether Sport in his unspoken dog-grammar  
even with his eloquent tail  
perhaps, sniffing at an interesting tree in the park  
might not distinguish just as sharply with that wet, wise nose,  
I-dog, you-dog, he, she, it-dog,

living with memory of some unspoken kind, yet  
oblivious of death  
or betrayal.

for Max if he likes it

Michael Shepherd

# ! To A God-Daughter On Her Sad Poem

Yes, we get blasé and dismissive on this site –  
reading in the reams of Poemhunter posts  
'yet another poem of teenage angst',  
we say, scanning the raw wounds  
too rough for poetry – but what else  
will ease the pain?

'I thought we loved each other for ever –  
how could you do this to me? ...'

we nod our older heads, remembering  
just slightly, as if it doesn't really matter now,  
how it was for us...

but then, who writes of happiness,  
when happiness seems eternal, hope untested,  
and life is to be lived?

that first heartbreak ... it seems  
there has to be a first one;  
a worst one; and only poetry  
can begin to salve the wound..  
at least you've got your poetry..

yes, reams of poems, and all much the same –  
but this time, it's from someone that I know,  
and that – that really hurts.. it's almost worse  
than if it happened to me myself – in that  
there's nothing I can say, that's not been said  
a million times.. and a million times, she's said  
'You just don't understand...' and of course, she's right –  
it's the first time in the world, her world,  
that this has ever happened...

I'll say nothing more than what I've said;  
than what your parents and your sisters say; for,  
how can time heal, when there's no time for time?

(and how could I dare to voice to you the thought –



your poetry will deepen when your heartbreak heals? ...)

Michael Shepherd

# ! To A Younger Poet

Well, thanks for asking - quite a nice surprise...  
first off, you have my passionate support -  
for how could I believe in any less  
of poetry, its value and its power?

And I know well of you, that despite all  
your youthful, quick impatience, so sharp shown  
to those, the wrinkly; grey; not keen on change -  
you'd like to hear our comments on your work;  
yes, even to reject them, red of face...

But spare a thought for ageing minds and hearts -  
like comfortable kitchen-cupboard store  
in that beloved house of realised dreams  
where we can now at last just be ourselves,  
where favourite brands cram out the sagging shelves  
with jars not opened for too many a year -  
more for sentiment, than for some new cuisine;  
there's not much room for untried brands, alas -

'despite the fervour with which youth may praise  
the heart-wrench of those wild love-seeking days,  
or praise in detail Her so unique sight  
to eyes so red from passionate wild night'...

there's not much room for endless rhymes for love  
now, in the store-room of our ageing hearts;  
we've been there, got the Tshirt (somewhere there, and  
rotting from the dazzling blue sea's salt  
of love's abundance, into which we two splash-dived) :

So please excuse us if we don't pour praise -  
however fine your wild and winning ways;  
we're poetry-besotted; live in thought;

know this: our passionate and full support.

Michael Shepherd

# ! To Denis, Tara, And The Muse Of Poetry

O Muse...

I have a serious question for you  
but I can't wait to put it into beautiful poetry.  
I hope you understand...  
Respect.

Some poets feel the need to consume  
substances – liquids, solids, smokeables, injectibles...  
before, during, and after the creative act  
as, uh.. consciousness-enhancers ...  
(there are, needless to say but I'm saying it,  
those who strongly disapprove, but also,  
those who call these, last defences of the immortal godself...)

I'm wondering, (and of course,  
I'm fairly well versed [so to speak - a curious phrase, that]  
in the slight evidence of the Dionysiac abandon  
that balanced and accompanied  
the ancient Apollonian disciplines...)

I'm wondering whether, you've always approved  
these means of lubricating praise to You and poetry...  
especially in this Iron Age, and we so far  
from sparkling and nymph-haunted streams  
and rocks and groves and verdant fields of sheep and goat  
and shepherds writing poems to all this...

or is it that  
You, knowing who your faithful worshippers truly are, and  
gently sighing, allow their glorious poetry  
to manifest quite irrespective of what they believe  
they need to find You within their writing selves?

I'm sorta hoping that  
You, who know all the arts of healing which poetry bestows,  
reward these devotees of yours through thick and thin,  
...through sick and sin...  
with that blessing and that heavenly smile

in their pure hearts; replacing all these  
Iron Age's physical protections  
for the heart, the mind, the soul,  
with Your pure fire,  
the fire of Your immortal speech..

which looks so strange upon this printed page;  
not sung aloud to Illyria's echoing rocks and hills ...

and that indeed You love them  
more than they or we may ever know,

O Muse.

Michael Shepherd

# ! To Li Po (Li Bai) And Uriah

Dear Li Po,  
strange things happen to poets  
during their life,  
especially those who like wine.

But now, more than a thousand years  
after your suicide,  
men have named a crater on  
the planet Mercury with your name...  
Mercury, the planet the Greeks called  
Hermes Apollo, messenger of gods and poets;  
the shining one;

although men have not been there yet.  
When they do, they may find you  
sitting in your crater, watching the Moon  
(we think it will appear to you  
two times a day instead of once...)  
and drinking wine with Uriah;  
(and your shadows will be there too,  
tall on the crater's slope...)  
you're teaching him Chinese;  
he's translating your poems into English  
with your approval.

He'd like that. We hope you would.  
A strange place for immortals to drink wine;  
but poets do and say strange things;  
that's why we love them, just as  
children love surprises,  
dear Li Po.

Michael Shepherd

# ! To My Valentine

I always think of you

when I smile

Michael Shepherd

# ! To Omar Khayyam

Omar – (do I need to insist  
that's the poet, not the terrorist?) –

when I was young and life was frantic  
I found your poetry romantic –

a loaf of bread, a jug of wine,  
and that non-gender-specific Thou,  
about whom, scholars gracefully decline..

but now I've weathered the twentieth century  
with perhaps a touch of grace

I'm equally content, and grateful too –  
chewing on my baguette of chorizo,  
the screw-top wine beside me,

in this battered caravan park  
where immigrant children play  
and TVs flicker in the dark  
bringing desert headlines by night and day;

so, not oblivious to fate's deals  
and dust beneath the trailer wheels..

Michael Shepherd

# ! To The Spirits Of Abn 'Arabi, Poet, And Averroes, Philosopher

The philosopher asked the poet,

Does what the poets and the mystics  
find in their hearts, agree  
with what the philosophers have discovered  
or reasoned to be true?

The poet answered

Yes, and No

and between the two  
is a place, a space, where  
the mouth is silent,  
the pen hovers poised above the paper,  
the eyes sparkle,  
the heart leaps and rejoices,  
and the mind soars on journeys  
beyond anything that was known before  
and lives experiences never before experienced;  
finds words behind words  
that were never spoken before,  
sounds behind sounds  
never heard before,  
a knowledge beyond love,  
a love beyond knowledge..

a place where poets and philosophers  
meet together in a world of wonder.

Michael Shepherd



# ! To William Blake, Poet, At Christmas

Through the tears  
soon breaks a smile;  
See God's Grace  
here in a Child.

Eyes washed clear,  
the Soul shines bright;  
eyes washed clean,  
the World's Delight.

Michael Shepherd

# ! To William Carlos Williams, Sorta

I would talk to you  
of shadows cast by street lights;  
but not so much in words

rather, take a walk with you,  
say, this is a street I know well,  
may we walk together?

not to influence or be insistent,  
but rather, see this, and this, so  
let's pause a while here,

perhaps just for a comma, or a space, or  
the setting out upon the page,  
a walk together,

a poem as a guiding of the reader  
in the experience of the poem  
I'd like to share,

not as insistence but rather  
see it as loving care  
as one would unwrap

some treasured heirloom  
from its silk wrapping – this  
I care for, you should know

and perhaps, as we walk together  
through the experience of the poem  
there'll grow, a friendly trust

of imagination shared;  
and like old friends, we can then talk  
of anything, of everything.

Michael Shepherd

# ! To, For, About, Because Of, Spike Milligan

Spike, we talked of you today.  
You'll have to live with that now, I guess -  
it seems that everyone has  
a place in their hearts for you.  
So, like a heap of 'floral tributes',  
they're all individual, but  
it makes a very great pile

For myself, it's that look on your face  
that stays – as if you found life just so great a thing  
that it stupefied you, wondering  
how to confront it – whether  
to laugh at it or cry for it  
(both of which you did so well,  
that perhaps it didn't help you much  
to decide between, so, lucky us, we got both by turns..)  
and on your face, that quizzical appeal  
to the rest of us, to help you to decide  
how to confront life...or sometimes, should we even try? ..

When you see, in theatre foyers,  
those two masks of tragedy and comedy,  
it could say underneath –  
'To Spike Milligan, who knew both'  
and perhaps people would notice them more and think.

And though you laughed and cried  
at our mortality like  
a philosopher who was also  
a stand-up performer with tears of absurdity in his eyes,  
it seems we've decided that  
despite how you may be feeling now,  
we've decided in our mortality  
that you're immortal.

I guess  
you'll just have to live with that.



# ! Tolstoy On Love

Love is life. Life is love.  
Everything I understand,  
I understand only because  
I love.

Everything is,  
everything exists  
only because  
I love.

Everything is united by  
love alone.

Love is God  
and to die means  
that I, a particle of love,  
shall return to Love itself, whole and complete,  
the eternal source of Love itself.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Tony Hoagland

and yes even the photo  
on the back cover  
as if he'd gone to the studio,  
said, I've written this book  
of seriously funnily serious verse so  
make me into a randy curate  
in a dropped-trouser farce  
or OK like a real cleric then  
looking sideways over his spectacles  
as he drops a wicked line in his sermon  
and the packed front pews of ladies  
of a certain uncertain age  
quiver with a well-dressed lust,  
and yes, highlight my bald dome,  
I liked the Dr Doolittle stories didn't you,

and that hair like a classroom demo  
of iron filings standing to attention on  
a ball magnet, or if we're trying  
to match his humour, you noticed then,  
since this is a covert fan-letter disguised  
as a don't miss - his hair peeping over the dome  
like that moment in a film when  
a double-page spread of Indians suddenly  
appear over the brow of the wide-screen hill

while inside the book, just as you laugh at the wit  
he's moved on to serious, and the tears of things

and you think this is how to be  
American and triumph over being

me I'd just like to go up after a reading  
and sincere sincere and straightfaced fan-style  
say to him, when I read you hear you  
I wonder if poets aren't the how shall I  
put it, unacknowledged legislators of  
mankind if you see what I mean...?

and we'd do as many double-takes  
as it takes because  
to him, I'd mean it.

How close laughter can be to tears.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Travelling With Robert Frost

Everyone but poets  
(who have their own allegiances)  
would acknowledge it – you were, and I guess still are,  
the most famous and popular poet of  
the 20th century – to Americans at least;

though since we're now into the 21st century,  
it's appropriate that you're being pushed hard, even overtaken,  
at least in the charts here on  
by the Afro-American and Spanish-American poets;

and your 'The Road Not Taken' is  
currently lying around fifth place  
to the favourite poems of  
those guys

it must be the most inappropriate poem title ever given  
since you don't tell us anything about  
the road you didn't take – and come to think of it  
not much about the road you did take –  
except – and that's so 'you' – that it  
'has made all the difference' –  
without telling us what that difference was or is...

but then, that's you:  
prose doesn't appreciate much, if any  
ambiguity; but it's the stock-in-trade  
of poetry, where – as it's fashionable to say –  
the reader re-writes the poem for themselves;  
and ambiguity is certainly your thoughty-forte...

OK the first line then, since  
we're on this road together (whichever) :  
like Dante, you're discovered in the middle of  
a dense wood; though (unusually in woods  
except those planted for cutting)  
there's some kinda crossroads there;  
though of course that's a neat Dantean metaphor too..



and it's yellow, which means autumn/Fall, most spectacular  
in the New England area – how easy to forget  
that you lived your first eleven years  
in San Francisco – and wrote this poem  
in Old England, not the New; and before  
you became the famous you..

As for the second stanza, Mister Ambiguous –  
there's just a sneaky feeling that  
it was the obligation to rhyme that  
makes you imply, that you were adventurous, but  
there wasn't really much to choose between them...

and right to the end of this famous poem  
you leave us with this ambiguity:  
sticking onto the road 'less travelled' the little word  
'by' – hinting that both roads get you to much  
the same place in the end...  
then tell us that that 'has made  
all the difference'...like, uh?

so there you are – that's poetry:  
scholars, academics, pull it to bits  
to find out what makes it tick—  
whether it's a heart, or just wind-up clockwork –

yet out there where people just read poems  
to aid their deepest lives -  
deep in the springtime thicket of their life  
or even later, in the yellow wood –  
out there, in there, hesitating at the crossroads  
looking for some sign; knowing deep inside  
that 'way leads on to way' –  
this is the poem which for so many  
their life's heart has lived with.  
And that is how it is.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Txtng U Phers...

IMHO -

& jst FWIW -

u my thnk ths pm a slly 1

or u my brk out in mrth -

bt if u're LOL

thn, at th nd o th dy (ATEOTD)

thts wht it's all abt (TWIAA)

- if u'll prdn my clché...

Michael Shepherd

# ! U N I C O R N 1 5

and though there are places, times,  
when you are most likely to find it  
there in your heart,  
there in front of your eyes –

the mossy glade within the woods,  
the sunlight filtering through the trees,  
or in the pure air of the highest hills,  
or among the tossing white-topped waves –

or at the quiet times –  
as the dawn sunlight makes the world anew,  
plays to make diamonds of the dew,  
or as the peace of dusk descends,  
carrying a silent blessing –

the places and the times  
when you're most ready in yourself to meet it –

yet it can appear to you at any time or place –  
the crowds, the rush, the noise  
cannot disturb it  
if it wishes to be seen by you

and afterwards, you'll remember,  
know just why it happened to be then and there;  
and what it told you, all about yourself;

when it's there, although we call it 'white',  
it's more than white – almost transparent,  
almost like a living crystal sculpture of itself,  
almost silver; somewhere where substances and colours  
are first made, and meet each other;

it may look at you, with eyes that seem to know everything  
and find everything, peaceful, loving, beautiful and reasonable;  
or it may not look at you; but still  
it talks with you with its very presence;  
you know that's so, because

you find yourself speaking to it in the same way,  
opening your heart to it, because  
it listens to you; it's there just listening;  
its listening is understanding;

and afterwards, the 'afterwards' is changed for ever;  
as if you've met yourself, and find that good;  
the world is yours, and possibilities  
are boundless; and the unicorn  
does not need your eyes - it makes its home  
there in your heart  
as if it had never been away.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Unbound Lyric, For Shirley Who Said So

Bonding, but not binding...  
now, there's true love, for you...  
fondly done by finding  
what joins you for true...

bonding, but not binding...  
free to fly in space,  
space to face together,  
no limits to that place...

bonding but not binding...  
these words mean what they say –  
trust is just a must for friends, for  
love grows strong that way...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Unmethodical Discourse At A Café Table

By the flickering candlelight  
of the long evenings,  
inimical to study so they said

they played this game  
to while away the time  
between learning and authority

in that Jesuit college  
in the early 1600s:

blindfolded or simply shut-eye and don't cheat  
you turn the pages of the Latin dictionary at random  
and stick a pin, in turn, upon a random word;

the first to make a sentence  
in the fewest rounds, the fewest words, wins  
a prize of choice..

we do not know the prize  
(among those severe, repressed, ambitious  
boys, perhaps it's just as well...)  
or what the others drew;

but this we know: that night  
René pricked a first word – 'sum' – ah! -  
promising! a verb was useful, in this game—

the second round... he pricked on 'ergo'...  
that swift mind already playing the tables  
of his agile mind...

the air was tense; they'd remember  
this night, this flickering light,  
forever in their future lives...

a hush (how boys fight to win  
more fiercely than Christ's soldiers,  
whom they would become...)

'Cogito'! A shout of triumph  
from our René – and the rest  
is history – alas..

It's said the Devil enters in  
at the third stroke; and so it was:

in three words, a lifetime's career  
as the greatest of divines  
in an age of awe for the divine

were lost to mere – philosophy...  
the age of Clairvaux, Cluny, Chartres  
for all too brief a moment,  
saw the vision of a glorious revival; but...

triumphantly, our René shouts  
'Á moi, c'est la conquête! Le jeu d'esprit á moi! '  
(impeccable Racinian hexameter, naturellement..) –

alas for human vanity! The gods were whispering  
'Sum, ergo cogito! ' in his spiritual ear – but no –  
his chose mankind's so vain conceit

and launched a thousand thousand  
café tables on the pavement; seated there  
in black, with scarf and beret, sunglasses,

in a cloud of choking gitane and gauloise smoke,  
centuries of self-satisfied philosophes,  
believing 'cogito, ergo sum': that they are their thought; born  
as true Frenchmen, to be world thinkers, Rodin-like; and  
that because they think, they are... somebody...

oh René, what a fall was there...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Victimisation As Threat And Control

She's the village's Force For Good –  
or that's the flag she sails under;  
news of distant earthquakes, floods,  
famines, ethnic or other massacres  
are her stoke-up calls...  
she'll soon be knocking at your door,  
or coming up to speak to you at the WI  
or after church...

knowing that you know she knows  
you know the details of just how fortunate  
she thinks herself, to have survived  
that terrible childhood (details vague) :  
so by extension, you should know yourself, and show yourself,  
fortunate too... by giving to the latest cause...

Have her in for drinks, and her roving eye  
will spot that electric towel rail you don't now use  
which would be just the thing which would alleviate  
the widow Smith... Though, should that widow Smith  
dare to grumble to her – and she'd sharply (with a smile)  
remind her, aren't we lucky, dear, we've got  
the Social Services here, while they, poor things...

How she delights in, praises, our new outfits  
which we bought last week in town!  
We don't need to be told what follows  
as the night the day – we should have  
a still-smart something to pass on to her...  
though I've yet to see an African  
caught on TV wearing my old Top Shop number...

Sometimes, husbands take the mickey..  
'How is it that now we no longer hear  
about the Burmese tragedy, Martha, now  
the orphans of Darfur are in the news? '...and  
in private, joke to us about calling in Miss Marple  
to root out the village emotional blackmailer...



The one house in the village and the largest  
is the one she least often calls upon,  
and that only in the afternoon  
when the housekeeper's in, but the owner's  
still at work: Alan was a kid to five adoptive families,  
three of whom were good... now he's the owner  
of a large industrial firm whose workers love him...  
At their first meeting, when she tried  
her own pathetic story, his curt  
'Oh get over it..' has sealed their subsequent relationship...

Somehow, I've never warmed to her  
since that first visit, when she stood  
dead-heading the geraniums around the door  
while exchanging pleasantries...  
and left me steeped in self-reproach  
and communal inadequacy...

Chaucer, with his perceptive and discerning eye  
would have spotted this Martha of the many causes...  
'Methinks she has the more concern  
for Mercie's name, than for the human soul...'

\*

He's the spokesman for his faith – although  
faith is a word that seldom elevates his speech;  
perceived injustice is his line: it's rather, our bad faith;  
a speech about immigrants by one authority,  
made only a day before  
the figures of illegals published by another...  
conspiracy against his community is his suspicion  
(while his community just get on with it...)

extreme cynics who know their extremist radicals  
deconstruct his subtext to be saying,  
we're only a poor community, but  
we wire up terror like the best –  
you have been warned..

and we, the tolerant and good-hearted,  
forbear from that sharp riposte

which would have him foaming at the mike...  
if you feel so badly picked upon, so disapprove  
of your adopted country and its morals,  
that you desire to meddle in its politics and laws –  
then why not return to the country you were born in,  
whose messy state, you and yours have failed to deal with...?  
Of course, he can't, because it's just too dangerous...  
Back hopme, they're just him, but on the 'other' side...

Oh perfidious Albion! Have you forgotten  
your imperialist and sharply-ordered past?  
The guilt of centuries lies heavy on thy heart –

well, at least as far back, as the Danish invasions  
of massacre, rape and loot; the marauding Jutes before them,  
the migrating Saxons before that; and the Roman soldiers,  
law-givers and architects and builders, before them...?

Yes, it's time for an Emotional Blackmail Studies  
Department in the local Poly... there should be  
no lack of smiling lecturers, to remind us  
how fortunate you are, mate, to be educated...

I'm thinking of applying  
for a lecturer's post, myself...  
wait til the appointments board  
hear my personal cv of injustice done,  
childhood without care or opportunity,  
the bruises bravely borne...  
a triumph of self-education out of the gutter...  
and if they turn me down...  
well, they know what's coming to them...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Washedaye's Metaphysikale. For Tara.

Myne mynde to me a tumbledryere ysse,  
where muste I watche my scrumpled, worn-oute thoughtes  
seeke their redemptione in Hys watere's grace;  
thynkes-bubbles that do forme and burste in ayre,  
thysse mynde's so constant turmoyle withouten cease;

O maye I humble sitte and contemplayte  
the roundel windowe of drye thoughte contained  
and I, the watchere of myne turbulence,  
Thy watchere aye; 'til time and change begone.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Watching The British Play Tennis...

and I'm more than ever now, convinced  
the British have a subconscious urge  
to prove to the world that a good game  
that everyone enjoys, sitting forward in their seat,  
is more important than who wins..  
we do this just so well

I wonder if it's much the same with war

Michael Shepherd

# ! 'We Read The World Wrong...'...Worse Than That...

Yes – we read the world wrong,  
and say that it deceives us,  
said Tagore...

just imagine, if the snake said,  
you can't see me... no, I'm just  
a stick of rotting wood,  
a length of old rope thrown away,  
mouldering in the undergrowth...

or the rope said, I'm reborn!  
I'm now a snake, I've risen in intelligence  
and consciousness – watch out, all those  
who treated me so harshly as a rope...

or the shell said, how beautiful I am!  
I'm mirrored all like silver;  
once I was a humble shell,  
content to be myself; now -  
how precious now I am!

Or the silver coin said,  
I'll hide here in the sand  
and look like mother-of-pearl, nacreous,  
and wait to give myself  
to some delighted beggar...  
how virtuous I am; and how  
rewarded I shall be!

no, Nature, prakriti, has never learned  
from Man, how to deceive...

ah, but mankind... how we deceive  
our mother, Nature... we promised her  
we would look after her in her old age...  
but all we did was steal her wealth,  
cast her into a filthy wilderness,  
pretend to others that  
she never was of our family

but an untouchable who works for us...

oh Rabindranath, what would you think  
of the behaviour of your grand-children...

oh Rabindranath, you never guessed  
how we've deceived our world...

Michael Shepherd

# ! We The Unforgiving

and we'll never quite forgive our parents  
for being our parents

and we'll never never forgive that one  
we thought our best friend  
for stopping being our friend without  
an explanation or anything

and we'll never ever forgive our first lover  
our first for heaven's sake  
for dumping us and ruining our whole life

and we'll never quite forgive -  
no, let's not go there; that's  
too close to home...

and we'll never forgive God for,  
oh everything, if we knew  
how to not forgive God

and secretly we'll never forgive ourselves  
for all the things we wish we hadn't done  
although of course we deserve to be forgiven  
for it wasn't really our fault was it..

how could we forgive ourselves, when there's that  
that dark figure lurking behind us saying  
don't you dare forgive yourself,  
you ungrateful little...

and if you forgave everyone, you wouldn't  
know who you were... it's not  
as easy as that, oh no

oh yes it is. oh yes it is.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Welcome To My Casting Couch, But Read The Small Print First

Where is the one  
I used to love so passionately –  
and who, I thought,  
loved me so passionately too...?

good question..

Two hot, cool chicks,  
Ellen Berscheid and Elaine Walster,  
told me that...  
(OK, 'Interpersonal attraction',  
Freeman, NY,1978 – that's  
even before your parents knew...)

that we should distinguish carefully  
between passionate love  
that's too hhot-t-t... not to grow cold...  
and companionate (the slippered) love...

Give it six months they say.  
And if you're still on speaking terms,  
come back and tell us what you've found...

So goodbye, dear, and Amen...  
here's hoping we'll think, now and then...  
it could be for keeps...

and perhaps the perfect gift,  
the romantic film, the bottle,  
nose candy or the pills,  
the getaway, just-each-other holiday,  
white sand, sun, palm trees at  
a brochure's distance -

and the whole damn cycle could  
start all over again...  
but... you cutest butt...:



come live with me and be my love,  
and wrong, we'll all researchers prove...

Michael Shepherd

# ! What A Wild Wind Today

What a wild wind today  
in Wimbledon Park,  
80 mph they say,  
mischievous, shameless,  
wild child, it cannot distinguish  
between fun and destruction

here in the park  
it does what it can with the boating lake;  
but the ripples are barely waves,  
and the boat club has wisely shored its boats,  
no fun to be had there

but wait – here's a woman with a covered pram  
walking along the path beside the lake...  
the crafty wind dies down, then  
one huge gust – whew, that was a near one,  
she'll remember that next time..

now it's spotted three laughing nuns – what fun!  
it tries to lift their skirts – it knows no shame  
in its innocent fun; it would most like  
to turn them into whirling, spinning dervishes in black;

instead, it catches their veils, as they, laughing  
as if they are being teased by their own sweet Lord,  
as Krishna (would they know) by milkmaids -  
turn this way and that to avoid it;  
they look like startled magpies, now like  
laundry on the convent clothes-line;  
it would love to make them into  
divine helicopters

now it's looking round the sports field;  
the cricket ball's too heavy, no fun there;  
it does its best to be twelfth man  
in a soccer game, but lacks the patience  
to do more than bend it to the goal; it hasn't learnt  
to pass, dribble, stepover, show off..

but now it spots the tennis courts and  
uses all its thwarted bowler's skill  
to turn the service and return  
to swing this way and that;  
the teenage boy, eyes sparkling,  
joins it in the fun, a double act,  
wins point after point in this windy game;  
a few scarved spectators cheer on his skill.

the wind is nature's free testing kit;  
it tries every tall tree in the park  
to test their roots; and they perhaps  
sending a fast intelligence from branch to root,  
become a little stronger if they do not fall..

now it's moving on to test the works of man –  
no need to pay consultants' fees  
to check your roof tiles; the wind will do this  
more thoroughly and for free..

and now it's spotted laundry on the line  
in the back garden – here's its chance  
to play at being a human being!  
it loves most of all, men's shirts –  
fills their arms like sumo wrestlers,  
hunches overblown backs  
like a row of fat men bending over food

and now the sun comes out –  
the wind is suddenly subdued  
as if its master had just entered the cosmic room;  
and I'm suddenly full of joy, as if  
I had never known until now  
that they might love each other, sun and wind,  
for some reason which includes us all

Michael Shepherd

# ! What Is A Poem? (From The Chinese)

The poet, bent over the paper, ink-brush in hand,  
carefully defining poetry for his pupils  
did not see the first stork of the Spring  
in the limitless blue sky,  
a new poem in its beak

Michael Shepherd

# ! What We See As...

What we see as nouns  
are verbs to God...

see the water in this glass –  
clear and still;

taste the water in this glass –  
its sweet taste with no taste..

watch the Spring rain;  
smell the earth give thanks

see the washing blowing on the line  
smelling happy to be clean

see the mighty river, fierce  
to reach the sea

watch the evening sea-fog roll in over the bay;  
see the city washed afresh in the morning sun;

look up to the glorious theatre of clouds,  
obeying water's laws for all to watch;

know what mercy is; how it descends – appears,  
as the gentle rain from heaven within;

what we see as nouns  
are verbs to God

Michael Shepherd

# ! Where Poems Grow

I love poems that grow  
out of themselves  
out of nowhere really

like an empty window-box  
you've cleared, but haven't  
any plans for and one day

some seed from  
some bird and  
some meal  
somewhere

settles in and look  
yellow courgette flowers  
sprawling delicately  
all over the garden path

poems that grow from  
a random glance  
like someone gives you  
a useless present and  
it asks to be told its story

poems that grow from that  
patch of waiting soil  
in the heart saying  
there's always something  
to surprise, to please when  
there's earth and water  
there,  
and warmth.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Where Sexy Meets Demure In A Place Called Trim

In the seat opposite in the underground  
in the off-peak afternoon,  
neat shoes, nice legs, skirt just the exact right length  
where demure meets sexy in a place called trim;

well-chosen outfit; wasn't her face  
vaguely familiar in some other context?  
Had we met, in Tahiti, Cuba, Necker Island,  
or on some other sandy shore?  
Met, yet not spoken? She offered me no clue..

Ah yes – for several years,  
come January grey but promise of a summer sun,  
the TV infomercials fill our screens  
with this year's new holiday destinations  
for the single girl who's demure to sexy,  
late thirties, but still trim.. writing her own script  
but with all the real life edited out..

How often had we seen her on a sunny beach,  
her swimsuit just where sexy meets demure in trim,  
about to enter a blue blue sea  
with no-one else about...  
such the conventions of the travel film,  
she too often in the shot...

or at the table, glowing in her evening outfit,  
bronzed, relaxed; but still alone;  
filling us in with details and the sights to see  
over the lavish fruit cup on the table  
before the smiling waiter brings the laden plate -  
after the waterfall where we'd seen her laughing,  
the market where she'd handled exotic fruit,  
the boat ride, she in the stern, her hair blown back.. or  
riding in safe open car through crowds of exotic natives?

did she choose her invisible cameraman on these trips?  
Were they an item? Or did his compensation  
begin with the local talent when he put his camera down?

Did she queue at airports, fluster over overcharging,  
wait for days for thunderclouds to clear?  
Arise dishevelled from an ill-advised fling with a local,  
which remained unspoken as the background  
to travel for the single girl?

Sitting there, ex-travel correspondent, professional,  
dressed where sexy meets demure in trim,  
the camera and the sound were off; she  
did not meet my eyes; but if I'd had  
a travel brochure with me, I could have played  
a merry game with her across the way..  
What a joyous disaster film her memories could have made,  
what a chance the infomercials cannot take...

Michael Shepherd



# ! Who Can Weigh Love?

Light. Lightness. Light-heartedness.  
Who can measure their measureless weight?

On the kitchen scales, we balance  
weight against weight; but how different  
the substances - on the one scale,  
iron weights with their iron discipline  
maintain like monks and nuns their constancy;

on the other scale, perhaps fine flour,  
poured as bakers recommend, from a height  
to catch the air between the grains; a foretaste  
of that greater levity that yeast will bring;

Lorenzo de' Medici, praising publicly his tutor,  
Marsilio Ficino, said of him, that one thing in him which he loved  
was that in his speech, gravity was mixed with levity,  
and levity, with gravity;

what then, of our substance? In the lightness  
of our being, then how bright the light! And in  
the dark and heavy days, what lightness of the light may lurk  
in melancholia – a yeast of wisdom yet to act?

And then – there's love...its golden weightiness  
so full of light; and hammered out and spread,  
the brighter then...oh, who can measure out  
the lightness, brightness, of our joy? What golden scales  
of justice, mercy, grace,  
may weigh the shining of a shining face?

Michael Shepherd

# ! Why I Call My Teddy Bear Jesus

I've got a cuddly teddy bear,  
Jesus is his name.  
I wondered what to call him;  
and then the answer came:

My Mom and Dad have told me  
that he's the friend who frees us,  
and loves us, keeps us out of sin;  
that's why my bear's called Jesus.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Wild Bees, Lost Souls

The bees, this year,  
have come before the swallows dare  
and take the wings of April  
inadvisedly;

ignoring the cloud of jasmine around the open door,  
incurious, it seems, about the front garden's offerings,  
they swoop into the house,  
take a left turn where the corridor gets darker,  
and land up in the front room; where  
they swoop again, then like lost souls  
start for here and there, change flight-plan,  
and end up nosing uselessly against the window  
which doesn't open; crawl a bit; and  
surprisingly soon, fall down, on their backs,  
legs folded in some final surrender  
just enough like a human being, to chill...

I take the kitchen strainer  
since it's larger than a jam-jar, reaches further,  
dab a touch of first-aid honey on the rim,  
persuade them to settle on its promise,  
and whisk them off to the front door,  
tap them into freedom.

I thought that bees were focussed, busy, pretty bright,  
with radar, iPods, mobile/ cell-phones all built in;  
this year, they're aimless as illegal immigrants  
hoping to exist, but not to work..  
surely even wild bees have a sense of home?  
'Go back where you came from...' I yell at them  
like some nationalist speaker at a rally...  
there is now no Limbo for these lost souls, it seems;  
bees, who through the centuries  
were said to have close links to human souls...  
it's puzzling, disturbing, too close for comfort,  
or for ignoring.



# ! William Wordsworth Hits The West Coast

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
o'er California's rocky coast  
and fields of melons, oversized,  
and Baywatch babes to match;

Earth hath not anything to show more fair  
than oiled and suntanned blondes with shampooed hair.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Wisdom

and they behave like children –  
always themselves, and always natural,  
all they do is natural;  
they seem to be as expert untaught children;  
and yet, they are not childish,  
nor like novices;  
appear to be accomplished; yet  
not weighty; wisdom  
not a burden or a badge to them;  
nor the severity of teachers;  
but question them, they answer, sweetly;  
loving them, we love ourselves the more;

they are bright, in every way;  
light – like dancers on the stage,  
their simplicity  
lovely to the sight; they live simply,  
as if things they need  
just come to them;  
living without anything attached to life  
because they love to live in freedom,  
love to live as limitless;  
like swans, like lotus flowers,  
they float on the lake  
of their own stillness;

no single thing  
attracts them, yet  
every thing around them shines;  
shines of itself, as if it shines for them;

and when they speak, you hear -  
the sound that shining makes.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Wisely Love The Wise

The wise love wisely.

It's said, that when the truly wise  
surface from their sleep,  
they see nought but heavenly blue  
in which the world then gently, slowly shapes itself  
as if this whole created world were but  
a single act of love; and within that love,  
their love is wisdom, knowledge, law;  
as they emerge from their wise sleep,  
this is what they are.

The wise love wisely; when they look at you,  
(you who maybe meet them for  
the first time; offer them perhaps  
a flower from too hot a hand,  
a fruit, a handkerchief...  
or meet them by some heavenly accident,  
they, like a comet through your life)

and their first so wise glance at you  
sees nought but your perfection;  
they do not doubt that you are they,  
that they are you; and while they're here  
you share all this with them;  
you've met yourself; for this  
is what you are..

The wise are careful lovers  
for love is care, and care is charity;  
and yet the wise are widest, wildest,  
most romantic lovers:  
they throw, they strew their love  
on all and every one and thing without a further thought,  
offering simply, lawful freedom, happiness;  
bidding love well as it flies away,  
wishing you themselves;  
wishing you, yourself;

The wise love wisely;  
for they know the secret law of love:  
the more it's given, the more there is  
to give.

The wise love wisely;  
so, they wear a wise disguise;  
they look like you and me; because  
we are that same disguise.

Michael Shepherd



# ! Withitness

Some people love the experimental in poetry  
Poetry, in the experimental, love some people  
Love poetry, experimental people. Some  
Lovesome

Challenging all preconceptions  
Preconceptions all challenging...  
Preconceptions challenging all  
All-challenging

Playing with outmoded language  
Language playing outmoded  
With playing language  
Language-playing

But with an implicit social critique  
Critique but social  
An implicit but  
Critique-implicit

In the spirit of post modern irony  
Irony modern in spirit  
Spirit in modern  
Post-irony

Look Ma I can stand on my head  
Stand Ma on head  
Stand on my Ma I can  
Can-head

All-challenging language-playing  
Post-irony  
Critique-implicit  
Lovesome?

Michael Shepherd

# ! Woman On The Underground

Nondescript – her clothes say nothing  
except perhaps, 'neatish'; hair – just there..  
certainly quiet; not hiding behind a book  
or newspaper; nice eyes, though;  
she's nearly your age; maybe more...  
and yet – surely, you've seen that face  
somewhere before?

What an incredible memory we have  
for faces – like, the managing director  
of some store firm which you've never used,  
seen profiled once on the business pages  
which you never usually read...

You stare discreetly at her, as if  
you want her to reveal herself some way –  
a sorta condensed silent biodata...

Then it all comes back. Her name?

No that still escapes you..

but it all comes back:

small parts, years ago, on the West End stage;

housemaids; faithful retainer in some famous

Shakespeare with those two stars;

A housekeeper in Ibsen, was it?

The one you missed? Then came TV; her nondescript, not unpleasant but not  
memorable face, has served her well,

unlike those who always play themselves; she played

a Queen Victoria with an inner dignity,

a fierce integrity barely hinted at, but there;

not one of the famous ones; but unforgettable.

And then - oh, of course - that famous Scottish serial;  
she, the caring housekeeper..

And now she's equal star (un-interviewed;

I guess that's quite deliberate; a true professional)

of a slightly overplayed, farcical comedy serial

so successful that they put on old repeats

every Christmas and at New Year..

She's been, in fact, a feature of your viewing life right through; she inhabits all her roles in such a way that – you care; as if she were somehow, family..

And now you want to catch her eye; and in some way (embarrassing - you still can't remember her name or all the roles she played...) but in some way (how can you do this privately in the public underground, she'd hate you for it..) somehow say do you know how much pleasure, no, not only pleasure, offered us an insight into many inner lives of great and humble human beings.. almost everyone in this carriage has been enriched by you, did you know that? ..

Maybe, if she leaves first, you'll catch her eye as she gets up, and with a 'meaning' glance imply, knew who you were, but respected your modest anonymity; (how well you play anonymous Miss Nobody!) - no need to recall your own most celebrated role, you and I go further back than that... or maybe I'll leave first; but I'll do the same..

and I left first; as I got up, tried to hypnotise a glance from her; but no; I did not even figure way down on the cast-list of this play of the moment..

Then, some fan-letter, perhaps? 'You won't know me, but I was the man who sat opposite you, yesterday, remembering...'  
Oh forget it. But what a life a dedicated actor leads - when they're in work...not many parts for ageing actresses these days; bless her, and her nondescript, rich, unforgettable, life-enhancing brilliance.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Words Mean - What They Do

We throw them to the winds;  
like water from a shower;  
what wind? what shower? and who throws them to whom?

In 1996, John Bargh, with scrupulous research,  
found that, hearing words about the elderly –  
even when flashed subliminally on the screen –  
makes us walk more slowly...you kidding? No...

and in 1998, Dijksterhuis and Van Knippenberg  
showed that if we hear words about 'professors'  
we're smarter playing Trivial Pursuits;

while hearing words about sports hooligans  
makes us dumber...

and this without referring to the images and sounds  
of crime, guns, killing, and computer games...  
ah well, we identify with those glamorous criminals  
and then are shown that justice always prevails –  
er, doesn't it? ...but what of those satisfying PC games  
where, zap! we always gun them down...  
oh, it's all harmless play; like Shakespeare's gods,  
'we kill them for our sport'...

words mean what they do;  
science has warned us when all else has failed.  
Good mortals all, be of fine heart, and hale...

Michael Shepherd

# ! Wordsworth A Fortune

I wonder if Wordsworth  
noticed that if he stood  
very still, aware of his body  
from his toes up to his head

and looked at the host of  
nodding daffodils, then the daffodils  
disappear into the sense  
of presence as if  
they were he and he they

I hope he did

cos if he had to walk home  
to recollect his emotion  
in tranquillity instead  
of standing in it  
out there on perhaps a wet day

then he'd missed something i.e.  
emotion in tranquillity recollected

Not to mention surrendering  
the feeling he'd lost  
something since his boyhood.

Try it yourself, it might  
save a lot of walking and  
trying the view from over there  
instead of here

and now.

[Yes, Eckhart Tolle, it's thanks to you again...]

Michael Shepherd

# ! World's Oldest Political Statement

(said to have been found on a Sumerian clay tablet)

'I, of course, would never  
have sanctioned this,  
had I known about it...

Right now, I'm looking  
for a fall guy  
who didn't carry  
a voice recorder..'

Michael Shepherd

# ! Yee Haw! A Country And Worse-Than Lyric

When I was a-dyin', lyin' on the sidewalk,  
head split, blood 'n brains a-runnin' down the drain,  
my life flashed backwards in my mind, just like they sez it does;  
the dog came to life again; she came runnin' back;  
the more I hit the liquor, the more the bottles filled;  
laffed myself to death I did; laffin' like a drain...

Michael Shepherd

# ! You Couldn'T Make It Up...

Morning newspapers exist  
to bring us spluttering outrage  
at the breakfast table, Soggies  
splattered over our office gear...

but sometimes they have it  
handed to them on a plate...

our finest universities,  
concerned at the drop-out rate  
of students who just can't cut it  
(or perhaps, cut it just too much...)

are considering in their donnish wisdom  
whether to postpone essential lectures  
to the afternoon... and this  
will dropp the drop-out rate? ...

the afternoons - when healthy students  
take their exercise outdoors,  
budding actors have rehearsals,  
libraries are visited,  
clubbers wake to check their evening's gear...  
and those precious foreign students  
who pay for their tuition, wonder if they'd  
have done better just to stay at home...

somehow, this problem never arose  
when college gates were locked at midnight;  
but then was then and now is now...  
fortunately, it won't affect  
the research for my doctorate  
in Youth Culture Studies...

Michael Shepherd



# ! 'You Have A New Comment About Your Poem...'

'What is the purpose of poetry? [Candidates will be awarded up to 80% of the total marks for this paper on the answer to this question. Write on one side of the paper only but with both frontal lobes; hearts may be used in answers to this question.]'

After the two hours is up, hand in a blank sheet; the examiner may sigh and smile.

Some sages say - those not affected by some academic status to uphold - (that pause, that look, which indicates, it's not as simple as all that...) - that it's the oldest-fashioned thing, to melt the heart...

but today I'd say, well yes and no - more like a key you turn and - whoosh! - there cascades out, all that's in their heart, all the vast all which they have to give; and you stand aside, stunned and humble; such a small key; such a vast world is there.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Zeke Snirer, Poetry Critic

Zeke Snirer.

he's young. ish.

he's got something to offer the world:

he's the best judge of poetry. ever.

this is his sincere opinion.

so he's obliged to tell you. often.

in case you missed it.

he'll take on any other poet.

invited or not.

especially celebrated ones.

he'll even interrupt their own poetry readings

tell them how bad they are

and offer to read his own poems

to prove to the audience

what poetry should be.

he'll grade Shakespeare's sonnets

and tell you the very few

which are nearly as good as his own -

perhaps, just perhaps, better in some ways

though of course not in others

if he were interested,

he would grade you Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Christ, Mohammed,

and himself,

if he got into that line of business.

he's a great spectator sport -

you can read him now on the internet -

if you like that sort of thing

and if you're not one of his punchbags

for he's like a boxer who announces a title fight

(to which he's not entitled)

against a heavyweight opponent

(whom he hasn't actually invited) :

then in the ring, it's him

and a punchbag with his opponent's name on it,

he hits it for a round or two,

claims a knock-out,  
awards himself the title.  
and afterwards says the other guy's a coward  
for not being there in person..

Bur does his abrasive whizz-kid act  
aid poetry itself? does it shatter  
the undeserved reputation,  
the accepted status of the famed,  
the thoughtless infill of the poetry  
that sounds like poetry, but is no more than that?  
a fresh breeze blowing through  
the stale and dusty air of the pedant's library  
in the Creative Writing staffroom of the University of Academe?

or would a poet who believed completely in himself  
be content just to offer us his finest poetry,  
and let us recognise it for ourselves;  
and put aside this damning of all others?  
even if he tells us quietly (as Shnirer does)  
that 'we' will be reading him above all else  
in five hundred years of poetry?

I wonder – deep inside this combative assailant,  
Defender of the Faith and of the Muse,  
is he so devoted to poetry  
that he just can't bear  
anything to be written that falls short  
of what he thinks is worthy of the Muse?

or does he really hate poetry  
for allowing others to partake of it?

whichever it is, he's not in doubt  
that he'd be the best judge of that, and  
you better believe it.

Michael Shepherd

# ! Zero Self-Esteem, Zero Self-Valuation

your life's a mess.  
you're a mess.  
oh forget the details.  
a mess. totally.

so who to blame?  
your parents of course, like everyone else does.  
they \*\*\*\* you up, your mum and dad.

so?

try this one.  
it's Hindu, it's unprovable, but  
it's a working model, if you're not into  
praying for God's mercy, absolution, etc.  
or you could even do that as well.  
safety in numbers.

this is how it goes.  
we have a succession of lives.  
how you lived your last life  
lays down the pattern of events (just the events)  
of the life you're living;  
however  
and this is where the mercy comes in  
because deep down, we're all perfect as constructed,  
you have the power to overcome all these

just like a steeplechase course  
where after the last race  
you put up the hedges, ditches, fences, water hazards  
to test yourself this next time,  
improve your jockeying skills.

so, it all depends on you;  
you got yourself into it,  
so you can get yourself out of it

the bracing thing

(you want to be braced, yes?)  
is that if you can see it like this, you can  
stop blaming anyone, anything, else

it just could do wonders  
for your self-esteem.  
trust me.  
I've ridden the course.

Michael Shepherd

## 0002 Lonely Dropped Me A Word

lonely  
dropped a word to me today

said

you wrote a poem about me thanks  
yesterday so  
I wanted to explain myself

especially as they're discussing me right now  
in academic though wobbly drawn circles

the older guys say I'm a Concept  
and therefore existed  
before Shakespeare found a name for me, while  
the younger guys  
the So-Sures and the Deriders  
say I'm merely a Signifier with  
an uneasy relationship  
with a Signified or  
if you're into that sort of abstruse joke,  
a Significant Other

deep in myself  
I'm One; that is,  
an individual in one sense  
but Everything, All One, in another theological  
or philosophical or ontological sense  
which feels pretty good,  
a One without a Second  
say the gurus

to illustrate my point  
I'm writing this on the pommel of my saddle  
riding the range out here where men are men  
and no-one mentions that film;  
Nashville on my i-pod,  
Lonesome himself,  
my chosen state of states,

the Iconic All-American  
free as a wild mustang in the hills

though sometimes I'm just  
Lonely  
waiting for that ride into town and  
the bar where everyone knows my name  
and the barmaid says she waits for me alone  
if it's the third Thursday in the month

Lonesome. Lonely. Close.  
That's the West for you.  
And someOne has to do the job.

\* \* \*

(For Will the poet and Will the barber with thanks)

Michael Shepherd

## 0003 Reborn Metaphor

I was born to be a metaphor;  
Darwin, embarrassed, did not talk of me;  
I did not fit into his scheme of things; I,  
knowing secrets of the tears of things,  
while he used his fine mind  
(which is, so obviously, beyond the physical)  
to deny that world, the metaphysical..

To be a metaphor  
you need to know your place;  
stay around too long, you lose  
that vital force; no one believes  
in the unbelievable – when there's no mystery,  
that's the end of metaphor for man.

Better choose a quiet place,  
some corner of a foreign field  
only to be found in mind,  
do the necessary – a few dry leaves and sticks  
to lay false trail – and the semblance of a nest; you,  
a place apart..

The desert, then, was easier; Egypt understood;  
the sun rose warm  
on the eggshell of pure thought;  
Greece, appreciative, then found a name for me;  
a whole race followed in my rise;  
Rome was, how to put it, unoriginal;  
America called a dry town, in an arid zone, after me;  
may yet know me, nested in my cruellest magnificence,  
ash and twisted steel and concrete, office equipment;  
I a metaphor, awaiting a new birth.

Michael Shepherd



## 0003 Similes, Metaphors And Stuff (2)

Isn't it strange, this thing called  
Poetry – and even stranger, these things  
called similes and metaphors, which are  
the very essence of what poetry  
uses to try to get to us?

Look! Over there, in that field! Did you  
see it?  
No, what?  
A hare! Never seen one before! It's  
hiding in the grass now – there! It's jumped up again!  
watch it bounce up and down as it runs,  
must have strong hind legs,  
isn't it funny? So fast, too – our dog will never catch it...

No I still didn't see it, I was watching that beautiful  
perfect V-formation of wild geese against the blue sky  
over there, I wonder where they came from,  
where they're going? And does  
their leader know and lead them, or  
do they all know and they're  
all on the same goosy wave-length and  
they must be cleverer than us then,  
how do they do that...?  
You missed them, they're  
out of sight now, so  
we'll never know...I guess our dog  
barking, set them off...

And so, our mind – that lively, scatty, playful, faithful dog,  
chasing hares which catch our idling attention,  
chasing wild geese which are out of reach,  
barking up the wrong tree,  
seeking with a wagging tail  
the beautiful, elusive good;

Or, like Swami Vivekananda describes,  
mind as monkey – restless, vain, vindictive,  
agile, watchful, quick to move,

never quite at rest – and worse,  
intoxicated, selfish, full of pride; and  
worse again – cunning, drunken, angry,  
inventing enemies in its divided mind –

Similes for one thing like another,  
metaphors for situations which  
connect in depth of mind like  
crossword clues which finally  
illuminate – ah yes, now I see  
what it's getting at...and  
we're into a world of enchantment where  
the word makes all Creation one, and new...

Like parables, they take us deeper, subtly  
tease the mind, and then dart round and past it  
like wingers on the football field  
thrilling our attention, their joyous goal  
touching our heart with the adventure and  
pointing it towards a boundless love;

similes, metaphors, homely proverbs, parables –  
more difficult than thinking, easier than thought,

magic.

Michael Shepherd

## 0004 Lyric 3: Rosefall

O, what is the song this late, late rose is singing?  
where will its petals fall, pale orange-yellow rose?  
when shall the breeze and the rose cease laughing, dancing,  
when will the raindrops bring time, and loss, and tears?

who wrote the song that the rose is singing, singing,  
who painted petals on this fleeting rose?  
when did the breeze discover dancing, dancing,  
with roses that fade and fall in loss and time and tears?

after the rosefall, a colder breeze is blowing,  
rose petals lie in drifts upon the ground;  
but the breeze remembers, wintering red rose-hips, sowing  
the rose's spring and singing; remembering rose's sound..

Michael Shepherd

## 0004 M I N D

and mind might ask,  
why then are brain cells gray? Is it  
because the world is just  
so wonderful, that they, stunned  
and amazed, cannot decide  
which colour to praise first?  
(Mix all the colours of the paints,  
and the result is gray.)

or is it because they feel themselves  
so dull in comparison  
with the miracle which is creation,  
the miracle they (miracles themselves) , faithful, serve?  
(Mix all the colours of the spectrum,  
and the result is white.)

or is it, because they know  
their work lies between ultimates  
such as (do they themselves  
call them this?) black,  
and white? do they know  
their work is equity –  
to balance all things, so that gray is not gray  
as we use gray for worldly metaphor; but

the gray of lakes at peace;  
of silver that lives in itself,  
needing no sun but its own innerness;  
mercury that is moved but longs  
to be united in a perfect sphere;  
gray of clouds that know  
the blessings that they hold;

and, the shining gray of mind -  
for which gray hair is living metaphor,  
the wisdom which life holds in store for you -  
as how many poets, this moment round the world,  
are joining new electric paths of thought between  
these tiny, great gray worm-like cells which hide, compact,

their vast and inner space which spins out eager words  
of metaphor, for that so nameless,  
boundless, dazzling spectrum,  
the radiant space of self?

Michael Shepherd

## 0004 Car Boot Sales

I'm always getting this junky mail  
plopping through the door  
inviting me to a 'car boot sale' -  
but I never wear boots in the car!

Michael Shepherd

## 0004 Love And Law; Law And Love

Law of love? Sounds good... so, tell me more...  
Love of law? mmm...maybe...not so sure...

You can disregard the ancients –  
label them Not Applicable – bin that bulky file...  
or try to make some sense; and they insist  
that love and law are so close intertwined  
that together, they may tell  
more than each other taken individually.  
What might this mean? Where can we start?

Those ancients say that all this universe,  
all this creation, is one single act of love;  
love brings it forth, sustains it, nourishes it,  
and so ultimately, it merges into love;

and by the laws of love,  
which hold all forms by law,  
our natural state is naught but love;  
and knowing this, knows no injustice in ourself;  
knows all as equal; knows no pressures nor compulsions;  
knows no darkness; and no partiality or preferentiality;  
and partaking of this universal love,  
we're therefore just, and light of heart,  
and ready of response..

and so, this love, which knows ourself as love,  
(for every creature's nature is pure love)  
may love the laws which make our nature thus;  
love the laws of love, and live as love;  
so out of love, comes law;  
and out of law, comes love.

only in this fleeting moment of the present  
is our life lived;  
and only if, in this continuous now,  
love and law are present in each action,  
may we make our golden future;  
live a golden life, where law has made us free.

this, the ancients say; the proof is ours to live.

Michael Shepherd



## 0004 Love Lyric: When Everything Is Said...

When everything is said, my love,  
there's only love to say;  
and though love's word can not be said,  
and love will live when we are dead,  
I'll say it yet again, my love –  
there's only love to say.

Michael Shepherd

## 0004 Oxymoron

You know the type - the word's just perfect for him:  
built like an ox, brain like a moron.  
shaved head, one ear-ring, bull neck,  
gold chain, tattoos,  
black gym-pumped T shirt  
(strange to think that thirty years ago  
that would mark him a, er, Judy Garland fan..)  
or football shirt on match days,  
jeans, trainers  
for a quick getaway between the blood and the pig-van,  
and sharp eyes in an impassive face  
as if one eye's always on the lookout for his mates  
and the other for the other lot  
so don't catch his eye, OK?

a 'football supporter';  
now that's a real  
oxymoron.

Michael Shepherd

# 0004 Rilke To A Young Poet 1

There is only one single way. Go into yourself.  
Search for the reason that bids you write;  
find out whether it is spreading out its roots  
in the deepest places of your heart,  
acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die  
if it were denied to you to write.

This above all - ask yourself  
in the stillest hour of your night:  
MUST I write?  
Delve into yourself for a deep answer.  
And if this is 'Yes! I must! '  
then build your life according to this necessity;  
your life, even within its most indifferent and slightest hour  
must be a sign of this urge  
and a testimony to it.

Then draw near to Nature.  
Then try, like some first human being,  
to say what you see and experience and love and lose.

Do not write love-poems;  
avoid at first those forms that are too facile and commonplace:  
they are the most difficult, for  
it takes a great, fully matured power  
to give something of your own  
where good and even excellent traditions  
come to mind in quantity.

Therefore save yourself from these general themes  
and seek those which your own everyday life offers you;  
describe your sorrows and desires, passing thoughts and  
the belief in some sort of beauty -  
describe all these with loving, quiet, humble sincerity,  
and use, to express yourself,  
the things in your environment,  
the images from your dreams,  
and the objects of your memory.

If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it;  
blame yourself, tell yourself that  
you are not poet enough to call forth its riches;  
for to the creator there is no poverty  
and no poor indifferent place.

Go into yourself and test the deeps  
in which your life takes rise;  
at its source you will find the answer to the question,  
whether you must create.

Michael Shepherd

## 0004 The Gifts Which Gifted On..

This is the story that the tribe,  
sitting together crosslegged,  
children at their feet,  
tell about  
the first gift

a man so loved his wife  
that one day at that season of the year  
when the sun is so low in the sky  
that there is fear that it might disappear

and only the wise old men, say  
this is the time for hope and prayer  
and the sun will return the stronger  
and we, the more joyful

this man so loved his wife  
that one day he brought home  
besides the daily food,  
a beautiful thing he found  
and gave it to her  
because he loved her

and she, overcome by this  
new event, kept that  
beautiful thing carefully hidden  
to remind her of his love  
for many years

until one day, because  
she loved her son so much that  
she in turn gave that beautiful thing  
to him

and the moment she handed it  
to him, the beautiful thing  
shone more brightly than the sun  
so bright that he shone too

and the tribe say, they learnt from this  
that gifts received are gifts unearned  
but come from grace itself; they are not  
magic gifts until  
you pass them on to someone else  
and then you are indeed blest by them  
and grace surrounds you as the sun

this is what that tribe say  
sitting there crosslegged,  
the children at their feet  
at this season of the year

Michael Shepherd

## 0004 The World Has Lost The Ear For Rhyme

The world has lost the ear for rhyme.  
It still makes children squirm with pleasure;  
and from some witty pens and minds, its fireworks fizz;  
so, after all these centuries of rhyme  
and all the games of meter, dancing words,  
should we now mourn its passing?  
Have we lost the music of another world?

Instead, the easy unpretentious discourse,  
sober, light, familiar, honest -  
the world of daily, homely, shared sharp life,  
that's now preferred. Not prose;  
much more than 'chopped-up prose' as those may say  
who think that poetry should be more visibly hard-earned;  
- as if a human life set down in honesty  
were not a poem in itself, unwrit;  
'prose with enhanced consciousness' it's often now defined;  
and consciousness - now that's earned, if you like...

and simile, and imagery, and metaphor - all the repertoire  
of glorious poetry - they're all still here  
to work their magic; if more played down, now,  
unostentatious as T-shirt and jeans;  
unostentatious as the beating, bloody heart.

And yet, when years bring tears  
and time brings death and dying,  
it's time for rhyme, to heal the heart  
and charm away the crying.

Michael Shepherd

## 0005 The Anvil Of His Mind

He's a regular on the TV arts review slot;  
sitting there waiting his turn to speak,  
he projects plainspoken ordinary man,  
working class with intelligence;  
more mouth, and he'd be  
a trades union official;  
less, and he'd be one of the invisible  
guys in the back room, on the shop floor  
who mend it for you, beautifully, and on time,  
loving their craft, their skills;

he's present here as writer-critic.

waiting, attentive, business-like,  
his sleeves rolled up as if they always are,  
his forearms are as thick as Popeye's;  
you almost look for the anchor tattoo; .  
no pipes on the TV set of course these days..

and as he sits he holds his arms and elbows  
out and forward from his body,  
his hands open, ready –  
what does this strange posture mean?  
I'm fascinated as I watch..

is his inner self a potter,  
about to soften and remould the literary clay?  
or an expert butcher, ready to cleave the bleeding carcass  
of the artwork into neat digestibles?

those strong forearms – ah yes, I've got it:  
he's a good old-fashioned blacksmith!  
he's ready to take the glowing iron ingot  
hot from the artist's imaginative fire  
from his assistant who's been heating it,  
his left hand's reaching for the long smith's pincers,  
his right hand reaches for Thor's mighty hammer of justice..

and in the shortest time with deftest craft



he's fashioned it just perfectly as you would wish it..

but hold on – he's been asked for his opinion;  
now as he gives it vigorous expression,  
sells it with his whole body-language,  
his hands are busy fashioning  
something more malleable, more intricate;  
a wrought-iron gate perhaps  
to the great house of art

I wouldn't fancy him as my initial editor;  
but with his craftsman's common touch  
I bet I'd be grateful later on.

Michael Shepherd

## 0005 The Poetry Reading

You're two-thirds the way through.  
The corners of their mouths are turning down.  
Their eyes are filming over.  
Their shoulders are stiffening.  
They're in defensive-polite posture.  
They feel threatened by poetry.

But isn't this just what they should be?  
Their little worlds, threatened by the greater world out there?  
Didn't you have to go through this yourself?  
For their sake, those who follow, wish to follow?  
Isn't this the proof that  
Poetry Matters? ..

Sure – on paper – but not, please,  
so visibly, and not right now...  
the carer in you winces;  
the poet, calls the self to duty;  
the teacher in you, piercing of eye and human perception,  
marks them off, one by one –

the officers of the poetry society,  
impassively attentive, have  
the easiest job – they don't have to  
like your poems – just approve,  
clear up after, lock the hall...

and some look just simply hungry;  
traffic bad in getting here  
so get home first, then eat;  
some find it just too long;  
a little poetry goes a long way for them;  
some are here because they think  
you'll notice if they aren't...  
some have just combined you  
with a shopping trip to town; culture  
a kinda penance for the overspend..

yup, time to flip over the pages

to the funnies, and the family ones;  
turn up the volume of your voice, speed up a little  
as if you too, are glad it's ending soon;  
with a bit of luck, you'll get them  
smiling at each other at each poem's end, towards the end..  
The applause is warm with virtue and relief.

but at least you threatened them a while -  
if not with boredom, perhaps with poetry.

Michael Shepherd

## 0005 'What Is There To Live For? '

and you asked this question  
half-privately, half publicly, (so there's some hope then?)  
but we, knowing alas your high intelligence,  
must pause, reflect, before we answer you...

we could just say, in our severest tones -  
that question comes from a nowhere, no-time place  
where ignorance is loved, and knowledge is denied..

I'd say, off the cuff, damn you, do just what you like...  
you'll do that anyway..

but if you want some words from me..  
(who knows the power of words, despite  
all evidence to the contrary?) -  
some words about what you already know...

I'd say, the answer's in the shortest word  
inside your question - 'is':  
that tiny window in our life  
between the past - that which has shaped your 'is' -  
and future - which your 'is' will make for you;

that tiny window, which the gift of life  
(and what else do we know of this?)  
offers you through all your lived-in life -  
gift, to be free; of past and future; simply be,  
live in a world of free unselfishness,  
be anything and everything, be what you wish -  
or better still, be what unsullied life  
continually offers you out of the blue...

Or you could count your blessings -  
think as Mark has written, just so beautifully, to you...  
you'll do just what you do, when all things have been said  
and all things written down in words - damn you -  
though I for one believe you far from damned..

I knocked upon your door - you didn't answer me;

so now I'm running round the back,  
calling through that tiny window  
of your very present life; and just to say,  
you know yourself; know all the questions, all the answers; but  
I'm here for you...and by the way, that ' I ' means we...

Michael Shepherd

## 0005 A Shouting Poem

This is a SHOUTING poem.  
Not a gentle wildflower poem  
not a whispering-of-love poem  
A SHOUTING POEM.

This is a POSTER poem.  
Not a subtly persuading poem.  
not a think-about-it poem  
A POSTER POEM

This is a HARD OF HEARING poem.  
A what?  
I said a HARD OF HEARING POEM

This is a LOST SPECTACLES poem  
to test your sight.  
No no not LAST TESTICLES  
no try the next line - -  
A LOST SPECTACLES POEM  
now where did I put them

This is a HAVE YOU SEEN MY? poem.  
I know I put it down somewhere.  
Are you sure you haven't seen it?  
Oh no, you didn't use it for THAT...?  
Why are you laughing it's not funny.  
I hadn't even finished it...

This is an ACROSS THE ROOM poem.  
Read it while you're in bed  
watching TV  
doing the ironing  
reading the newspapers  
putting the new wallpaper up  
combing the cat  
having a bath  
washing the car  
talking to the neighbours  
gardening

this is an ACROSS THE ROOM POEM

This is a BLOWN ACROSS THE STREET POEM

no need to run after it

and pick it up

just watch it blow

maybe wonder

if you missed anything

(revised)

Michael Shepherd

## 0005 Letter To A Younger Poet

Thanks for your letter. Though  
you've caught me at a rather awkward time –  
I'm going into surgery tomorrow – a rather  
risky op; so I'll try to put all the answers that I've got  
into this one letter;  
I hope you'll understand...

and that helps me to make my first point to you:  
write as if you, too, may not live  
beyond tomorrow – write as if  
it's the last thing that you'll ever write –  
give it everything you've got,  
hold nothing back;

or better still – write as if  
the world will end for everyone tomorrow:  
write so that in their last hours, too, this  
will make them feel, will make them know  
we've faced life fully, faced it so complete  
that death is relatively unimportant now...

write as if it were only yesterday  
that, in an air crash, all your family –  
parents, wife or husband, partner, children, and best friend,  
had lost their lives; write as if,  
were you not to write,  
your heart would break forever, or you would go mad...

write as if you're writing somewhere  
where there's no such thing around, as ink;  
you'll have to use your own blood in the pen,  
so use it carefully; so red, so living,  
look at it... so beautiful, so precious,  
and so solemn – use it carefully, don't spill a drop...

write as if you're borrowing every word  
from the very centre of the universe, where suns and gods are made;  
and need thus to account for every word  
with your whole life, no less; know that every word



must be given back, cleaner, stronger, brighter  
with your own power, than when you borrowed it;

write as if every poet that ever lived  
is leaning over your shoulder, so that you  
can feel their breath upon your neck as they say  
'Tell them all that we would tell,  
but cannot now; tell them all of this'...  
this, now, is how you must deeply be and speak;

write as if you are the only being on earth  
who can tell them this; as if tomorrow, if tomorrow comes,  
you shall visit them every one, at home,  
and look them in the eye; write as if  
you love them more than they will ever know;  
write as if you were offering to live their lives with them;

write as if you were a force of nature in yourself:  
as if whatever earthquake, hurricane or flood might do,  
whatever law or love may greatly do,  
whatever gods or men can speak, in fullest force,  
this you may do, because the sound of poetry is such;  
yes, write 'as if' – but know you really write 'because'...

write as if – no, write because –  
you know that only poetry can tell  
all, that must be told, and must be known;  
and as all hearts melt in the heat of your own love,  
be in no doubt – and see that all are in no doubt too –  
that life was never, never more serious,  
never more glorious, than it is right now;

write all this.

Michael Shepherd

## 0005 Totally Boring Poem

I'm totally bored by:

poems that sound like other poems

poems that try to sound unlike any other poems

poets who never take risks

poets who think that taking risks  
makes them good poets

poems with 'meaning'

poems with no meaning

poets who slag off other poets  
as if that achieves something

poets that tell you that rhyme  
is not for an age but for all time

poets that tell you that rhyme is outmoded and boring

poets who think that the poetry of 'the past'  
is greater than that of 'the present'

poets who think that the poetry of 'the present'  
is greater than that of 'the past'

poems that tell you the poet's the first to discover sex

poets that tell you they're the best sex you'll ever have  
although you'll never meet them to find out

poets that tell you they've been dumped

poets who've never known love and being dumped

poets who are ambitious

poets who are unambitious

poets who tell you all about higher things

poets who reject higher things

poets who think life's just a joke

poets who think life's no joke

poets who sit on the fence

poets who have no sense of balance

poets who despise 'the middle ground'

poets who talk about technique

poets with no technique

poets who just throw down their thoughts

poets who 'work up' their poems to a self-satisfied polish

poets who list what they like (who cares?)

poets who list what don't like (who cares?)

poets who write about extreme states

poets who think they're immune to extreme states

poets who tell you why they're bored

poets who have opinions

poets who seem to have no opinions at all

poets who have boring opinions to air - why choose poetry?

poets who comment on others' poems  
as if it's the last word

poets who never bother to comment  
on others' poems

poets who don't love poetry passionately

poets who tell you they 'love poetry passionately'

poets who – oh I'm too bored to go on reading this,

how about you?

I suppose you have boring opinions too?

another time perhaps

and oh yes I'm most of all bored by  
those who waste their precious time on this earth  
being bored

well I feel better for that.

how about you?

Michael Shepherd

## 0006 Weasel Words

It's such fun spotting them –  
this should be built into the syllabus  
of every English class: to con the cons;  
sharpens the mind, too –

those words that cloak deceit,  
prevarication, ignorance,  
evade the point of a discussion,  
evade answering the vital question and questioner,  
simplify the complex,  
complicate the simple...

'the real point is..'  
say they, switching the agenda  
to the home ground of their local thought,  
'more to the point is...'  
'more importantly...' (that's smart..)

said quickly (that's the trick  
of weasel words - make them seem  
more like an um or er or hello or throat-clear  
or, just some punctuation mark) ..

and anyone who says  
'it's absolutely clear...'  
should be frogmarched off  
to the Absolute, his, her, itself  
to answer in person for their arrogance..  
the rest of us left, of course, to guess that  
if they say that... it just ain't...

and now, there are 'mission statements' –  
confronted with some cruel inhumanity  
perpetrated on the innocent individual or group  
by some institution, public, private -  
a 'spokesman' solemnly reels off  
the high ideals they stand by to deliver,  
which just happen to be totally  
at odds with the (often unmentioned)

suffering caused to some (better unmentioned...) human being..

pop goes a good old weasel in the football press  
today: "We take this area of regulation  
very seriously. When we find evidence  
of breaches of rules and regulations,  
we investigate thoroughly" – you bet they do;  
but how about that 'when we find'?  
try 'when we seek to find'..  
I rest my case. And so would they too, if they could..

Michael Shepherd

## 0006 A Thankyou To A Fellow Poet

This is a thankyou for your poem  
though, it may not seem like that, to you -

To be quite honest, I can't now quote  
a single word.. but all the same,

I remember exactly how I felt  
when I'd finished reading it,

and that, I'll remember all my life...  
so....thank you.

Michael Shepherd

# 0006 If Only

If only

everyone about to pull the trigger of a gun  
imagined the shell hitting his own family  
what a world

if only

everyone remembered how they loved  
their teddy bears or dolls, asking nothing back from them  
and lived like this for the rest of their lives  
what a world

if only

we could keep the environment as clean and happy  
as the seaside  
what a world

if only

everyone who cut down a tree  
planted a tree in its place  
what a world

if only

you would add your own deepest hopes to this poem  
and all your friends agreed  
what a poem  
what a world

Michael Shepherd



## 0006 'Love Is Knowledge'

When first I saw you, I saw but your face;  
and felt for you, no more nor less  
than others of the human race;  
you were as other; that I must confess;

and yet, by some uncharted act of grace,  
the grace of you stayed in my memory;  
stole subtly through my eyes and ears,  
my ears and eyes; stole subtly to my heart;

and what my heart knew, murmured to my mind;  
and what my mind knew, murmured to my heart;  
they spoke your name; and somehow, listening Love  
made instance of it; and this knowledge grew;

I loved you, then; knew more of you – and love;  
knew more, myself; so, loved the human race  
through loving you; and loved the knowing you;

and all this, through Love's knowing, caring grace.

Michael Shepherd

## 0006 Prayer For The Condemned

He'll be the next to go.

In the Condemned Block, over many years,  
he's moved up the line; now he's got that end cell.

All legal processes have been tested.

Of course his lawyers will fight once again –  
a pardon's out of the question, of course,  
but maybe just a lifer? (He's spent half of it  
behind bars anyway.) At Association Time,  
if it's allowed, the others look at him  
covertly – how's he taking it? And maybe  
know a little more of themselves..

And so, we're asked to pray for him  
knowing in our hearts, that he's but  
a metaphor for all of us.. so despite his crimes,  
there's that in us which feels that we are he...  
and redemption's not unknown, to God or man...  
are we just praying for ourselves?

But how to pray, and how to pray for – what?  
that he be free to be himself again?  
but we don't know him well enough to trust  
him when he says, he's found God in there...

And if we pray that he remain himself,  
but where he is, behind those bars,  
to work out his life, like a monk  
(who also needs more time, even forever,  
to understand ' forever' more) –  
there's mercy for you, of a sort,  
if he will get that spiritual support  
that monks may call upon...

We may pray to God to bring him change of mind,  
if it's not too late now.. and here again,  
who is to judge, or how may he himself so prove?  
'O Lord, please give him one more chance...' –  
are we thinking more of him than of ourselves?

Yes, we may pray, deep in ourselves, that human law  
may bring together as we best may know  
justice and mercy in their godly match..  
and in a subtle sense, his death, if it bring  
that dedication in our social thoughts,  
will have been in some small way  
another death but on the cross of life for us;

And for some of us, prayer's not unlike  
the action of a wounded animal - as if comatose,  
gathering all one's capabilities, and diving deep  
beyond words, beyond thought, beyond any wish,  
like a surrender of one's living soul  
to seek, deep within oneself, that place  
where all souls meet...;

Those who live a life of faith  
need but to dip into  
the holy water of eternity  
flowing in the sweet words  
of the age of faith:

'Lette goe the teares  
of earthlie wepyng -  
comende hys sawle  
to Cristés kepyng'...

So should we not, when and if we pray each day,  
and use the Lord's Prayer, reaching that too familiar line,  
'Thy Will be Done',  
pause, and remember him in his last hours,  
- perhaps remember Him in His last hours -  
and live the remainder of our lives  
(as we move up the line towards That Day)  
slightly, subtly, differently; and know  
a little more about prayer; about ourselves.

Michael Shepherd

## 0006 Saraswati

The name means  
wisdom. Perhaps  
we should leave it there. For  
the human mind loves  
to bring the heavenly  
down to earth; then bury it:

maybe not wisdom, did they say –  
who worships wisdom in these foolish days?  
Maybe a goddess then?  
We'll name our greatest river  
after her; that will help men  
to remember wisdom  
which flows from heaven  
to the tops of the unreachable snowed  
Himalayas, flows down and nourishes  
the earth that nourishes the seeds  
that yield the plants  
that bring life to men  
who meet together on her banks  
and build a whole Harappan  
civilisation – so, look –  
she's wisdom, and a goddess, and river bringing life itself  
and so she's in the heart  
of every Indian.

so far, so good; but then –  
was it anger in the heavens,  
that made the lovely goddess  
lift her veil across her face?  
conceal her wisdom? Was it  
that men forgot to honour her?  
Or was it some tectonic plate, slightly tipping,  
that turned the fertile Sindh and Rajasthan  
into deserts? And the river Saraswati  
first became not a river, but  
a line of pools, needing the yearly  
tribute from the rains of mercy,  
brought by men's sacrifice? And then,

finally disappeared?

and so the goddess of wisdom  
who is eternal wisdom  
and a river, is now  
the goddess of the wisdom that's  
no longer seen so gracefully flowing there; invisible.

Maybe this purdah  
is more dignified; we know she's there,  
if we honour her enough  
and need her.

The story is not over, though:  
the satellites have photographed  
her ghost; a veiled figure seen  
slipping out in the cool half-light of dawn,  
waterpot on shoulder; she knows  
that deep underground, her wise water  
waits in stone caverns beneath the earth  
these 3,500 years; to be drawn on  
by wise engineers, to drink again  
with awe, with gratitude, or thoughtless...

Wisdom waits,  
living a life so deep in poetry,  
in metaphor,  
wisdom, goddess, water. How  
she must love to live  
lightly veiled in silken speech,  
quietly in the heart, like  
metaphor itself.

Michael Shepherd

## 0006 The Constant Heart

The test is constancy –  
the proof, the constant heart.

See that pair who walk across the park –  
from the back, it's difficult to see their age –  
they walk as if there's nowhere now to go;  
for they're so still, inside themselves; they're joined  
by that shared stillness. Now and then they glance  
deep into each other's eyes – seeing there,  
a constancy. Their hearts – you see it – are at rest.

They can remember with an inner smile  
how when they met, they put on every charm  
to seek to catch each other for themselves;  
now they dive, swim, laugh, at rest  
within each other's still, warm constancy.  
See them walk and laugh their way  
across the park; across their life.

\* \* \*

See now over there, the man who stands,  
talking quietly, with observant eye;  
a group of boys around him who  
can think of nothing else but listening:  
he's still, he's standing sure within himself.  
He's just too far away for you to hear the words he says;  
and yet you know – he's constant in himself,  
he's constant in all that he gives to them.  
They've found a wise man, and they're listening.

\* \* \*

The test is constancy –  
The proof, the constant heart.

(with acknowledgements to Shantananda Saraswati)

Michael Shepherd

## 0007 A Crocodile's Tears For Steve

I shall miss my pet human, Steve.  
I loved to play with him,  
hear the gasps from the watching millions,  
grinning my big toothy grin,  
stretching up to grab the snack  
knowing well that I could have snacked  
on him instead or  
knocked him aside, grabbed his baby,  
gulp  
but hey, who's stoopid enough  
to eat their meal ticket?

Steve worked hard for me –  
who has a pet that efficient, hard-working?  
Better than a robot and  
just as predictable.  
He made all the arrangements,  
kept me in luxury.

And the really big deal,  
We crocs get protected world-wide  
if we pretend to behave around people  
and so do all the animals,  
which is a good thing  
since we can all, each species,  
do one thing at least better than any man..  
did you think of that, pet?

So though humans, being the inferior  
do-a-lot-of-things-but-badly species,  
do lots of idiotic things  
that would ruin the planet  
that animals run so well  
if you let us,  
they're OK as pets  
if you treat them right  
and we have to share the planet  
with the idiots anyway



don't forget that animals  
always know one thing above all –  
is it in our interest  
to kill our pet humans?

that's where that stoopid sting-ray  
showed itself an inferior species,  
guess it hadn't known Steve  
long enough to suss that out,  
or got swollen head (well look at it)    being  
on TV, thought it was a character  
in Neighbours

What a waste – I'd trained him so well,  
I wonder if he really knew that..  
anyway, we made a good double act..

I shall really miss my pet human,  
Steve.

Michael Shepherd

## 0007 African Child

What's that dirty mark on the carpet in front of the TV, Mom?  
That's just a shadow from the screen, dear.

I feel sick, Mom, I must've eaten something nasty?  
I expect it's that film, dear..shall we turn it off?

Is that a boy or girl baby crying, Mom?  
Didn't notice dear, why, does it matter?  
What's that group of men just off-screen, Dad?  
They're just interested in the film.  
Then why aren't they with the Moms, helping?  
They may not be the fathers, dear.  
(She's too young yet, to know about child-rape, honey,  
though I guess we'll have to tell her sometime...)

Then where are their real Dads?  
I expect they're dead, dear.  
Dad you won't die will you, promise?  
I hope not, darling, I'll try not to...

Why are they so hungry, Dad, when the TV can go there?  
Their country's in a mess, dear.  
But they always used to have enough to eat,  
otherwise they wouldn't have dads and moms themselves?  
It's a long and sad story, darling, I'm not sure  
that I can explain it to you. I wish I knew the answer.

Will those flies on the babies' eyes come off the screen, come here?  
No darling, it's Africa.  
Don't they hurt? Why don't their Dads brush them off  
instead of just standing there?  
I expect they're used to them in Africa, dear..  
shall we turn the TV off?  
No I want to watch, I want to help them.  
That's very good of you, darling, maybe  
when you're grown up? It may be better then.

What will make it better, Dad?



# 0007 Christmas At Guantanamo Bay

and yeah, I ate too much  
but this dream  
a guy in a red suit  
came from a nowhere sorta somewhere  
right on midnight unlocked the gates  
and I guess magicked the shackles off

they streamed out the gates  
except for some who felt  
the company was better inside than outside

one guy mugged for the first cellphone he could  
then didn't know how to use it

most of the guys went for a woman, women,  
but some changed their minds  
when it came to it

some just knelt and prayed

some asked the way to the nearest mosque

some spat at everyone they saw  
until they ran out of spit

one or two just smiled at everyone  
even got a few smiles back cautious like

as they spread out I had a problem  
which one to follow  
which one would tell me most  
by their actions  
about truth and justice and stuff

then I woke up of course

Michael Shepherd

## 0007 Holding The World

and there's this alleyway  
and a passage, then a door,  
ordinary, but  
the pavement in front of it  
has been carefully swept this morning;  
you came upon it by chance,  
but now you're here, it  
seems important;

an old man - well,  
old for that part of the world -  
probably not long to live, but  
erect, still, extraordinary eyes,  
they seem to see everything;  
doesn't say much, but  
ask him any question in the world  
and he gives you an answer  
you'll remember for the rest  
of your changed life

he says, it's all, all love;  
and so are you

then there's this dusty road  
to a small town  
in a country built by faith  
now torn apart by faith,  
run by political masters from abroad;  
a pub that takes overnighters,  
an outbuilding - well,  
more a lean-to to shelter the animals  
on a cold windy night;

a baby's first smile, something  
its parents remember all their lives;  
it seems to say,  
it's all, all love;  
and so are you



## 0007 I Thought Of Her

and suddenly this morning, I thought of her;  
not in the Christmas way -  
thinking of you at this time,  
we must meet, sometime in the New Year...

but with the sense of loss  
and the sense of gratitude  
so strongly present together  
that there's no point  
in balancing the two; they live in  
two different worlds;

remembering how I would phone you  
who had time for everybody  
and never looked at the clock or watch  
as we talked about ourself until time itself were weary..  
(then came the pointed, quiet alignment...)

knowing what a treat it was going to be  
but I'd have to be on my mettle..  
and when welcomed, and the tea made,

it was as if you rejoined a conversation  
about things that really matter  
which you and she - well, OK, she -  
had been talking about,  
gently, seriously, all her life; and yet as if  
she had never formulated a thought about it before,  
until you brought it up;

and together, you and she  
would hear the sound of wisdom  
as if it were newborn that day, in that tidy room.

Loss; and gratitude.  
A single lady of advancing years,  
serious eyes, with a sparkle waiting there,  
a smile ready at the corners of her mouth  
as if it waited on the prompt of love

in some high golden play.  
I'm told she had more annual Valentine cards  
than anyone would have known.

Michael Shepherd



## 0007 Rilke On Solitude

If you notice that solitude is great,  
rejoice because of this.

For what would solitude be  
that had no greatness? There is  
but one solitude, and that is great,  
and not easy to bear,  
and to almost everybody come hours  
when they would gladly exchange it for any sort of intercourse,  
however banal and cheap; with the first comer,  
with the unworthiest...

but perhaps those are the very hours  
when solitude grows, for  
its growing is as painful as the growing of boys  
and sad as the beginning of springtimes.

To be solitary, the way one was solitary as a child,  
when the grownups went around involved with things  
that seemed important and big  
because they themselves looked so busy  
and because one comprehended nothing of their doings.

Be close to things; they will not desert you;  
there are the nights still  
and the winds that go through the trees  
and across many lands;  
among things and with the animals  
everything is still full of happening  
in which you may participate;

and children are still the way you were as a child,  
sad like that and happy,  
- and if you think of your childhood  
you live among them again.

(Abstracted from Rilke's letters to a young poet)

Michael Shepherd

## 0007 The Transcendent

'The Transcendent'...'The Metaphysical'...'The Higher Truth...'  
spooky words used by  
spooky people with  
spooky minds who belong to  
spooky organisations for  
those who've nothing better to do?  
These days words like this  
sure look weird in cold print...

OK let's be cool about this  
it could be worth a chat.

When you rush home from school  
and at the door  
the puppy barks at you and skids on the floor  
cos he's wagging his tail that hard  
and the cat condescendingly  
acknowledges your presence and dispenses  
a saucerful of warmth by rubbing against  
your ankle or bare leg  
and Mum groans in a friendly way  
at all the smears on your clothes  
you've acquired during the day  
and Dad asks you what you learned today son (...uh...)

you're in the transcendental world -  
of things that can't be nailed down or measured;  
starting with love and happiness and faith and hope and trust  
and a lot of other words  
like justice, mercy, compassion, care, courage, selflessness,  
generosity, humanity, enthusiasm, gratitude, praise...  
which if we don't use them occasionally as words  
but just take them for granted

disappear

from human mind.

and so poets being poets may take them down from the shelf

or out of the dictionary  
once in a while,  
dust them  
and put them back looking as dusted things do  
more noticeable and really rather fine.

Michael Shepherd

# 0007 War: One For Frank And Whomsoever

There was peace  
before there was war  
that's when two parties  
fight for 'peace'

and after the war  
there are two losers

though one believes itself  
the winner  
and perhaps that  
is the most dangerous belief

and which god ever  
declared war on men?

if every woman in the world  
refused war  
the men would not have a chance in hell  
the hell of their own making

Michael Shepherd

## 0007: 2007 - Year Of Revolting Poets

2007, he said, was a memorable year for poetry.

A world conference of poets held  
somewhere NewMex way, came to the view  
that the rhyming dictionary put altogether too  
great a stricture on the structure  
of verse, and worse;  
it was time, for rhyme  
(which came back into fashion  
that year with a passion)  
to be more relevant,  
less of a white elephant;

so  
all poets who  
wrote in English  
(including Strine)  
were asked to define  
what words should be allowed appropriately to rhyme.

It took a little time;  
since they couldn't agree about basic words  
(some felt that 'words' shouldn't even rhyme with 'turds',  
they thought that any such ditty  
would be shitty;  
some thought that such a possibility of rhyme was crap,  
and would lead to poetic mishap)

So, first things first, what would be appropriate  
to rhyme with love?  
(which of course some pronounced luv,  
others, lurve) :  
some felt that rhyming it with 'above'  
had just a smidgen  
of politically inappropriate reference to religion...

\* \* \*

The whole idea was well meant

but you can see just how it went –

it took until 3006  
even just to fix  
after long debate upon it,  
fourteen rhyming words to cover one suitable sonnet

by which time  
those celebrated poets who did or didn't rhyme,  
while English tended to vanish,  
were writing in Spanish  
or Chinese;  
bringing American-language poetry to its knees.

then vowelless txt  
became the nxt  
style  
for a while  
(which left poetry weakened,  
bcs t cdnt b spknd) ...

\* \* \*

But I'll have to cease this sorry tale;  
I've a Hallmark card I need to mail.

Michael Shepherd

## 0008 A Ghazal

I lie awake as the light night-rain falls, listening  
to its irregularities, listening

as the breeze blows it now and then  
against the window and the curtain flutters; listening

and wondering if I can hear  
the rain listening

to itself, as if – I sometimes think I hear this –  
there's a moment just before it stops as if listening

to its own decision to stop, as if it sighs,  
thinks, that's enough; it could be listening

to the gratitude of the closed flowers, the wet earth,  
the ecstasy of roots which are themselves listening

to the flowers sleeping, sighing in their sleep.  
But do you wonder why I'm listening

instead of sleeping, this warm rainy night?  
What's so important that it needs my listening?

It was the rain that woke me; and as I turned, sighed,  
it was the thought of you last night here next to me, listening

not to me, but to your own dreams – which I may never share;  
though I may share you in my listening

to your sweet sleep's breath, felt faintly on my shoulder;  
and so, there's a question in my listening –

did you awake at the same night rain, you so far away,  
awake, sigh, and in your half-awakened listening

know that I too, thought of you?  
Sighed that sweet thought, of our shared, single listening? ...



As the perfume of a rose may be more evocative than the rose,  
So sweeter, steadier than thought, dream, memory – the listening!

[A ghazal has a rhyme scheme aa ba ca da >]

Michael Shepherd

## 0008 A Ghazal About Ghazals

A poet friend spoke of a poetic form called a ghazal  
and said, why don't you try to write a poem like a ghazal?

They've been revived in recent years in English, in fact  
there's even a periodical devoted to the ghazal...

and you're rather keen on that mystical poetry stuff?  
and love and such? Why don't you try the ghazal?

My usual reaction to suggestions like that is, no..  
but I googled Wikipedia out of curiosity, on ghazal

which told me everything about it except  
why anyone should choose to write a ghazal..

which as you see, is such a restrictive poetic form..  
And then I found a passing mention about the word ghazal

it said that the name came from the cry of the gazelle...  
and that, told me more than anything about the ghazal...

since a gazelle, like any animal, bereft of the power of speech  
and thus of poetry, is the very essence of the ghazal

in that, whether from pain, from danger, from love  
- or visited by God - cries the same cry of the gazelle - the ghazal;

as poets, seeking to express the inexpressible, are as limited  
in their success, as crying animals, in their way - the ghazal

may thus be seen as every poem that ever poet wrote;  
crying within itself, one cry alone...So the ghazal

must choose the human word for its repeated call  
with care... ah! yearning heart! ... for One or All! ... Ghazal!

Michael Shepherd

## 0008 A Love Poem In A New Old Language

Wilfrid Chin Sue says that poetry  
is about 'about', and thank you Wilf  
for that, and thanks too from us poets all  
to ngs for reminding us  
that lurking in the words between  
the words we give most value to  
like nouns and verbs and adjectives  
are the words that hint,  
about the presence of the subtle

so here's a love poem about your about

because when it comes down or up  
to it, it's all about just what's about  
you – like the scent you loved to use  
which brought and brings  
you into an empty room

and the things you left about  
which speak of you  
more subtly even than your scent

and your near... ah yes, your near...that's never far from me

and your around  
that made eyes light up, with life and joy and love

and your between  
which I shall not speak  
(about)

and the because of our true together  
which I could write (about) endlessly  
because of its endless, its inexplicable,  
its because

which reminds me of your beyond,  
which I would not write (about) in case  
I wept, or failed, or failed and wept

oh so many other, being one  
but most of all

I miss your  
around

Michael Shepherd

## 0008 A Woman's World

She was artistic as a student,  
sweet-natured, imaginative, not  
overly ambitious; a good catch  
for him, the fellow student with  
the drive, the ambition, the great  
family connections.

They married young; she did  
what so many girl art students  
have done: gave him all her  
intelligent support, bore and raised  
his children; and in the few brief moments  
that she was granted for herself, took out  
her student paintbox, and while the kettle boiled,  
sat at the kitchen table, and beyond the view of washing-up  
part painted that familiar view –  
a jug of garden flowers on the kitchen window-sill..

and when he left her for  
another strong woman who, however,  
sculpted the cutting-edge new abstract thing  
she brought up his children by herself

and when they left the nest, and she, now older,  
had more time to give to paint,  
she returned - as so many artists do –  
to that motif, for them an eternal reminder  
of that moment when the exalted mind  
sees, beyond the kitchen sink,  
a glimpse of that great heavenly view  
beyond the garden flowers, where  
she could walk into that paradise  
that eternally awaits  
the sweet-tempered heart..

and year by year, the modest  
jug of flowers on the window-sill  
became herself  
and she

became that heavenly view

until the jug of flowers burst into glory  
and she did what only ikon painters, praying, do  
and gold and silver joined the rainbow paint  
to point the way to an eternity  
where kitchen sink's now holy path;  
that is more now than now

and she became,  
the painting is,  
a jug of Eden's flowers on a kitchen window-sill  
and with all heaven in its sight

Michael Shepherd

## 0008 The Gift

Who does not wish to give the perfect gift  
to those we love – to whom we have already  
given the greatest gift we have – our heart?  
To choose a visible and outward sign  
of love whose meaning's inward, spiritual?

But who would dare to challenge innocence  
and ignorance in their demonic bond,  
and break the spell of Christmas wish and hope  
by telling children, that old Santa Claus  
is but the God who gave their life to them -  
dressed up in red and white and snowy beard;  
and who, in needing nothing of himself,  
would be delighted to receive their thanks  
and nothing more; and who, we might believe  
of one who has all gifts in his command,  
might be obliged by those laws he himself  
created, out of justice, equity,  
to give them that which they themselves have made –  
a life of gratitude for life itself –  
a life of praise, where all the world is gift  
beyond all human gifts?

What parents now  
might give their children gold, myrrh, frankincense  
with all their love; and teach them by this show  
why Christmas gifts are godly metaphor?

Of course, no parents would dare break this spell;  
you'll laugh at me for this absurdity;  
yet it might build a clear-eyed, praising race  
who thought in metaphor; spoke poetry.

Michael Shepherd

# 0009 A R T

and spoke with authority  
about the never before

Michael Shepherd



## 0009 Cole Porter Hits The Chatsites

Frat boy,  
bratboy,  
innuendo chat-boy,  
why do girlies fall for you?  
You're really too good to be true –  
and it's true - you're just not you –

your humdrum face  
lacks manly grace;  
your 'slender figure'  
's much much bigger;

your cheatin' heart  
has played its part  
so what d'you do? you go to  
some mag, and steal a photo,

and say you want a 'long-term'  
-but boy, is that the wrong term—

for p'raps the joke's on you –  
she's doin' the same thing too!

\*

but back you go –  
you never know,  
out there's a she  
for whom you're He,  
the one you'll give your life for –  
(the one you'd leave your wife for..)

\*

oh you and I are cynics –  
but we've tried all these gimmicks;  
once bitten, and twice shy  
they say – but one more try –  
we love these crazy antic  
s – they're just so darn romantic!

Michael Shepherd

## 0009 Favorite Poem

and you can't remember much  
about the first time you read it except  
that it held you to the end, but most of all  
this one line, which seemed to hold  
the key to the whole poem

as if you were opening the closet of your mind  
to bring out something which you knew was there  
but instead something way at the back  
called to you and you remembered  
a moment from way back you thought  
you had forgotten

and then you read the poem again  
in company with the poet and  
yes that's it, and the two of you  
became friends for life, almost  
related.

So, now you've read all their poems,  
feel some more than others but  
as if you wrote them all in the same room  
where you read them together  
and you wait for their new book with  
a sorta family pride

and like family,  
you leave the poems for a spell,  
grow up a little, then  
come back to visit -  
they mean more;  
can it be,  
you've both grown?  
each time you come back to them  
you carry them more close to you

in fact you feel that you could write  
poems very much like theirs  
as if you'd inherited, too,

the family gift

and though you wouldn't of course  
seek them out in person except  
in a reading where you'd  
have to share their warmth  
with the rest of their extended family  
but not say much since  
you are a, well, close relative,

if you happened to be driving a route  
not far from them, you'd detour,  
park a little distance from their house,  
but have it in your sight,  
hope you might catch a movement,  
wait a few minutes, then  
start the car with almost a sigh

half relieved that you didn't have to try  
on their cautiously polite doorstep  
to find words to say  
you love them in their words,  
which you almost wrote together,  
lived them together;  
love them like life itself,  
love them

Michael Shepherd

## 0009 A Palinode

and there was this one  
which I was particularly proud of  
where I thought I'd caught  
just the right pace, then  
the change of pace when  
the poem goes deeper  
and then the perfectly chosen metaphor  
with a rallentando  
which made it musical  
and ended it just  
knock-'em-flat  
sheer poetry

then last night  
I read your poems  
for the first time in oh fifty years  
and there it was  
almost identical and  
I realised where I'd got it from  
and the part of me that  
wasn't bruised ego wept inwardly without naming any cause

and maybe when I've recovered  
and demoted my poem in  
the collected works of pride  
I'll marvel at the power of poetry even if yours not mine  
which can lie low in the mind  
for fifty years and not only that  
but may well, and here we should be careful  
but reflective, respectful even awed,  
have subtly infinitesimally but significantly  
like some homeopathic almost unquantifiable tincture,  
altered my whole life. For fifty years.

now that's something

Michael Shepherd

## 0009 Before Birth: Those Who Will Lean Over Me

Comfortable, oh yes comfortable  
but how to explain  
the other things

the warnings  
that there were to be  
others like and not like me  
that I was not the only one;  
even if I would be the light  
of all their hopes, they who  
will lean over me with  
my light on their eyes  
and strange human sounds

and there were promises to be made with  
the warnings: that  
I'd forget all this  
and would have to, must  
remember with such help  
as I might have; so  
three solemn promises,  
to try to remember  
where I come from,  
which I need to return to,  
and also why; for there may be  
little help in this from them

strange, that all this  
which is born into me  
and which my first smile  
tells those who will lean over me,  
how could I forget  
all this? No wonder  
some turn back;  
it's braver, more courageous,  
more loving, more adventurous,  
than any of you remember,  
to be born

so wish me luck of it

Michael Shepherd

## 0009 God's New Year Hangover

I'm wondering –  
with, I trust, due circumspection  
with respect to these holy, mighty matters  
yet with the open mind  
which He has risked mankind and me with,  
whether He keeps a tally  
or even an annual journal  
of mankind's cavortings around God's Christmas...  
and how mankind approaches  
God's seasoned, ordained New Year,  
His holy, spirited Hogmanay.

Does He receive intelligence,  
flights of angels pushing their way -  
or unaffected, for who knows? –  
through cyberspace, the ether, as it was  
and is and ever shall be,  
bringing news of how the Good News  
went down this year;  
the statistics, perhaps, of how many  
parents explained this season of infantile blackmail  
in the name of metaphoric divine love;  
or whether His Christmas message  
survived Brussels edicts  
and Brussels sprouts

giving Him a clear week  
before, in the name of  
divine justice and equity,  
laws obeyed or disobeyed,  
Good and Bad,  
Virtue rewarded,  
cause and effect,  
planning His New Year programme for the world -  
a catastrophe here, a well-disguised miracle there –  
just to remind mankind of who's in charge  
of those things not covered by your insurance  
touchingly referred to without a hint of political correctness  
as 'Acts of God'...(He passed it over to Natural Law..)



Or as some divines assert: powerless,  
even He, having set the world upon its course,  
its laws – and love, it's said – in Genesis I ch. I v. I  
(and its equivalent of course, in other faiths) ,  
to do aught but sit and watch  
as the world plays out all this  
divine comedy with its silent laughs  
like some old film that's put on  
the TV every New Year's Day;  
here We go again, maybe He thinks..

or maybe with a gentle smile  
that's not forgotten the Paradise  
of those Who Got What They Wanted  
regardless of the cost, (for?) at Christmas;  
the Hell of New Year's Eve;  
the Purgatory of a hangover;

or maybe He's laughing fit to burst – they say  
He got the Dawkins book on Christmas Day.

Michael Shepherd

# 0009 Medieval English Cathedral

Once I had this fanciful idea of recording  
the silence in each great cathedral  
and marketing these...

As you pull open the worn and squeaky door  
there's a strange moment of apprehension as if  
you're not sure what will greet you - a fullness  
or an emptiness; a football-stadium roar  
or a silence; an earfull of praise or  
a mindfull of questions...

but the first step inside, and a silent gasp -  
it's bigger inside than outside...  
and the sound of your steps soars to the high  
indescribably glorious roof like a  
small bird looking for an escape.

so that you'd like to sing a note or two  
to hear them repeated by those  
invisible angels of the echo, waiting poised  
in the stoniness of the walls and roof  
like the mountain cliffs and valleys  
from whence the stone was dragged  
by devotion.

and you feel an intruder into the space of history  
waiting for you to find your place.

How wonderful if at this moment, history unreeled;  
played itself backwards; and as the years rolled back,  
the cathedral nave would fill with the quietly respectful  
devout. Then back again, and the voices would be more raw,  
rich with the earth they'd just been tending.

Would the praise, to our ears, sound more heartfelt?  
we'll never know.  
Reel back again to that almost  
unimaginable scene - the walls rising, still part built;  
the clambering masons, chisels singing on the stone,

lifted only a little lower than the angels  
on wooden planks on slender wooden scaffold,  
the squeal of pulleys, the sudden silence of tools  
and the call for the master mason;  
and up there where the roof is still blue-grey sky,  
the occasional bird from an optimistic nest  
built the year before in the part-built spire, fluttering,  
searching for a crumb or two from  
the mason's heady meal

as birds may wheel again over half-there walls  
when please God no the roof falls in and  
respectful visitors walk down the tidy gravelled path  
where once the aisle was walked, bowed head and singing,  
but now so neatly grassed where pews and praise once stood,  
remarking out aloud or in their heart  
how the silence is, still, living, there.

(revisited)

Michael Shepherd

## 0009 Mild And Bitter Thoughts

and I'm sitting in the pub,  
fruitful source of people-watching verse,  
(Jake will know it)  
collecting the strength to walking-stick home  
or that's the story,  
chilling out,  
glass half empty,  
heart half full,  
a benign haze of love  
for all the people in the pub  
mingling with an universal love  
suspectly

opposite, two sepia photographs  
of local scenes, which the thoughtful pub chain  
use to decorate the walls:  
both are of the local, semi-rural, Tube station;  
one's from 1905ish so I'd I guess  
from the floor-length skirts,  
the birds'-nest hats; I wonder  
if the ladies felt the need to think  
dress up? dress down? for this  
ground-breaking, literally,  
new form of transport?

the other's from around the early 1920s:  
a glimpse of stockinged ankle, gasp, or manly faint..  
I try to place myself, push my sepia way  
into gelled history - 1905, and if I still lived round here  
the house would be brand-new; I -we- would be so proud;  
newly-married with my stable job,  
stiff collar rubbing on the neck in summer heat;  
and just the right age to fight  
for King And Country in that bitter war  
that loomed on the expansive, leisurely, secure  
Edwardian horizon..how did my widow manage  
with all those children?

No; I know too much in my born blood

of that trench war.. let's look instead  
at post-war peace - the stiff collar  
still chafes, but I walk erect  
still in a bowler hat, a waistcoat, a sense  
of my place in society, a career  
of slow but steady rise in just one firm; and  
it's a toss-up whether I might be  
still young enough to be called up for  
my King And Country around 1939,  
or old enough to be bombed at home...

The glass is empty and the crisps are done  
(that sounds like Auden, Eliot, Betjeman?) :  
I pull myself with sepia suction sound  
out of the photos into full colour; and  
still benign and walking steady,  
take home my fantasies and gratitude.  
One lifetime at a time - that's quite enough.

Michael Shepherd

# 0009 Nowhy Meets Everyhow, Somethen And Anywhence

Every word needs  
a good wash now and then –  
a good scrub, put it through the wringer  
or tumbledry it; hang it on the line outside to dry,  
let the air go through it; if it rains  
leave it out until the sun shines,  
smell it, iron it, check for wear...

have you seen my where around?  
I've looked everywhere, it's nowhere to be found,  
it must be somewhere; surely you know  
what a where looks like?

now you're not going out like that –  
dressed anyhow! Not nohow you ain't!  
you'll have tidy up somehow!  
Why can't you dress like everyhow?

You never tell me why you do these silly things!  
If there's a how and a where, when you do them,  
why isn't there a somewhy, or a nowhy, and an  
everywhy, that you could use to explain?  
'Dunno – just did it nowhy...'

And you say you'll do your homework 'then'..  
When's then? Somethen? If I know you,  
it'll be nothen! I wish you'd do it  
everythen..

And where did you put your homework anyway?  
What do you mean, somewhere? Nothere I can see....  
Yesterday you left it around everywhere...

You're just so untidy, not a bit like your sister...  
I wonder where you get that from?  
Somewhence, I guess; nowhence that I can recognise;  
there's nothing but trouble from you kids, everywhence...

\* \* \*

Words are fun. They're not used up yet.  
One moment, they're no-where – then they're now-here...  
Guess they made a dash for it...

Michael Shepherd

## 0009 On Being Caned, Frequently

Ooh! Ow! ...I'm a victim! ...I've got a psychic scar! ...

not in my schooldays,  
I have to say;  
how quickly the world changes!

Life was straightforward at my schools –  
you disobeyed the rules, you got beaten, caned –  
simple as that.

And if you were the adventurous type,  
you disobeyed often, just for the hell of it,  
got beaten often; the heroic aura glowed from you;  
modest hero too – you never showed the marks when asked...  
though perhaps paused a moment longer  
when putting your pyjamas on  
if you were at boarding school  
to show you hadn't stuffed any foreign substance  
in your pants. You quickly learned  
that cardboard made a giveaway hollow sound,  
soft paper like toilet roll was better,  
otherwise next time the ultimate indignity –  
'take down your trousers, boy! '  
The football stars sometimes took a running kick at you instead.

For minor infringements, you were beaten  
by a prefect, all of one or two years older than you  
(as you would have to do in your turn) :  
taken from the homework room,  
'Shepherd, go to the prefects' study' –  
justice reigned, you were questioned first;  
pathetic excuses were not in the hero's book.

the whole room knew it was coming,  
the washroom next door was the place it was carried out:  
they listened to count the strokes – usually six;  
checked your face for tears in younger years;  
if they saw them, turned away, questioned themselves;  
later you learned to stroll in, head held high



as if you'd rather enjoyed the experience,  
had come out on top..  
and savoured the covert, inquisitive hush  
that descended on the homework room..  
glanced a minute or two later  
at your mates with triumphal grin,  
shifting slightly on your wooden locker seat...

In fact, I was a physical coward; but soon found out  
that holding the record for being beaten  
was a good path to status, almost, if not quite,  
equal to being good at football or at gym...

Riskier was bad behaviour in the dormitory,  
like talking above whisper, or general hubbub  
heard by a stalking prefect lurking outside the door;  
that meant being caned in your thin pyjamas..  
but with a cadet officer's swagger stick –  
more bruise than cut as with a cane..  
and they were gentle schools –  
our hands were never caned...

or more serious conduct would be more awesome,  
beaten by the housemaster in his room ...  
and worst of all – I only remember it once –  
a public caning by the headmaster  
in front of the whole assembled school...

perhaps we were a fortunate generation:  
misbehaviour; and just punishment; a simple world;  
an ordered system; and in such,  
no victor and no victim, no psyche to be bruised;

many in those times went on  
to be traumatised or killed  
in wars less just.

Michael Shepherd

## 0009 'Pardew, Knave..! ' He Swore, Curbishly...

so Magnusson,  
the mastermind that's a joke  
of West Hamateurs  
has sacked Pardew

a scholarly note here  
pardew is old norman French  
for by God, as might appear  
in some Shakespeare play,  
'pardew, wench, thou hast a pair  
of foaming jugs, I warrant...'

or in a later century of faith  
by God comes victory to the worthy

or on the terraces,  
by God it's time he was sacked

while Curbishley sounds  
more like a 19th century novel:  
'why sack the manager  
when it's the millionaire players  
who are at fault..',  
he answered curbishly

well there you are,  
at the end of the day  
it's a game of two halves  
and creating chances  
if you'll excuse  
the oxymoron

and talking of morons  
the after-match interview  
'how sorry are you to have lost today? '

pardew, a curbish lout of an interviewer, i'faith..



## 0009 Persian Vase, Persian Thoughts

As you enter this quiet and peaceful sunlit room,  
it seems at first all space; but then your eye  
- as is intended - straightway drawn  
to that fine Persian vase which sits  
upon an old oak chest, its lid, polished  
with the wax of love and years,  
a crack across it somehow speaking  
of trials borne and overcome;  
the tale of life, of time, of history, of lessons learnt.

The chest - it's cedar lined, as aromatic as memory  
when the lid is opened - does not now hold,  
as when it was first carpentered, a bridal trousseau;  
a girl given with fine clothes to destiny -  
now, precious family documents  
that tell of rights and duties, high positions  
and their responsibilities, once held;  
past, present and future, public life and private,  
aromatic in the memory.

The vase is cool and vivid, curls of blue and white;  
a cobalt blue, the colour of far-seeing beauty -  
the surface colour seen in deepest sea;  
the colour which the upper air, in flight,  
seems to yearn for; as if we look  
into the vase and through it and beyond it;  
the white's so white, it speaks of purity;  
and here are touches of an emerald green  
which sets off both, as if jewelled thoughts  
are never far away from golden minds

I am the potter, speak that vase:  
I am the eye that draws your eye,  
I am the beauty that may touch your heart;  
and to your mind, I bring the thought -  
I too was born of dust, of clay and precious water,  
decorated with a potter's love;  
one day I shall, by that accident which reigns  
in life that passes, be broken into pieces

and return to dust...  
you and I, our past is dust, our future dust –  
but oh, the beauty of the present that's eternal,  
the joyous dancing of the here and now...  
cobalt blue like sea and sky, innocent as white,  
emerald as green fields fresh diamonded with dew..

Michael Shepherd

## 0009 Railway Restaurant

The staff behind the bar  
freely exchanging comments  
in their language you don't understand  
stare blatantly at you  
as if you are a travelling zoo -  
that's their perks; that and the odd  
pick-up; why else should they work here?

The waiters  
take the orders, lay the plates  
with silent scorn, concealed disdain  
- and, perhaps, a hint of compassion?  
no, I think not.. how, they seem to wonder,  
could any foreigner be so ignorant  
as to eat here?  
The drained ghosts of vegetables, and  
would m'sieu like his meat  
insulted lightly, heavily, or mediumly?  
They long ago exhausted their pity.

Their compassion is reserved  
for their fellow nationals -  
they know that some strong reason  
obliges them to eat here - perhaps  
a funeral in the provinces. There's  
the shadow of an implied shrug  
as they lay the plates  
with ancient formality,  
take the redeeming order  
for alcohol in which all sins are dissolved, forgiven

they're secret students of humanity;  
they may discuss you and your strange behaviour  
when they get home to a leisurely meal,  
(a fine cut of meat beneath their jacket) :  
dream of opening a small restaurant  
somewhere in the provinces;

they'd miss you, though;

for anatomists,  
friends are no substitute for strangers.

Michael Shepherd

## 0009 Rococo Time

It's part of the tourism thing –  
you stick your nose, more in duty than in hope,  
into the local church;  
the flowers at least  
may be friendly; the flower arrangers, busy..

you've been in churches which  
as soon as you gently push the squeaky door,  
frown on you, their fingers  
to their lips, and point  
to 'Thou Shalt Not' where you expected Jesus' open arms;

and to vast cathedrals asking, it seems,  
an unformulated question of you  
in their overwhelming magnificence  
so that you'd like to kick a pew,  
scrape a chair, dropp a hymnbook,  
to find out in the echo echo echo  
how Nanny says you should behave;

but this one's different:  
as you step inside, it's as if  
the fraction of a second before that moment,  
some huge song-and-dance spectacular  
was in rehearsal, Busby Berkeley in full charge,  
then 'Freeze, kids...!' and all you see at first is  
the lavish set: like a wedding cake, white as icing, giant size,  
with a Technicolor sweet-shop suspended over it; while,  
frozen in their extravagant body-language,  
four golden figures beside you gesture, inviting you,  
'Come on in, you too are onstage now!';  
these are no evangelists to tell you what  
it's all about; these are guys who know that you know too;  
so of course you'll want to join in, join the wedding party;  
you were part of it before you knew you were...

you've read the essays dutifully before you came –  
' this Rococo church is a typical example of  
the desperate overload of frivolous and



meaningless detail that betokens  
the last dance of a culture in decline; note  
the curlicues like sea-spray, shells and wavelets...'

not so; not so; this is the joy of a Creation  
whose every move and moment is all joy;  
seaspray, shells and wavelets on that blessed shore  
which hears the trumpets sounding on the other side;  
which cannot find the time and space enough  
to shout its joy in gesture, plaster, paint;  
this is a church which people rush to enter  
to sing and dance the joy of being themselves;  
a church which smiling, happy people leave  
and fill the streets with love;

this church like some expensive wedding cake  
is celebrating, dancing at its own wedding; and why not;  
this joyful church is celebrating  
the wedding of earth and heaven  
and all, all are invited.

Michael Shepherd

## 0010 A Day, A Meadow, A Miracle

This is the meadow.

It slopes from bright South  
down to the West and North  
from the primroses in the southern hedge  
down through the violets, sometimes white,  
in the western hedge tipping down  
to the rabbit warren and  
down to the wild garlic  
in perpetual shadow in the northern ditch  
shouting among the nettles

this is where, each morning in May,  
the world is made anew;  
there are more wild flowers in this meadow  
than you'll ever see together –  
cowslips, oxslips, pink mayflowers,  
wild orchids, red scabious,  
yellow celandines, clover, cuckoo-pint...

and as the sun curves slowly round,  
and the shadow moves aside,  
the flowers, saturated with the morning dew,  
shine each with a crystal drop

and it's not until you step among them  
and a small cloud of moths and butterflies rise up,  
that you see the meadow is so full of life,  
sipping its daily bread of dew  
and in an hour or so, pollen, honey;

every day this meadow  
invites, invents anew  
words fresh as dew –  
joy, constancy, innocence,  
love, freedom, rest,  
wonder, praise, and gratitude –

if every day this miracle,  
what of tomorrow

and the heart?

Michael Shepherd

## 0010 Memory

and brought back with her

the first few primroses she did not pick  
tucked neat into the hedgerow

a wisp of sheepwool  
caught on wire she did not touch

a dewdrop which the sun caught as she passed

rabbits who lifted softbrush ears  
paused then hopped away and yet not fast

a slight breeze which did not touch the primroses  
which blew the wisp of sheepwool a little for a moment

which trembled the dewdrop into colours  
and yet it stayed on the grass stalk

in the night  
the primroses sheltered in her and grew imperceptibly

the sheepwool almost touched her  
the dewdrop joined the air around her

the rabbits slept close to her  
the breeze sighed and waited outside the window

in the morning they awoke together

Michael Shepherd

## 0010 Miss Elizabeth Bishop Reads At Poemhunter

When we invited her to read to us  
(she'd be 95 this year) , should we then ask  
if she or we should choose  
which poems she might read -  
she who had written on manners...?  
(and would we then, at question time,  
dare to ask her politely  
to check, maybe agree,  
her 'also read' list? Bukowski, eh? well, well...)

The packed room was a little apprehensive:  
might she have read our own poems here?  
Though more likely not, we felt – exposed.  
(her poems had remained almost uncommented,  
uncommended, here at Poemhunter  
and not all very highly scored or rated...)

Silence as she entered. Then as  
she faced us on the platform, the years fell away.  
Her nose seems still too young for her young face;  
her face, still that of a girl of fourteen years  
going on fifteen, clear-eyed, clear-browed,  
eager to face life and find out  
what it has in store;  
(the girl who sang hymns to a seal  
because they both believed, as she fancied,  
in total immersion...)

the barest hint, at the corners of her mouth,  
of the acquired, polite petulance  
of one who has no time to waste,  
eager to face life. Watch out.  
(she didn't like cold calls and such  
on the telephone.)

We'd asked her to read the  
Invitation to Marianne Moore –  
so that we could watch her face, and  
bathe in her love so carefully expressed

('We can sit down and weep; we can go shopping')

and asked her too, to read  
her Fannie Farmer cookbook verse – so that for years  
to come, we'd remember how she smiled...  
(she'd talked with Robert Lowell about having fun)

When finally she read the sonnet  
written in the year she died  
I thought of Prospero  
rehearsing William Shakespeare in his part  
(she who'd written about learning  
the art of losing)

and as she read the sonnet,  
we watched as her light spirit  
gently left the platform  
and floated out of the open door  
like a pet bird, sighingly released,  
flying out into space;  
like a young girl  
eager to face life.

Michael Shepherd

# 0010 Poemhunter And The Simplicity Of Freedom

Poetry is about freedom.  
The spirit of freedom.  
The freedom of spirit.

You're free to post your poems here.  
People are free to comment on them.  
Or not.

You're free to air your views  
on poetry rather than people, please  
on the Forum  
(named after a marketplace  
sometimes used as  
a place of public entertainment  
and human slaughter)  
and they're free  
to disagree

simply, free -  
unless, of course  
you wanted something else as well?

Michael Shepherd

## 0010 The Great Release

We begin by loving our parents,  
(said the famous author) :  
later we judge them;  
rarely, if ever, do we forgive them...

a jaundiced view?  
we remember (most of the fortunate) that childhood, once,  
was bliss, and life was full and endless  
and lived entirely in the present,  
skies were blue, or rain meant indoor play;  
and happiness and joy was always ours..

and yet, we blame our parents...  
violently; or gently; or with unspoken qualifications...  
made me do this; held this from me;  
gave me too little attention; breathed down my neck too much...  
the list goes on; the grudge; the shoulder-chip;  
what secret solace that such misery affords!  
we are so justified - our lovely, wilful selves!

suppose we believed, as Hindus do,  
that something of us finds its way, at death,  
into another body, another destiny,  
in order to progress - or is it rather, to return -  
to our god-given, blissful nature,  
full of all we need;

and thus it follows as the night the day  
- and as the death, the life -  
that this our present life was dreamed up  
by previous faults, yet set  
by some divine program of mercy, providence,  
to aid us, a Stoic show-jump course  
so cunningly set out that we might overcome,  
within ourselves, what stands  
in our wished, natural, entitled way to bliss..

the inwardly courageous may take this view  
to heart; exclaim triumphantly,



this is the life I chose me for myself –  
I chose my parents, and all these seeming  
outward, self-depriving, abusive things  
around my rediscovering self – for, no-one else to blame;  
today is now indeed  
the first day of my real life;

and singing on our way, rejoice  
to be ourselves as we would be

Michael Shepherd

## 0011 For The Godless But Good-Natured

If mankind has dethroned the ancient gods,  
then what has mankind brought upon itself?

since - no more prayer, requests – no special treats  
for those who offer up humility?

no god above the lesser gods – the One  
who favoured those who followed 'our' stern creed;

no longer faith, or hope, or charity,  
no longer blest by loving-kindliness?

what shall we place upon those empty thrones  
and still avoid the legion of Man's sins?

those virtues which our forefathers saw as good –  
which made the gods to smile – have they now changed

and Lying, Cheating, Killing, our new gods?  
it cannot be.. so what of Reason's rule?

and what of Love – that even the gods themselves  
declared the essence, binding 'them' and 'us'?

so Reason says – what godly things we sought  
by some divine decree declared 'out there'

we must now seek within ourselves; as did  
the Greeks; as do the Hindus now;

and find a glorious god within, at rest  
until we waken him or her, and shine

as godly good in our most inward self;  
believe ourselves so wholly perfect thus,

remembering in ourselves, magnificence  
which pours out glory as those gods declared..

but where to start? with gratitude; and praise;  
for all those things which so enrich our days;

for thanks and praise in life stand by themselves;  
they call forth love, which makes all things, oneself.

Michael Shepherd

## 0011 Blown Rose Wise

How wise  
the rose?

near the shortest day,  
the seasons all confused this year  
even the great globe itself  
confused by man

and on this gusty day  
a rose throws  
itself upon the world  
simultaneously hero, heroine, victim  
seen calling through the window;  
if it were a child alone out there  
you would rush out to save it

does the rose know  
how beautiful it is?

or is it wiser than we are,  
knows more of love?  
of law?  
looks tenderly upon  
man's need for beauty,  
frail reassurance  
of the beauty of our own soul

any moment now  
the wind will tear its weakening petals

yet I saw it while it lasted, as if  
the only rose in the world

and before it returned  
to wherever the souls of roses  
sigh, laugh, smile,  
return to eternal Rose

it wrote this poem in – to it –

an unfamiliar language  
that tried to translate  
its beauty into me

wiser, in some way,  
than I

Michael Shepherd

## 0011 Chet Baker Sings And Plays: A Homage

That's the word we use  
for the abrupt suddenness  
of the old rubber-squeezed car horn  
on the outside, by the driving seat  
of the old battered Ford

and unforgettably for the anguished heart,  
the bugle on the battlefield  
as stretcher-bearers move in gathering dusk,  
the final drawn-out, liquid, haunting pa-a-a-rp.... dies away  
to pregnant, bloody silence;  
death after life; life after death.

and then the sound of the civilian trumpet  
in the days of the uneasy, hopeful postwar peace  
hitting our eardrums, calling to attention,  
stirring our blood  
or perversely,  
making the silence in between the notes  
more silent, more laid back, more significant,  
as if to say, how quickly  
rest may follow action, action rest,  
hot, cool; cool, hot;

So trumpet can be voice; voice, trumpet;  
behind them, heart and mind, and mood and mode  
sing, even whisper, you're unforgettable,  
that's what you are; there will never be  
another you; that's how it is;  
if you don't know what love is,  
I'll play it to you; maybe sing..

his husky, boyish voice,  
a hint of Oklahoma on Pacific shores,  
sang – sings – the standards tenderly  
as if they are the given texts for all mankind  
of this new day of love; they apply  
to him, and you; and everyone; so  
he makes no pretence he thought them first; .

yet, in the long pauses in his singing, he's thinking them into now.

then as the line's still finishing, his trumpet  
turns the words to comment, as the cage is opened,  
the bird flies out and up, released to joy  
in boundless air and space;

as if it were outside the soundproofed recording studio  
but recognised the song; and knew itself as free,  
soaring high in sad songs or in glad songs,  
knowing them the same at heart,  
as a trumpet soars its notes  
out over the Pacific air as gulls call to the waves,  
singing liberty, equality, fraternity -  
I'm telling you what love is

Michael Shepherd

# 0011 Contragulations To Poemhunter's Damnable Mini-Quiz

So, you're sitting comfortably here at the PC  
with a few precious minutes to spare -  
escaping the family,  
or waiting for a message at work,  
or the boss isn't around;

you're a poet,  
you need to keep in practice.  
Now's the time to knock off a haiku  
that will knock the Japs off their cherry trees into the snow,  
maybe a limerick to throw those  
silver-tongued Irish into the murky  
black-and-tan Guinnessy Liffey out of sheer envy,  
slag off a rival poet (poet!) on the Forum,  
generally feel that life's for living,

but no - there's that damn 'quick quiz'  
lurking with a wink on the Home Page -  
wouldn't you think management could spare the time  
to fix the spelling of dropp and delet, instead  
of wasting our precious creative powers  
on that damn quiz?

I mean, there can't be many people in the world  
sailing the 'largest inland stretch of water' right now,  
do they care that it's - no, I'm not going  
to tell you - water's just water when you're on it

and you'd be pretty silly to set off  
in your hired ice-breaker for a jolly weekend  
in northern Canadian waters  
without knowing which is the northernmost island -  
oh silly me - we should have turned right at Baffin Bay...

and either you've read Balzac, Bronte, or that comic strip  
the rest of the world never heard of - or you haven't -  
and anyway, you've only got to do the damn thing



four times for each question you don't know...

and - oh just a minute - gotta check the stats...  
as if I cared that Reece Kay got it all right  
in only 12 attempts, I don't know him  
but I hate him already...

Bukowski never had this problem

Michael Shepherd

# 0011 How Rilke Might Have Translated Bashó On Poetry

Be solitary.

Love solitude, and don't look for poetry;  
don't seek what former poets sought;  
see what is still and changeless;  
see also what is changing;  
be filled with the true nature of things – mountains, rivers, trees, grasses, falling blossoms, the scattering leaves,  
and, yes, humanity too, its true nature –  
and the universe will become your companion.  
So your solitude will be full of the universe;  
and you will watch, unmoved, the reality  
and the vacuity of the world.

Concentrate your thoughts, in solitude,  
on an object, on each object;  
in this concentration,  
the space between oneself and the object will disappear,  
and the essential nature of the object can be perceived.

Then be quick to express it, while it lives for you;  
say quickly what is in your mind;  
as a woodcutter fells a tree, or  
a swordsman leaps at his enemy, or  
as you cut a ripe watermelon with a sharp knife,  
or take a large bite at a pear;  
this immediacy will be the life of your poem,  
for nature will write the poem for you.

The language may be untrue;  
but it will live with the truth.

You may feel that writing so quickly,  
you may always fail; but pay no attention;  
know no other thing than writing poetry;  
let it make you penniless, if that is  
what it needs, to speak itself.

Then, in your solitude,  
which is so full of everything,  
the poetic spirit will lead you wherever you must go,  
make you a friend of nature,  
and every form of existence will reveal  
its individual feelings to you –  
which are similar to those of men;  
and all things, you will know, have their fulfilment.

In this solitude, your mind will be undistracted;  
and then, enlightened by nature itself,  
you may return to the world,  
with a lightness of being, and poems  
as light as looking  
at the sandy bed of a shallow river;

as a tree untouched by the axe,  
seemingly useless,  
vulnerable to wind and rain,  
at ease in itself.  
Like a poet.

(This text is Bashó's advice to a poet. But the medieval Japanese poet and the modern European poet seem to be so close in their search for essence, for being, that some of Bashó's phrases have the same ring as Rilke's own advice to a young poet. I have tried to bring this out discreetly..)

Michael Shepherd

# 0011 'Living And Dying, Laughing And Forgetting' - Listening To Ferlinghetti

and you've read many poems like this,  
on the printed page;  
the big words thrown in like some hot curry  
where you're short of good solid meat  
so rap a few more big words in and  
another spoonful of curry powder  
or sex, or some current buzz-word  
denoting a lifetime of youthful intelligent  
rebellion and independent thought...

but not this time.

This is a famous poet of a famous time  
and he's just written it, in his eighties  
and he won't live for ever and he's here  
and reading it with vigour; a husky voice, and  
his face flushed with eternity;  
eternity, and innocence;  
he means every word; and each word  
comes from the centre of his life

'living and dying,  
laughing and forgetting...'

and listening to him, you could feel  
that poetry's too good for the printed page –  
it should be declaimed, to audiences  
who've walked for dusty miles,  
who've bathed in sacred springs,  
who've brought their children,  
who've been here all day  
and who will sit silent by the fires at night,  
who are on their knees  
listening with their lives

Michael Shepherd

## 0011 Scrubbing Carrots

Every Friday, a happy smiling man  
who says he's a mixture of Spain, Trinidad and England  
delivers a bag of organic vegetables  
and a bag of organic fruit, and  
it's a bit like a child's Christmas bran-tub adventure –  
some strange vegetables I've never seen before  
and would never have dared to buy;  
or eat, if I found them growing in the garden...

but it's worth it for the carrots alone –  
they taste, well, OK, like carrots used to taste..  
and each week, they come from a different grower, so  
they arrive clean and smooth one week,  
clotted with earth another, but  
as Rilke might say, rich with carrot-ness..

and I clean them with a respect which they  
and the sheer living greenness of the greens  
and other vegetables naturally demand of me  
so that vegetable-cleaning  
which used to be a chore done with attention  
only at half strength, is now something more -

and in this mood, almost overlooked small great miracles of life  
just happen of themselves –  
two weeks ago, I watched amazed  
as my two hands of themselves  
devised a new way of cleaning carrots –  
the hands reversed their roles: left hand  
now held the scouring pad, diagonally,  
and the right hand spiralled the carrot  
in the pad... and lo! those etched horizontal lines  
of dirt were perfectly removed..

and the isness of the carrot  
and the isness of its servant  
were together one silent song  
where, it seemed,  
the forgotten met the remembered

and rejoiced.

Michael Shepherd

## 0011 Senior Shitizen Or, Old Age

You never did  
sort yourself out  
so there's no point now  
going over all that

all you want to do  
all you've got time for  
is to open your arms  
eyes heart etc  
to everything,  
everyone

hoping not too many people  
laugh or make it  
difficult for you  
standing bemused  
with open arms  
on the traffic island  
by the crossroad

Michael Shepherd

## 0011 Synaesthesia..

Sounds nasty, maybe  
life-threatening:  
'I'm sorry, boys,  
Michael can't come out today  
and play – he's suffering from  
synaesthesia..'

Oho, no – synaesthesia  
is Poet Central: it's the description  
of what one sense perceives  
in terms of another.. like when  
Emily Dickinson,  
she of the golden pen –  
writes 'To the bugle,  
every color is red'...

So here we have the soldiers  
Changing the Guard  
at Buckingham Palace  
(Christopher Robin  
went down with Alice...) :  
the scarlet tunics are loud as trumpets,  
the bugles are painting the town scarlet red;  
and watching them are Gertrude Stein,  
e e cummings, and Emily herself...

In the Odyssey (we're talking  
top-drawer Lit, you'll note)  
the Sirens sang with honeyed voices:  
'Pooh Bear was just going out of the door  
when he heard a whisper like a bee  
busy in a flower; then a louder sound  
like a happy bee taking a rest on Pooh's ear  
on the way from one flower to another..  
then he realised – it was the hunny jar  
at the end of the line of hunny jars,  
asking to be noticed...  
Pooh sighed an obedient sigh,  
took off his scarf, took a spoon



from the drawer, and the smiling hunny jar  
from the shelf...'

This was the song the Sirens sang...

And there's one whole song about it:

You're the tops!

you're the Tower of Pisa;

you're the smile

on the Mona Lisa...

you're the metaphor

that's better for

the thought;

you're all the senses

that God dispenses,

all making sport...

so, I'm sorry,

Michael regrets, he's unable to play today –

he's at his computer,

velvet blues on the CD,

tasting words with his fingertips,

poems glinting on the horizon of his ear,

dancing in the stillness of the mind.

Michael Shepherd

## 0011 Those White And Future Blues - To Chet

Under the ring of linked brown arms,  
bare feet, brown feet with whiter soles  
drum on the dusty, hard brown earth, stomp the rhythm  
as if to wake the gods of earth  
to draw the rain down to the roots,  
caressing seeds against the growing time,  
hearing the tears at the heart of things;

hearing the shuffle-clank  
of leg irons listening for some rhythm that consoles  
with promise; hearing the blues sung softly, like a prayer,  
taken up across the cotton field,  
sadness meeting hope in longing patience

and a century ago  
the white lady who loved Africa said,  
I am weary with the future

\*

white boy, you're so young –  
how could you hear the blues so well?  
are they just around the corner  
of every town that's built, as dusk descends?  
Do they lurk wherever lips meet plangent trumpet,  
in the reeds of mourning clarinet,  
the nostalgia of a dreaming saxophone?  
Wherever future whispers to the past  
and hears the sad reply?

white boy, white boy without a past,  
you hear the blues so well,  
I think you hear  
those future blues,  
those old white future blues,  
those lonesome future blues.

Michael Shepherd

## 0012 Ego Takes The Stage

It's a lovely old-fashioned tea-room  
in one of those rare up-town hotels  
that's still a family concern; well-run,  
staff been there for years; prices  
reasonable. In fact the whole enterprise  
is civilised. Even media types  
for whom it stood in angry youth  
as all they affected to despise, rather like it now.

It's full though admirably leisurely  
every afternoon – all friendly chatter,  
silver-plate and fancy cakes. It stands  
for exactly what it is, now rare – a tea-room.  
Those who visit regularly wear the faintest sense  
of self-congratulation. There was one  
at every major London corner not so long ago.

Yesterday, suddenly, an intrusion:  
onto the dais where a pianist plays  
from four to five of a weekend afternoon,  
a studenty-dressed chap launched himself  
with a rant, which seemed to take in  
everything from coffee and class to human rights.

Conversation dwindled; out-of-towners  
up for supper and a show  
judged it perhaps as experimental afternoon theatre  
put on by an ill-advised management;  
(the tea-dances there, long gone) :  
some of the younger media types  
barracked him; the rest of us  
listened politely, before he was removed.

Conversation picked up slowly, then  
became more stimulated; some of us  
remembered the bombings only  
just up the road. On the more senior tables,  
his performance was compared unfavourably  
with what we used to hear in '68. More

hot water was called for; it seemed to have  
made us thirstier.

It was, altogether  
a very English occasion. A pity John Betjeman  
or Alan Bennett couldn't have been there.  
When we left, the cloakroom attendants  
looked friendlier, as if the tips were a little  
larger today. And departing visitors  
smiled at one another. We had shared  
an occasion in central London,  
and lived to tell the tale at home.

Michael Shepherd

## 0012 Remembering And Being Reminded

'Did you remember to tidy up that room of yours  
this morning – or do you need reminding? ...'

that gap between remembering and being reminded  
pursues our childhood and right through our life

as if there are two compartments in our brain  
joined by the snaky sliding metal walkway

between two railway carriages at top speed,  
the air, the ground, our life, flashing by

how close they are, how far apart,  
what parts them in the living heart?

as, how can I ever forget you, all the life  
we lived together, every little movement

of your eyes, your body, yes, your mind,  
your eyes on me, the day

you looked at me, then looked away...  
yes, I remember you, in every little thing

- then on the crowded street, before  
some fancy high-priced fashion store,

some woman passes, with a dash  
of Worth's 'Je reviens' – and like a flash

I'm some old heart, some long ago to now heart, reminded that  
I get along without you very well,

of course I do... except when all the scents of you  
become our song, and you are you...

and behind, the memory  
of whom I like to live and be,

and the sharper, true, intense  
reminder of my truer sense.

Michael Shepherd

## 0012 Basho On Robert Frost

Icy evening road  
Lonely traveller

Good choice!

Michael Shepherd

## 0012 Bereavement

What is it, when we mourn and grieve and cry  
for those we loved - and love - now passed away,  
that gives our pain such brute totality?

so vital, that we almost love that pain  
(our faces sometimes radiant in grief) ,  
unwilling to let go pain's absolute,  
since there, hides knowledge deeper than belief  
of that sole absolute itself, the root  
of all our being, oneness that we share  
with those with whom we sought our selves to prove?

that pain, which barely differs from a prayer  
to know - by suffering deepest hurt of love:  
Yes! Let us dive into that holy deep  
of total grief and love: then, can self weep?

(2001)

Michael Shepherd



## 0012 Creation?

Creation out of  
nothing, nowhere, no-whence?

How much more intriguing  
and possible,  
even probable,  
if Creation came out of  
everything, everywhere,  
everythere, everywhence..  
alltime, allspace, all,

which is after all - or before all -  
what we all wish to return to,  
enjoy, and be, and know...

scientists, why not meet  
philosophers, worshippers,  
and poets, where Creation is all  
just a great big work of art  
made out of forever-love and therefore-law, as  
one and all?

Michael Shepherd

## 0012 'Only One Life Was Lost In This Disaster'

The water's not so deep  
down here, it's still stirred  
on the sea-bed by the off-shore tide.  
The seaweed waves in slow rhythm, almost gracefully.

Sometimes a crab, going somewhere not apparent  
with laborious stubborn intent  
displaces very slightly the bone-white skeleton  
lying on its back, almost relaxed, almost temporary,  
as if waiting for time to give some signal  
to turn those stark claws back into a son's hands

or the current turns a few degrees the eyeless head,  
the young jaw, as a light sleeper  
in a dream, submissive to the tide;

peaceful; down here  
in this filtered light  
death, grief, tears, a mother's memories  
seem unknown, have no place.

Michael Shepherd

## 0012 Poetry Class

Two o'clock on a quiet afternoon,  
and the class file in for their poetry 'hour',  
brief daily slot in the packed week's course in many things.

We've been through 'the basics' –  
whatever they are these days;  
they've been told what, at least,  
they used to be; I try to keep all options open,  
say 'this is what it used to be', tell them  
it's a great time for poetry now, no rules,  
just sincerity, the open heart, some models  
if they need them, so after this week,  
just read, write, as much as they can;  
and now, forget about achievement,  
just feel really good  
that you're doing what you want to do,  
being what you want to be - yourself -  
saying what you want to say –  
feel more like a loving, expressive human being  
than you've ever felt before..

A few more basics, just as few as may be useful;  
then I say, here's today's offered theme, stay in the room,  
or find a place outside on this fine day,  
come back promptly please..

Forty brief minutes later, they return;  
would anyone like to read theirs, no compulsion?  
None of them want to be the first, in case...  
I wonder if they know just how much they're loved..  
I ask one, in the end; then of course  
they all want to read, each with  
an apologetic preface first..

At the end of the week, the inevitable  
request for a presentation; I've tried  
to shield these innocents from that.  
I say, it's voluntary... they all want to read.

And so they do. We chose 'Childhood' as the theme  
at 24 hours' notice and just forty minutes..  
perfect choice. The audience love them  
for just being themselves, and what they have to say.

The one who pretends to be a mouse  
reads hers; her cheeks are pink with mingled  
modesty and sincerity. I catch  
the light on the corner of my colleague's eye  
where a tear of sheer love is gathering.  
Poetry has worked its magic once again.

Michael Shepherd

## 0012 Re: Poem For Maryliz

God is brilliant. God is cool.

(We do RE at our school)

Michael Shepherd

## 0012 S T I R R E R!

Oh why must you flaunt and yet again  
your proclaimed divisions with others  
like some badge of honour?

And yes, I could not note your  
stirring, stirring, stirring,  
if I did not see it in myself...

Creating this dolls' theatre in our mind,  
allotting all the minor parts  
to those we think we know,  
reserving to ourselves  
the role of the protagonist,

and the dramatist as well:  
keeping the action going,  
sudden feuds and gracious relinquishing,  
enemies inflated, lovers too,  
claims and counterclaims,  
abuse poured on abuse,  
fragile allegiances made and unmade,  
clowns and ghosts and retributions,  
heroes and villains in quick costume change,  
larger than life creations empty of heart or mind,  
like some gaudy set of children's shaped balloons;

if you had written it, but with more grace,  
we might applaud it; but you pretend  
to live it, foist this empty play upon us;  
it is untimely; we yawn, hate, doze,  
and carefully tipping up our seats,  
leave your theatre quietly and early,  
treading the carpeted aisle,  
outside the clattered exit doors  
breathing the fresh air of actuality,  
happy to rediscover life.

If this gaudy fool's cap fits,  
then wear it, or forswear it;

mine's there, hanging on the peg.

Michael Shepherd

# 0012 Summer E E Cummings In

said rilke  
god needs us too

people celebrate spring  
spring celebrates people

parks enjoy children  
gardens care for gardeners

flowers bless the showers  
eggs make birds

flowers choose their pickers  
new dresses look for girls

kites drag children  
love looks for lovers

and merry is all

with a ho and a hey  
for this jolly today  
tomorrow will be  
yesterday

Michael Shepherd



## 0012 The House Of Metaphor

After you've negotiated that artfully-conceived  
sharp elbow bend in the long, grand drive  
through the fields of its estate,  
and it hoves into view,  
you always gasp – this palace  
- no, more like a temple with living quarters –  
set deep in the countryside, yet as sure  
as one in Athens or in Rome;  
yet that too is artfully contrived -  
the slight mound it's built on,  
the cunning proportion that magnifies,  
disguises, with its public face  
the aptness of a family home;  
its public rooms so grand, just echoing enough  
to magnify a public speech; its family rooms  
smallish, cosy; love and friendliness  
live here. It says to the world,  
stability; tradition re-affirmed; yet  
this is our familiar family home.

It has its rooms, as rooms should be,  
devoted to each family pursuit:  
here's the grand library  
but here, with books so evidently, lovingly well read;  
you almost missed the little girl, her hair and knees  
curled round a book, deep in that leather green armchair;  
the study, where your breathing seems to change,  
there's such a still and living silence here;  
the nursery that emanates a lifetime's care;  
the children's bedrooms set around it,  
through which you ran and laughed and ran again; the window seats  
from which you looked so wistfully  
as childhood's assurance faded into teenage questioning;  
a house to leave,  
a house to come back to;

a metaphor  
as living, haunting, as the poetry it is.



## 0012 The Law Of Love

In the eyes of true law,  
everyone is equal.

In the eyes of true love,  
everyone is the same.

Are love and law, then,  
the same?

Or if not,  
which came first?

Michael Shepherd

# 0012 We'Re Sorry - All Our Lines To Poemhunter Are Busy...

Your call is important to us.

Please hold the line.

A dedicated critic will answer your call  
as soon as they finish with the last victim.

To help us to allocate an appropriate advisor  
please choose one of the following options:

If this is the first poem you ever wrote  
but you're rather pleased with it,  
press One

If you've just been dumped on,  
and hope he'll read this,  
press Two

If this is a blatant suicide blackmail attempt,  
press Three

If you never read anyone else's poems here  
but still want them to comment on yours,  
press Four

If you think that rock and pop lyrics are the real 'poetry',  
hang up and read some poetry instead..

If you just want to be noticed  
and can't even bother to write a poem,  
press Five and  
you will be connected to the Forum.

For all other ways of gaining attention,  
press Six

Michael Shepherd

## 0013 A New Poetic Language

If we could only find words for

the freedom, the unbounded energy,  
the love, the joy,  
the devotion, the care,  
the seriousness, the play,  
the sensitivity, the abandon,  
the surgical precision, the anatomical care,  
the discovery, the giving,  
the pure animal watched by caring human,  
the passion, the attention to every detail,  
the sublime choreography, the poetry in motion,  
the silent song, the music without pause,  
the feeling of immortality,  
the sense of gods and goddesses at play  
at the centre of Creation

of what we get up to  
or down to  
in the bedroom  
or even  
before we manage to get there

there would be some fresh and subtle  
poetry made, and after

we emerge from this timeless time  
glancing at our watches,  
lying into our cellphones,  
those telltale diagonal ridges  
below our sparkling eyes,  
filled with memories still in seed,  
above our bruised lips,  
sensing touch and air  
and hunger and fulfilment

perhaps there'll speak  
a finer poetry about other matters  
which love teaches

Michael Shepherd

## 0013 Aftermath: London, July 7,2005

Two days after,  
when they'd cleared away the mangled  
meaningless twist of metal,  
familiar red paint smeared with oily black,  
its intended destination still proclaimed,  
I passed the place on business  
and walked more slowly  
avoiding the eyes of others  
in case they imagined in my eyes  
or I in theirs,  
some falsity, some failure of the mind,  
some lack of the appropriate emotion,  
whatever that might be -  
almost a guilt acquired  
in some complicity

In the gutter, a glove, brown, damp, like a hand,  
lying on its back, its fingers slightly curled  
as if in mute request  
for a reason

but to whom, now, to return it?

Michael Shepherd

## 0013 And, Friend...

and if you wonder, friend, why I begin  
a poem thus – you are to understand  
that it's as if  
we have been close friends all our life,  
friends, as Kabir defined a friend  
as if no-one ever tried to speak of friend before –  
friends, who share the silences between their words  
as much as sharing their most inward thoughts;

so, our conversation's just as much  
a continuation of our friendship,  
wasting no time in speaking passing things,  
sharing some new thought in turn  
and asking more for listening  
than easy agreement for politeness' sake;

for, we're listening to the allness of the all -  
all that has been said and  
all that cannot yet be said  
but thought in silences, in pauses between speech,  
all that we might say  
when we find words in which to say it,

and because  
there's not much time, to say what we would say  
and so, we speak of that which time  
can never steal; so there is always time  
to speak, and hear the silence  
out of which speech comes;  
listening for the unspoken  
bringing miracles

Michael Shepherd



## 0013 Basho Reads Robert Frost

This road.

Nobody goes down it.

But it's still there.

(The first two lines of the haiku are in fact Basho's own; and there's said to be a Japanese-Chinese word-symbol-play - mechi/Tao [ the Way])

Michael Shepherd

## 0013 Pink Without Think

My friend the gardener who manages  
to combine romantic or ex-romantic  
with realist and fine poet and  
loving gardener and teacher  
and much else, harmoniously,

points out to me that the pink geranium  
swinging gently in its hanging basket  
in the late September sun, with  
an effusive burst of flowering  
which it alternates with exhausted,  
barely green recovery and dry stalk,

puts on this display simply (simply!)  
to attract insects to accidentally  
(accidentally!) aid it to  
propagate its species..

so I, who am nothing to it  
except perhaps a passing Samaritan  
who gives it water in a thirsty summer  
and, perhaps irrelevantly, perhaps  
from deeper cause,  
received just now a shout  
of pure pinkness from it so that  
my senses thrilled, passed the message uncommented  
to what seemed like my purest being,

am indeed attracted, my nature to that of it,  
animal or human I'll leave others to decide,  
and from that vaguest of cosmic relevance  
intend to see it through the winter  
to the birth of Spring or spring of birth  
with what - my gardener friend -  
may well be love

Michael Shepherd

## 0013 Sainthood Via Automated Complaints

Living saints seem to be an endangered species  
though nobody complains

so how about the 'sustainable' bit?  
How To Be a Saint isn't yet in that  
expanding Idiot's Guide series

however

there is a Path, a Way  
right at the tips of your fingers  
though have your blood pressure  
checked first

automated complaints

and I'm sure I don't need  
to spell that out for you

the one that you can't even get through to make;  
the options that don't include yours;  
the hanging on, because  
we value your call;  
the background music  
like that loop from  
Mendelsohn's violin concerto  
like a continuously thwarted orgasm  
without a climax

so here's the perfect practice

run through a checklist  
of the required virtues;  
western religions tend to run to  
quite a few; but Indians  
love enumeration – they've been at it  
for thousands of years; and now  
they're Call Centre International  
it could be a growth industry

I've got a fine list here from the Jains  
which is especially practical  
since they don't require subscribing  
to a specific image of the god  
who's running all this, remember:

you could take one virtue a day to practice  
or just have the checklist there beside  
the telephone – I guess  
if this catches on, there'll be  
an illustrated poster to hang there  
in exquisite medieval illumination

so for when you get through to a human being,  
or better, while you're waiting,  
here's the first nine of the ten:

forgiveness;  
humility;  
straightforwardness;  
truth;  
restraint from anger, abuse, etc;  
penance; (you could settle there for patience..)  
non-attachment;  
indifference to any kind of gain or loss;  
cleanliness of soul, mind, body;

I guess by now you're  
either laughing or crying;  
both have their uses  
on the way to sainthood;

oh yes, the tenth,  
supreme sex-control;  
not sure if that applies, apart from monks etc.,  
but it might somehow

anyway, there's nine  
for you to practice on meanwhile;  
I don't need to advise you on  
which institutions will help you most by their hindrance;

you already have that list?  
if not, press...

Michael Shepherd

## 0013 The Witness Box

It was a minor court case –  
a matter of a market trader  
selling maybe stolen goods,  
the police attempting, probably not for the first time,  
to get clear evidence to nail him...

but for those serving on a jury  
for the first time, an occasion  
full of all the solemn majesty of law;  
the difficulties of following court proceedings;  
weighing the evidence; and most of all,  
the fear of convicting an innocent man –  
even, as visibly here, a slippery man to deal with.  
The court was small; almost intimate.

After the grubby, vague, sometimes seemingly irrelevant  
prosecution claims (points being made that  
a jury would not appreciate, involving finer points of law) –  
and, months after the event,  
policemen reading from notes they took of the case  
which were as evidence, more like a crime half seen, and  
half assumed, the accused took the witness stand

and as he took the last two steps towards the stand  
I witnessed an extraordinary moment, even with  
his back to me – for two seconds at the most, you could see  
the burden of a lifetime's criminality fall from his shoulders;  
in this moment of pure, beautiful grace:  
something within him knew that this was the given moment  
to 'come clean' once and forever...

before me stood, for a single glimpse,  
the human being in primal innocence.  
So when he took the witness stand  
and declared himself not guilty  
at was, at one level, manifestly true..

He took the stand; swore on the holy book  
to tell the truth, the whole truth,

and nothing but the truth;  
and lied and lied and lied – so obviously,  
that to my astonishment, the judge intervened,  
leaned over to him and said in almost motherly tones,  
'Mr Smith – why is it that whenever you are asked  
a question.. you tell..a lie? '...

In the courtroom, a breathless pause;  
(the defence lawyers can't have been too pleased  
to hear this condemnation by implication) :

'It's me nature, ma'am' was the sincere and miserable reply..

The police failed to convince us of his guilt – although  
we guessed they'd been after him for some time;  
we let him off; but in that moment which was unforgettable,  
I'd seen innocence and guilt within one man.

Michael Shepherd

## 0014 Lyric 2

The heart so loves to love,  
loves love, beyond the loving all;  
The mind so plays, so loves to play,  
plays with that greater play  
of love, that plays with mind and time;  
time plays with love, times out of mind,  
but love's the heart of it;  
love loves beyond time, love loves beyond mind,  
for in the end,  
there is no end to it.

Michael Shepherd



## 0014 A Hindu Temple Speaks

How can I, a temple, persuade you  
that the boundless,  
the limitless,  
the eternal,  
the One,  
exist?

I could tell you that  
only those who are bound  
recognise the boundless,  
only those who are limited  
recognise the limitless,  
only those who are mortal  
recognise the eternal  
only those who feel themselves many  
recognise the One

or I could tell you that  
only boundlessness tells you you are bound;  
only limitlessness shows you your limits,  
only the eternal shows you your mortality;  
only the One shows you multiplicity

or, if you're still not convinced,  
see my sculptured couples;  
kiss, and find  
what love tells us

Michael Shepherd

## 0014 From The Koran, Sura 29

Remembering as first and foremost, Allah,  
who knows of all your actions in His name,  
be courteous to all Children of the Book; for  
Arab, Christian, Jew, this Book's the same:  
They share with you, God's spoken revelation;  
whose God and your God are but ever one;  
in Adam, Abraham, Moses, all one nation;  
and unto Him all men, as one, return.

He gives the infidels their painful burden,  
the faithful and the good He will reward,  
for life on earth is but a sport and pass-time;  
the true life lives, with mercy, in the Lord.

Surrender to the one God, in His Name:  
His heaven and earth for all men is the same.

Michael Shepherd

## 0015 On The Mental Freedom Of Old Age

What I always say is  
when you get older  
you can't always remember what  
what you always say is

Michael Shepherd

## 0015 Aftermath Of War

Within themselves, they hold  
more than any man or woman should be asked to hold;  
they are the unsung heroes of the peace  
which clutches at the coat-tails of a war;  
and we can never truly know them;  
only offer them love, support, respect...

My first school had been an officers' recuperation hospital  
or final hospice for the wounded – in their body or their mind -  
in the 1914-18 war; now  
the dignified head doctor of few words  
and his beautifully-mannered, voluptuous  
ex-head-nurse wife  
had made of it an ideal, loving school  
for the new children of a new era after  
'the war to end all wars'...

The last resting place of warriors with screaming silent minds  
who could not recuperate or  
who found death so much more peaceful than their life  
became, first the art room,  
then the chapel: death, art, God and life  
all together in one room.

My second school had as its teaching staff  
several ex-officers who had chosen to shroud their memories  
in teaching that new generation; but ironically,  
were asked to run the cadet force which was  
intended to preserve that lovely peace..  
the sergeant-major who taught us PT and defensive war  
had a face that was a repulsive souvenir –  
like camouflage – brown, red, livid white,  
almost the yellow-green of mustard gas  
that had painted war upon him;  
though he saved his lungs...  
fine, stern, stiff-upper-lip teachers  
shrouding their memories, until  
some pupil tested them too far –  
then their anger spilled, their canes and swagger-sticks  
fiercely wielded, were memories for those (not us) who knew,

of discipline that might shoot at dawn  
for the sake of lives then saved at dusk...  
today, they'd be hauled into court for passing on 'abuse';  
we were taught by heroes.

My third school gave me a housemaster,  
another unsung, unsinging hero, a confirmed bachelor  
so we thought, who likewise buried unknown memories  
in devoted teaching; few clues except  
the same occasional, devastating temper when aroused;  
in his modest study, a few small  
muzzy photos in silver frames, of comrades – dead or alive?  
or did it matter? In his late fifties or even early sixties,  
some inner torment of his memories transcended,  
he surprised us all by marrying happily and producing  
a large family. And once again, we had little clue  
about the war he fought; or whether the nights  
brought him tormented dreams...

We were taught by heroes who were asked to hold  
more than any man or woman should be asked to hold:  
do we wish – or should we wish –  
that we knew then what we guess now?  
They, teaching us from all their memories of hideous war,  
how to grow up in peace; only to see  
a generation of those same boys and girls  
demanded by another war..

Autumn again; brown leaves fall like green lives;  
soon, November mists and poppies  
red as blood, red as children's blood  
from a terrible union, of heroism and futility  
called war.

Michael Shepherd

## 0015 Frenzy

There's frenzy in the kitchen:  
a pale yellow brimstone butterfly, frantic -  
fluttering dashes, dives, attacks,  
swerves and retreats  
from the naked light-bulb,  
again and again drawn by  
(is it her?) irresistible beauteous light,  
repelled by the passionate heat of (her)  
denying presence, cold to her lover...

outside, I'd give it but a glance;  
here inside, the agitation is unnerving,  
drawing me in as if it bears  
a metaphor for life..  
a lover that will not learn  
that what it most desires  
is not to be fulfilled..

I grab a kitchen sieve,  
wave it ineffectively,  
now talking to the creature like a baby  
in some mortal danger -  
'we're going to save you..' 'we're going to save you..'

suddenly the butterfly,  
as if I had uttered the purest prayer (as indeed I had) ,  
settles in an instant upon the sieve's outside,  
all passion spent, and  
totally at peace; allows  
my careful passage to the open air;

leaving some metaphor unformed,  
more unresolved questions of myself  
than poetry may yield

Michael Shepherd

## 0015 From The Koran, Sura 55:

The Lord, the Merciful, has taught you this:  
created you; and gave you gift of speech;  
made order in the world; made plants and trees;  
    which blessing of the Lord would you deny?

He made the heavens; set balance in all things,  
through laws which, followed, keep you close to Him,  
and watches over you afresh each day;  
    which blessing of the Lord would you deny?

The earth, its fruits and grain and scented herbs;  
salt water in the sea, yet fresh for you;  
the good rewarded and the bad destroyed;  
and, though you die, His majesty abides;

compassion, mercy, glory, majesty -  
which blessing of the Lord would you deny?

Michael Shepherd

## 0015 'Infectious Holiness'..

Read the newspapers  
from the back to the front, instead  
and joy can catch you unawares

obituaries: all too often you just wish  
you could have known them when  
they were alive and glorious..

maybe there's a place for a special  
service of celebration, memorial, honour  
for all those who read their obituary  
and wished they'd known them..so  
get together in their honour in the hope  
that something happens..

here's Murray Rogers, died at 89,  
went from Britain to India to Jerusalem  
to Hong Kong to the Mohawks of Ontario  
to Oxford... and described as  
'a priest of infectious holiness'..

just imagine - you met him by accident  
one fine day, and next thing you know,  
you've caught - well, they're waiting to see  
whether it's a mild case, give it time,  
maybe severe or even, terminal..

a bit like around this time of year,  
popping into a pub in Bethlehem  
or that place just outside the Temple  
which is the equivalent of Speakers' Corner  
or doing a bit of fishing just off the shore  
of Galilee... these public places  
are a hotbed of infection at this time of year

infectious holiness

Michael Shepherd



## 0015 'Intelligent Design' Goes Bats

Once upon a time  
in the forests of Ecuador -  
but this is a true story,  
who'd dare to make it up?

there was and is today  
a flower with a deep bell-like cup  
whose tempting nectar is just out of reach  
to all but one species

In the forests of Ecuador  
there's a species of bat  
with a tongue 9 centimetres,  
that's 3 inches, long  
and therefore quite a proportion  
of its bodyweight  
which is the only species  
yes you've guessed it

there's something going on here

it's called something like  
species co-evolution -  
have they come to some cute arrangement  
and if so, what language did they whisper in?

that means, over hundreds, thousands, millions?  
of years, each generation the flower's bell  
got infinitesimally longer and  
the bat's tongue got longer

Had they allowed for the possibility  
that one day, mankind,  
meddling as mankind does,  
might mess up the rain -forests of Ecuador  
and suddenly, a shortage of  
flowers - or of bats?  
the deal's off... but anyway,  
who gave these guys the right

to bargain this private deal?

Can it be that Intelligent Design  
sticks a offside pass or two in?  
A kinda divine joke by Evolution  
or vice versa..

Michael Shepherd

## 0015 Mrs Wordsworth Joins Poemhunter

I love to see the daffodils,  
they're just so very yellow.  
In jugs upon the window-sills  
they make me feel so mellow!

But when the daffs begin to niff  
it gives my Will the willies,  
so now I buy them market-fresh,  
flown over from the Scillies.

Michael Shepherd

## 0015 Reading A Short Story Of Whose Life

and since they say  
you're the greatest American short story writer,  
I'm reading the one of yours  
you chose yourself

and as I'm reading  
I become two people sitting here:

there's the cynical grown-up,  
enjoying it yes but  
all the time - how's he setting it up,  
what's he making us feel? -  
now he's slipping in  
something a little out of kilter;  
now it's all going wrong for  
the guy - hero, villain?  
now it's coming good again, how's he going to avoid  
ending in fairyland or in total disaster?

and there's the little person  
sitting in their tiny warm pajamas,  
soft, cosy, comforting,  
laundered with more love  
than he (or she) 's yet earned in their short life,  
knowing all this tale  
from many repetitions  
but loving this repeated game -  
suppose  
that this time, just this once,  
it's going to end differently...?

so only if I listen ev'ry moment  
can I make it come out happily this time..

and when it ends - aah - like it should -  
my tiny toes wiggling with delight -  
and they live happily ever after...  
is this the bliss I've not yet earned,  
but what I'm due - the innocence

with which I'm born, and which entitles me  
to know that this is me;

or am I being told,  
this is the tale which I must earn with life? that  
these are love's laws for me to keep?

Michael Shepherd

## 0015 The Couple On The Station Platform

There's this couple  
they're standing there, not close enough  
to be about to kiss and separate,  
one for the train, the other  
more slowly back, but close

people pass them, one way, the other,  
they're still; they're calm, it's an important decision but  
they're sensible people, they're  
going to make this together,  
give each other space, take it  
slowly so that

years and children on from now  
they'll look back and know  
they did the right thing at the time  
whether they're together then or  
happily two different families,  
two different partners,  
no regrets.

if they'd been standing like that for  
just five seconds, they'd be simply  
deciding whether there was time  
to grab a quick snack or whether  
to risk what's on the train but

they're still standing there; time  
is less important than that  
they should decide together so that  
they'll feel the same way forever  
as they feel soon, when the moment comes  
that they know what they'll do

this is not a film, or some poem which  
has a beginning and an end  
it's now and it's two lives  
and I, an onlooker drawn in  
a passing glance, into these two lives,

am caring for these two people  
I know nothing about, so much that  
I cannot bear to know the outcome  
in case I know too much  
even though I know they'll make  
the right decision. I  
walk on, slowly, as if I'm  
carrying something important that  
I'll unpack later.

Michael Shepherd

## 0016 Amphibrach

A tinker, a tailor, a soldier, a sailor...

'A one and a two and a three and a four, guys...'

The amphibrach sings one of poetry's basics;  
a metrical foot – though a difficult one; it  
is named from the Greek, meaning short at  
both ends – that is, short, long, short, short, long short;  
a poet can use it like this for a few lines, or longer;  
however, it always seems trying to be something  
else – like, some poor donkey who's lame in one hind-leg;  
it's happier changing to dactyl or ana-  
pest – see what I mean, now?

Michael Shepherd



## 0016 Christmas Rose - A Spell

Blown rose, wild, white,  
thrown by snowflaked winter wind;  
summer's tender scent, intense,  
dispersed; no mercy; beauty, blind...  
perfect petals torn by scorn,  
where will weather cast your care?

soon there, new year's bud be born;  
pray the maid's rose bless the year

Michael Shepherd

## 0016 Fathers, Sons, And Families

and next to the world of heavenly gods,  
the world of ancestors...

when ageing Indian fathers heard the call  
that spoke some other world, they called their son  
and put to him three propositions, to which  
he might then make three promises:

'You are all things - you are God in everything ' -  
this the first, to call the open mind  
to gain the widest knowledge of all things;

'You are sacrifice, surrender - you are universal law,  
tradition, responsibility...': this the second; then

'You are the world - you are humanity itself—  
find this and live by it..'

the father's mind now freed; and for the son,  
continuity; and constancy; the good passed on;  
all that fathers seek, for family and son;  
and so the family lives on, in sweet redemption  
of its generations, in its hopes, and in its love.

\* \* \*

And so, I like to think, poets speak for them today  
in rituals of poetry; holding in cupped hands  
against the cold night winds of chance and change  
the lights that pass from hand to hand,  
from mouth to mouth, from ear to ear,  
saying, remember, you are all things  
in all your shining consciousness;  
you speak of all good things and pass them on  
in all your glorious languages;  
you are the world, yourself,  
you are humanity



## 0016 Immortalised - A Not Quaiku

The almond petals  
fall as slow as snowflakes  
hoping that a poet passes.

Michael Shepherd

## 0016 Orpheus - Or His Lute?

It was his listening; he listened  
to himself; he listened to himself  
listening to his lute; his lute perforce  
listened to itself; listened to itself  
listening to him..listened to  
the measures of all things, even  
the measures of mankind..

space, air, listened to his listening;  
listened as the eagle made a silent,  
perfect circle around a centre in its mind  
high above Delphi that clear morning;  
listened to the silent cliffs across the gorge,  
silently ominous in their listening;  
the stream which trickles down past the carved theatre,  
cool and clear enough to wash your face;  
look up the mountain and hope it sacred, holy; it  
plashes like curiosity pursued, down towards the river  
which is a mere pencil line at the bottom of the gorge  
in this so unexpected place;  
the sea barely visible in the distance,  
misty with its myths unspoken;

space listened and loved his music, allowed this scene;  
a cool air, this morning elsewhere hot, descends gently  
down the mountain to the gorge, curves past these rocks  
where a dark shadow here or there  
could be where the Sibyl listened too.

we thought, boarding the hot bus,  
that we were tourists; then we looked,  
became pilgrims; then something more,  
more like worshippers of the unknown god  
whose altar we left behind in Athens,  
silent beyond questions,  
listening to the space  
as if the space itself  
listened to some instrument well tuned,  
a voice perhaps, silent, powerful.

the sun, the sunlight, moved from rock to rock  
this cool, clear morning, waking  
clumps of sparse bright flowers, woken  
again by morning bees  
who may be unaware – or born to know—  
they forage at a world heritage site as do we visitors,  
at Delphi, where still truth speaks in silence;  
bees who listen to each other,  
dance their satnav trails,  
listen inwardly to flowers,  
to honey, and what else

Michael Shepherd

## 0016 Weirdwords

I'm hooking all my tenters,  
marching like a frog,  
mandering my gerries -  
just need a standard for my bog!

Michael Shepherd

## 0017 And Where The Joy

This, then, the question  
for those whom it may concern –

to find a celebration in oneself  
that, as outer is, so inner;

that all truth rests within oneself –  
for where else can it be found?

to love oneself – for oneself must be loveable,  
or none other could be loved for true;

to know all happiness to be within;  
to celebrate all this; the world a constant joy;

to find this celebration in oneself.

Michael Shepherd



# 0017 Sandy Claws, Avenger From The Ocean Of Goodwill

The tale I have to tell, children,  
is not a pretty one – so,  
PARENTAL SUPERVISION IS ADVISED;  
though on the other hand,  
as moral tales should, it has  
a happy Dickensian ending,  
where, as moral tales should tell,  
the last state is infinitely better than the first;  
and perhaps, who knows, your parents  
may even benefit from the telling  
though, naturally, without mentioning the fact.

'Twas Christmas Eve. The Smugg family  
were sitting around their fine dining table  
made from wood from sustainable forests  
in their photographable and photographed  
Bahamas beach bungalow in its  
gated enclave with 24-hour portering and security,  
about to tuck in to their Christmas Eve locally sourced  
corn-fed free range hand-reared organic  
turkey –  
Dad, Mom, and their 2.4 children;  
Point Four was attended by his personally recommended  
Filipino nanny who it was understood  
did not take part in the general conversation.

The Smugg family were feeling good in themselves  
and let's leave out the obvious wordplay here.  
Since October 1, when the calendar in the main  
restroom had been annotated 'Start Thinking  
About Christmas Presents! ', they had each  
in company with their Family LifeStyle Consultant devised  
exactly the right present for each other  
and their family (Dec 25 5-9 pm)  
and friends (Dec 25,12 noon-3 pm) .

\* \* \*

Christmas night (the turkey was rich in vitamins and essential oils) was a disturbed one for the Smugg family - snug and smug as a bug in a rug yet afflicted by nightmares which despite 24-hour security and panic button with guaranteed five-minute guard attendance all shared the same dreadful sound - the sound of sandy claws... scraping... scraping... at the locally constructed handcrafted front door... scraping... scraping... a sound so terrible that not a hand reached out from the bugsnug Smuggs to press the panic button... for how unSmugg a false alarm on Christmas night...

I need not tell you how there were no marks on the handcrafted front door - just the most horrible smell - and... and... footprints of a hideous size leading from the so-innocent blue morning Bahamian sea with hand-raked foreshore sand (Christmas Day: afternoon only) to the front door.. and back again...

The Smuggs, after their fairtrade morning coffee and non-biologically-enhanced cereals, sat around, opening their predictable, expensive presents with feigned surprise and delight but with an overpowering sense of anti-climax, despondency, and all that post-Christmas jaded exhaustion without the Christmas bit before it..

However, their Family LifeStyle Consultant, paid to be bright, and fearing for her job, had the solution on hand - a Roman Style Anti-Event in ancient traditional style, a re-run where however the presents were to be the worst and cheapest and most inappropriate; the games, the ones they all dreaded..

never had shopping been more fun, or games so merrily acted out.

New Year's Eve that year at the Smuggs'  
is still talked about; a riot of laughter, fun;  
indeed, you could hardly distinguish  
between the Smuggs, their family, and  
their friends – and that, I needn't tell you,  
is Quite Something at this merry time..

There's a moral here, somewhere buried in the sands of time;  
the Smuggs' Christmas parties are renowned,  
the gated enclave comes together, invites  
the under privileged (from 2-6 pm, approx.)  
but in their hearts – for in their hearts – they don't forget,  
know each, the deep significance, of  
the footsteps in the sand, and at the door,  
the scraping...scraping...scraping... of those sandy claws...

\* \* \*

(For Max Reif, who introduced me to Sandy Claws...)

Michael Shepherd

## 0017 Suppose It Said..

Suppose it said – and, yes  
it has been said, that  
you were made to be  
as much the same, as God,  
or, The Creator – or  
some other word that  
means as much – were made to be  
as much the same as – That -  
as any human being could be; that

this, waits for you; it's there;  
cease to deny that that is so,  
and then, it will be so...

suppose you hear it said; and  
like the sound of it; then  
close your eyes for several seconds  
and open them again; but, it's all  
just the same...

suppose that at that point,  
you don't give up, with, as they say,  
'a snort of derision'; but close your eyes again,  
and think

I don't remember such a big denial  
all at once; how could a child  
know what to deny, or why;  
deny so vast a thing?

or could it rather be, a history  
of many small denials? ah yes,  
that seems quite possible – like  
all those things that we put to one side  
as – so the song goes on – 'but not for me...':

some few were overcome – I thought once  
that riding a bike was Not For Me;  
but thanks to Dad who proved me wrong,

I've thousands of miles of the joy of freedom  
ticking on the cyclometer...

but yes, there's much that's labelled  
Not For Me; once, poetry  
was labelled, too, so great a thing  
but Not For Me..

suppose a life  
without self-deprivation  
where all these small denials were denied,  
whom would I be then? Would I be great  
in so many small acceptances,  
that all that life might have to offer,  
should be myself? Would that be joy?  
I think it could be so.

Michael Shepherd

## 0017 The Ironic, The Sarcastic, The Sardonic...

These weapons of literary abuse  
so prevalent in the 17th and 18th century days  
of literary gents in coffee-houses  
have fallen into desuetude  
these amicable days

but for the sake of Eng. Lit. studies  
it might be useful  
to run them through:

they have Greek roots  
which we should know; it keeps them tidy  
in the first-aid box of the literary mind:

there's irony: that's from the Greek  
meaning 'simulated innocence';  
in practice, saying the opposite  
of what you mean; the Greeks  
used it in tragedy – the man who says all's fine and dandy  
as the black cloud of disaster gathers;  
we use it more for humour; as in  
'you're a right barrel of laughs, Mona..'

then there's sarcasm: in Greek, wow,  
to tear the flesh; gnash the teeth,  
or simply to speak bitterly;  
using irony (as above) , to express contempt:  
'that meant to be funny, then...? '

and the sardonic: Homer used it  
to describe bitter, mocking laughter,  
which for undisclosed reasons  
was associated with the people of Sardinia..

Imagine, perhaps, a tinfal  
of no-head-to-no-tail sardines  
able to read their label..



## 0017 The Philosophical Goldfish

Doctors' waiting rooms.  
Dentists' waiting rooms.  
Goldfish etc.

What have goldfish done,  
what fishy business have they been up to  
in the murky underworld of the unpoliced,  
to be incarcerated in public view  
of the apprehensive, the fearful,  
the distressed out of mind, those bearing  
all the myriad aches and pains  
that flesh is heir to?

Looking up from the Horse and Hound Gazette  
which I noticed I was holding upside down  
my eye was caught – or did he, or she, catch mine first? -  
as if it heard my thoughts about its welfare

It swam towards me, pressed its mouth against the glass  
in perfect O-shape as if singing,  
or perhaps sounding some universal Om  
(the final consonant difficult to catch for the dry-eared)  
and it seemed to wish to communicate.

I sensed it was not a cry for help (and indeed,  
what help could have offered, without  
a plastic bag and in view of others who still  
believed me sane? No, it seemed  
peaceful but chatty; even helpfully inclined.

I got up, walked discreetly as if calmly passing time  
and – almost tempted to kiss the glass, but instead  
simply mouthing a friendly mwaa –  
and though my lip-reading isn't all it could be,  
I believe I identified this message:

'As above, so below;  
as without, so within'



Sometimes one's view of Creation  
seems to have been hitherto  
singularly unimaginative

Michael Shepherd

## 0018 Home-Made Thoughts From Abroad - A Modernist Poem

How could anyone  
eat a home-cooked lemon pie  
when they're really hungry  
and not believe in God?

somehow, Thank You Evolution,  
or you simply must give me the recipe  
just don't measure up.

Michael Shepherd

## 0018 Man Raking Leaves (Re Jim Morrison Lyric)

The sound of wooden rake scratching concrete.  
walk nearer - rustle of dry leaves.

This, the beginning of a Japanese haiku  
or maybe a Japanese film -  
dry sound first, then rake, then leaves, then man -  
that evokes autumn  
too near the heart  
to need a title

the sound stops. silence. man leans on rake.  
then match strikes, there's almost yes an echo  
from the dry leaves not yet fallen from the trees  
in the forest all around.

then the first tickle in the nostrils  
of burning leaves which  
the two-year old scrunching through the trees  
hand in hand with older sister  
will remember all his life  
like the silence between  
two lines of a haiku or  
the silence of the moment when the seasons turn.

and who can say  
what the golden-orange-yellow-brown trees  
slowly stripping in a rustle as of silken nightgown  
to the tune of, more a whisper than a breeze -  
what the trees feel  
as the incense of their, their, burning leaves  
steals like a last caress  
for each such faithful  
lover?

Michael Shepherd

## 0019 A Passing Thought

It's a society of rights -  
and duties too? Oh, that can wait.

Anyone has the right  
to dress up as a black pillar-box  
with an anonymous lady inside

or I, I guess, in  
the equivalent -  
my sex-object status disguised with  
hoodie, balaclava helmet

and perhaps a large backpack  
with my favourite alarm clock  
ticking away inside

wojja mean rights come with duties

Michael Shepherd

# 0019 An Intrusive Thought In The Bathroom At Christmas

We control freaks like to feel  
we have our thoughts in some sort  
of order; though yes, we like to have  
spontaneous feelings, it shows  
that we are human (not just  
control freaks, ha) - but we like to feel  
we have those feelings, too, within  
some sort of mental framework -

Saint Paul stricken, on the road to Tarsus,  
with a blinding epiphany  
is good to read about - it can happen  
to others, great - but, as the song goes,  
but not for me...

It happened, with a corny total appropriateness,  
on Christmas morning (I almost feel  
I have to apologise for that...) : I'd overslept;  
hadn't even put the radio on, to work myself  
gently into Christmas cheer;  
the bath was running; and then

I suddenly felt blest.  
No. Knew myself blest.

You'd have to know  
the nervous, melancholic, depressive me  
to know the inconvenient inappropriateness  
of that 'state of grace' as some would say;

my control freak brain couldn't find a mental slot  
where such thoughts belong; while registering  
that many people would feel only  
gratitude for that..

but that was it: it had happened;  
now I had it in my memory

for the rest of my life; I had to deal with it; and worse,  
I knew that what I recognised  
so inconveniently, as the bath filled up,  
was something that had a future and a past,  
and if true in this brief moment  
then had been, would be, true for ever...

\* \* \*

There's a beautiful tradition  
that while those who give  
are blest, that those who receive their gift  
are not blest until (rather like  
'pass the parcel' which we play  
sometimes on Christmas Day)  
they pass the gift along  
to someone else..

But this control freak thinks,  
try to tell someone else  
and you can finish up  
not believing it yourself..

I guess I'll have to try  
writing a poem about it sometime  
but without  
trying to find some sorta  
mental framework for it  
etc.

Michael Shepherd

# 0019 Anniversary

Today, no looking back and no regrets;  
but simply, celebration..

The world turns round with awesome force, and tilts;  
its axis, lawful - merciful or cruel -  
spins silently its thread which weaves our lives  
and adds a number to our earthshaped days;

And here I'm much intrigued  
by Indian thought – if never to be proved, alas –  
that this same soul or self has solemnly laid down  
by previous actions in our previous life  
the screenplay of our present life and its precise and  
tempting, daunting racecourse, steeplechase,  
hard ground and hedges, fences, walls and waterjumps...

set down with glorious intent that we  
transcending, lay down in our turn  
a further life, and life, and life  
so near a glory in ourself, eternity  
be seen to be more natural than change...

it would be good – it would be good to ask that One–  
if aged wisdom's memory might bring  
some misty vision, of how we're 'getting on' -  
in this so golden chain of being where  
there are no 'others' for ourselves to blame;  
to meet that soul won out of previous life  
and say 'look, this is what I made  
of what you set for me...'; and to our future soul  
present our present soul, with all goodwill,  
in lieu of meek apology...

Today, no looking back and no regrets –  
for this would be too dark impediment –  
as law and justice act invisible,  
this sunny anniversary;  
the flowers peek cautious from the ground to sound their praise;  
the air speaks with the best of bread one ever smelled or ate,

and fresh-cut garlic adds its promise, hope, delight and joy,  
and through the open window, shouts to neighbours, celebrate!

Today's a day of comings, goings, calls and messages;  
and on this keyboard under grateful fingertips  
there's just one battered word tap-taps itself:  
a sound before a word: before it was, it is;  
and yet, today, it's now-born here and fresh,  
and echoes through eternity's timed view:  
it's boundless, shared, and indestructible:  
it's yes and yes; and day by day; it's love.

Today, no looking back and no regrets;  
but simply, celebration..

Michael Shepherd



# 0019 Her Question

(dedicated to Sus Goldner and Emily Dickinson)

\* \* \*

I -  
He?

Michael Shepherd

# 0019 O H I O!

and how many citizens of Ohio  
know that when they say Ohio  
they're saying what, in the  
Senecan language of the Iroquois tribe, is  
'Ohiyo' meaning, it's beautiful..  
as said originally of the Ohio river;

so, poetry being a place where  
the imagination is allowed to roam  
as free as any Indian tribe, I like  
to think of Ohians today passing  
each other in the street every day  
and saying 'O-hi-yo! ' with  
a merry smile rather as in  
'Oklahoma' was it, they sing  
Oh what a beautiful morning

or as we do in a telephone call  
when after a second or two  
you come on the phone and  
we say, 'oh, hi... oh I forgot to say...'  
mixing greeting and memory

well, there you are, Ohians,  
I leave it to you,  
whether this daily gesture  
towards state pride, heritage, and  
just friendliness, could catch on...  
it's poetry in action...

Michael Shepherd

## 0019 Shopping

and as she paused  
at the store window  
her mind which was rose-gold  
that day, poured in a  
shining stream out through  
her eyes and through the plate-glass  
door while the air-conditioned  
dark richness of the salon  
opened its black velvet arms  
to greet her and even the security person  
smiled at the star-sparkle in her hopes

and when she'd tried it on she walked  
towards the window beckoning him  
whom we had not noticed  
to come in and take a closer look  
honey he said you look just beautiful  
how can I look at the price tag when  
you look so great in it?

when she came out and he  
had melted away into the crowd  
as if he had not been  
she was carrying wrapped in tissue happiness  
the silky slither in a shiny bag  
which proved the truth  
of what he might have said

Michael Shepherd

# 0019 Supabug Of The Mind

There's an infectious bug  
racing through the British meeja  
especially TV and radio,  
corrupting every interview,  
reducing interviewers and  
viewers to mindlessness  
and no-one notices,  
no-one tries to stop it:

H.O.W.

'How pleased are you to have won this match? ' or  
'How sorry are you to have lost this fight? '

That's on a scale of...?

In the legal profession, that's known as  
a 'leading question' – as in  
'How sorry are you to have killed your wife? '

'Hey, wait a minute, mate, I din' kill `er,  
I fort this was menna be a cor' a law...? '

They're all infected – in a mere matter of a month or two..

What are you supposed to answer?  
The incompetent interviewers leave  
their poor victim - modest, proud, speechless -  
squirming on the hook –  
how are they supposed to answer?

'Well, not particularly pleased,  
since he was an under-achieving also-ran  
that my manager picked for this fight  
as his last pay-cheque before retiring  
and to boost my ratings and  
my managers' ten-per...'

'Well, not particularly sorry,

since my manager says the rematch will bring in  
even more dosh and  
it's a sure thing and paid for  
that I'll beat him...'

\* \* \*

So how pleased are you to be alive  
to read this useful heads-up,  
- on a scale, say, of  
Genesis to Revelation?

Michael Shepherd

## 0019 The Heart's Music

Is there music always in the heart?  
Does it sing a fresh yet endless song?  
There are times I'm sure it must be so.

Is it singing in its waiting heart  
for words to join it, tell itself in song?  
Reason says, indeed it may be so.

When a poem goes straight from ear to heart,  
its words so musical, it's now our song,  
it sings these words: the heart is always so.

(from a thought by Jacques Maritain)

Michael Shepherd

## 0020 Awakening To Myself

Surfacing from deep sleep, that moment  
when the disciplined get up immediately,  
the self-motivated can't wait to get on doing their life,  
the blest open their eyes with praise upon their lips,  
the tardy look with horror at the bedside clock,  
or the peremptory alarm floods the body with adrenalin,  
while the rest of us pull the bedclothes over our head  
to keep the world out of ourselves, or vice versa,  
not I..

half-surfacing to some stony ledge  
in the ocean of part consciousness  
I am at one with every depressive, every would-be suicide,  
every spiritual down-and-out,  
every being who feels their worthlessness,

as one inspecting carefully the contents  
of the fullish bag of a vacuum cleaner  
finding there, naught for my comfort

until, if I'm lucky, some passing concern  
for another human being  
takes the place of fervent morning hymn  
and I may feel I have some place,  
some part to play in this strange drama  
that we find ourselves thrust onstage to play,  
wondering if we learned the lines aright;

and after this chastening roller-coaster  
of humility, mayhap another chance to seek myself,  
I, dispassionately, rise.

Michael Shepherd

## 0020 A Loving Sestina To Our Lady

1 In Europe, around the end of the 12th century, women  
2 began to be regarded by men as more than a good lay  
3 and mother to your children; but that contented sorta love  
4 that even men feel afterward, could be seen as quite divine  
5 and thus related however distantly to the Creator;  
6 this gave rise to a type of poetry called the sestina.

6 a troubadour called Arnaut Daniel invented the sestina,  
1 so it's said, around 1190; and this new respect for women  
5 as being, believe it or not, related distantly to their Creator  
2 led to this, to us, rather absurd and complicated 'lay' -  
4 that was the rather double-entendre name for the divine  
3 love for mankind related to the act of physical love

3 which, though we make this a common metaphor for love  
6 today, was new then, to unreconstructed men; the sestina  
4 which plugs the same six end-words throughout, divine  
1 and human, was supposed to underline that women,  
2 exquisitely praised in the poetry of the troubadour's lay,  
5 were men's path to loving, through them, his Creator;

5 Creator of man and woman, Adam and Eve; Creator  
3 of all things and of, crucially, both human and divine love  
2 and this point was hammered home; the troubadour's lay  
6 in this somewhat tiresome form of the sestina  
1 was supposed to make men respectful, and women  
4 feel good about themselves (like Maya) as being divine;

4 but of course, troubadours were also human and divine  
5 musicians; sexy and available (OK, blame their Creator...)  
1 and, it was envied, did their own share of loving women  
3 while going from castle to castle, gig to gig, love to love;  
6 which gave rather a double edge to their sung sestina  
2 and prompted many a coarse joke about 'a good lay'..

2 however, poets - Dante, Petrarch - found the lay  
4 a way of linking human love and the divine;  
6 a profound metaphor, in a fine, poetic sestina,  
5 that love in all its forms is the very nature of the Creator



3 and that we should remember this while making love  
1 and perhaps have rather more respect for women..

Envoi:

5 I hope that this sestina has made its point: the Creator  
3 is Love; Love is the Creator; and for most of us, this love  
1 arises from, let's say, a very poetic lay; with women.

Michael Shepherd

## 0020 Bliss

After that first photo-flash in mind  
that signalled that there beyond where, might be  
a poem waiting to be formed;  
and there followed, that strange mixture in the mind  
of awe, surrender, thrill, and wonderment;  
and as the mind, now as obedient servant  
beyond the asking, brought the building stuff  
for this new, strange construction (though not, I noted,  
in the order that these would be used) –

after all this, and the poem now on paper,  
I walked to the front door; and stood; and looked;  
looked like a child looks, and expects to look,  
seeing the world as gift; as ever fresh;  
no thought, no wish, the mind drained, grateful, of all thought  
except the awareness of just – being allowed to be –  
as the impressions flooded in, the senses sensed,  
watched, as all the – all – passed through  
without a judgment needed, made;

and that portion of my mind  
now free to think or not to think,  
superb in that peace that comes with freedom,  
made the connection which  
was not intellect, but knowledge –  
pure knowledge which was  
almost silent, wordless worship of that 'that'  
which is beyond name and form, yet known -

'this, this, is bliss itself; this present self is bliss'.

Michael Shepherd

## 0020 Finger Lickin' Blood

At Wendy's Restaurant in San Jose,  
California, USA,  
a woman 'found' a finger, rather illy  
hidden in her bowl of chilli.

The management's reaction -  
and this is just no laugh -  
is irony in action:  
they've had to cut the staff.

The Prosecutor's hinted -  
though the amputee's not found -  
the culprit has been fingered,  
with the evidence...to hand...

but suspicion's bound to linger  
and fingers sure to point -  
did rivals have a finger  
in cutting down this joint?

Michael Shepherd

## 0020 The Faithful Servant

and when she took the job  
of being his secretary, adored  
his manliness – his powers,  
his integrity, his fierce command,  
his piercing blue eyes, and  
his mischief...how could she not  
eventually, become his wife?  
Faithful to her wedding vows, she  
miscarried twice, eventually  
bore him a son; allowing him  
to continue making all the family decisions  
which eventually cut them off  
from both their families – even  
took his side in the many battles  
with his disoriented son battling for his own identity;  
and when – eventually –  
stone deaf, demented, and incontinent,  
and fierce as ever, blue eyes blazing  
with anger, he became impossible,  
she continued to nurse him single-handed;  
loved, honoured, and obeyed;  
love found the impossible to be the possible.

Who can doubt, the faithful servant  
is greater than the master?

This, love never tells; but knows.

Michael Shepherd

## 0021 Poets' Tree

Spiky, a mass of spikes more threatening than sharp -  
what are they fending off, what are they protecting  
so fiercely with their green carapace like a thoughtful womb,  
dropping their hidden beauties in reflective autumn  
so generously despite their ferocity, scattered all around,  
rejecting the curious mind of passers-by,  
yielding to those who know to seek what they hold precious;  
or perhaps to lie uninvestigated, awaiting the invisibility  
of the wintered years, the earth's silent fruitful grave,  
to seed, to grow, to spread their glorious canopy  
some later spring, some future generation,  
with flowers as delicate as wild orchids?

Dare to investigate, open their spiky soft protection,  
and a beauty without parallel is revealed: like some sculpture  
fashioned by a master craftsman in some rich wood;  
dare to touch, to lift, to hold: the surface has been polished  
with some wax that's more like precious soap,  
made by some mind that knows as many secrets  
as a tree.

Laugh if you will at this precious toy for boys  
which, pulped into pure water, will wash the finest clothes,  
redeem their stains, and leave the lightest fabric of our dreams  
the radiant, palest blue of heaven itself;

chestnut tree; metaphor for poem and poet,  
for those who seek a parable of unity  
to join blue heaven with the rich brown earth.

Michael Shepherd

## 0021 Football's New Rules

I guess you read the news  
about the town – soon to be copied –  
which abolished traffic lights...  
what happened? Self-preservation,  
care, and courtesy have won the day..

while the soccer news this weekend was  
that everybody blames the referee..  
who's after all, just the traffic-lights to this game..  
suppose we tried the same daring system on the soccer field..

any player who makes a bad tackle  
or an inadvertent trip (deliberate ones  
would disappear as a mark of shame)  
to apologise politely and offer  
a free kick to the other side..

the player who kicks the ball into touch  
immediately hands the ball to the other side  
or at the very least, runs away – both sides  
always knowing very well who touched it last..

shirt-pulling and diving would be  
such matters of shame that the player's  
own side would stop playing and remain  
rooted to the spot until  
the culprit offered a free kick..

and any really doubtful events would be referred  
to the television cameras for a quick decision;  
and all the players might just feel the urge  
to applaud and clap a tricky moment fairly resolved?

and at the end of the match,  
the players would line up and just like  
an international does at the beginning,  
shake hands down the line...

while the managers would meet symbolically at centre-pitch,

shake hands publicly on a game cleanly fought,  
and even – full on camera – look each other  
in the eye..

and we the supporters would feel damn proud  
that sport was sport once again, that  
football was and is the life-blood of the nation,  
and if not more important than life and death  
at least a happy occasion of skills enjoyed..

and that, win or lose, chivalry and  
the game's the thing..

Michael Shepherd

# 0021 Santa Claus Franchises Inc: A Public Statement

We the undersigned have been requested to issue the following statement on behalf of Santa Claus Franchises Inc in the light of recent serious allegations:

SCI as an international organisation takes its responsibilities to the public extremely seriously, while at all times being sensitive to contemporary issues.

SCI defends itself vigorously from suggestions that it projects an image of extra-terrestrial benevolence which may lead to later adverse effects of trauma, mental and physical ill-health, etc. All SCI Franchise Outlets have an authorised notice that 'parental discrimination should be exercised at all times'.

There are no similarities to the tobacco industry to be drawn in this respect.

SCI will therefore contest vigorously all lawsuits for breach of agreement and failure to deliver goods as promised.

SCI thus points out that the phrase, 'And what would you like for Christmas, young man/lady? ' does not constitute a legal promise to deliver goods as defined by law. This applies also to our website and email facility, and to telephone calls, which are at premium rate.

SCI affirms that lap-dandling and possibly interpreted inappropriate touching is now forbidden in all SCI Franchise outlets. All our staff have had a criminal record check. Please confirm that you are attending an official SCI Franchise Outlet



SCI defends itself vigorously against accusations of ageism, racism, colour preference, religious affiliation, and the suggestion that it is a paradigm for white colonialism. SCI points out that Single-Image Branding is an internationally accepted form of consumerism. We are however looking into alterations in our franchised brand-image in certain global cultural areas where, for instance, bounty is traditionally associated with matriarchy. The Disney Organisation is assisting us in this.

SCI further points out that it repudiates accusations of pandering to consumerism and commercialism, (while these are indeed essential to a healthy economy) and points out that it is at all times sensitive to changing public requirements. SCI seeks only to serve its public and maintain the high standards of its founder.

SCI vigorously defends itself against the accusation of 'passing-off' – trading on a deliberate confusion with the image of God The Father. This is made quite clear on the officially authorised form to be stuffed up the chimney or ventilation duct.

SCI has no face-veil policy. However, metal detectors may be used at certain outlets.

SCI wishes all its participants seasonal cheer and a prosperous trading year.  
SCI affirms its mission statement:  
'Yule Be Grateful, Ho Ho Ho'...

[Published at the request of SCI Franchises Inc.]

Michael Shepherd

## 0021 The Advent Of Commerce

December 11; and through the letterbox  
falls like a heavy snowflake, the first Christmas card..  
who's so eager to draw  
my mind and heart to Advent-tide?

no stamp – ah yes, of course,  
it's from Alex the paper boy,  
counting his goodwill before it's cashed,  
throwing me into a moral tizzy.

My parents, who knew the circumspection  
with which the poor must treat the poor,  
taught me that after God and the family  
had been acknowledged on Christmas Day,

'Boxing Day' was the time for showing gratitude  
to those who'd served your family faithfully  
daily or weekly – the milkman with his  
unsociable hours; the paperboy  
(for those who could afford a daily paper) :  
and other delivery boys;  
the coalman; so, if they called with a delivery  
on Boxing Day, your Christmas box  
would be waiting in its envelope outside the door for them;  
or the promising and friendlier note above the letterbox,  
'Paperboy please knock'

only the boldest would have dreamed  
of knocking on your threadbare door  
to wish a partially sincere seasonal greeting..  
though the clop of the coalman's horse and cart  
significantly empty of all sacks, on Boxing Day  
was known to be a gentle hint..

Around here, the dustmen of the mid-20th century  
who were the nearest to the Mafia  
in this lower middle class suburb,  
(and worked for it, carrying heavy iron dustbins  
over their shoulders from your house to the cart...)

timed their bold knock on your door to coincide  
with the day your double Christmas/New Year pension  
had been drawn at the Post Office,  
asking gruffly 'Would you like to sign The Book? '  
which meant you wrote your name, address,  
and amount (fictionally exaggerated? They left it to you)  
so spontaneously given.. so that the whole street could read  
and judge their contribution accordingly...

So I'm in a moral tizzy about Alex;  
he's worked unsociable hours all year  
as the newspapers get heavier with advertising dross,  
for just this chance to buy himself (or so we guess -  
should we be entertaining worthier thoughts?)  
those boys' toys he's been anticipating all the year;

OK he's earned it - though we've never yet received  
a thankyou from him... and it would have been nice  
to feel it would be a surprise for him...  
but the stores sell out these days long before Boxing Day..

and so, there goes another nibble at the heart of Christmas -  
the season of receiving.

Michael Shepherd

## 0021 Under The Bridge Of Time

Oui, c'est beaux, le jardin... at this time of year;  
mais... for myself,  
a little too overgrown – but Monsieur  
prefers it that way... you see him down there  
by the lily pond, the nymphées?

He's nearly blind now, yet he's out all day  
and nearly every day. He draws life from the garden,  
je crois; and though there are some who laugh  
and say, his paintings are now  
mere daubs, when I see them  
and then go out into the garden,  
there's a truth there, beyond what we see...  
what passes, what floats serene and unaffected...  
what floats on time itself...

You may find this fanciful, but I've watched Monsieur  
over the years: first he had the garden made,  
when he could afford it, and the bridge and then the pool  
that slows the river... then he painted the lilies which we planted,  
floating on the water, all the colours  
of sunshine as you see it through a prism...then he painted  
the sunlight on the water... then  
he seemed to paint the flow of the water  
as it passed... and then he seemed to be painting  
time itself, passing under the bridge  
where we're standing here, as if  
outside time... and now,  
qu'est-ce qu'on dit? I think  
he's painting the philosophy of time –  
Monsieur Bergson le philosophe  
agrees with me – in paint; perhaps  
one might say, painting  
the future of painting...

yet, the flow of time and death came first, they say:  
Monsieur began to paint his water-lilies  
after he had seen the photos of the solemn river  
of corpses in the trenches

in that terrible war; even, it's said,  
the same colours of the unburied dead who putrify  
are the same colours that he sees  
in the water-lilies...c'est étrange, n'est-ce-pas?  
a sort of redemption in the painter's palette...  
this, I feel, gives these pretty paintings  
the vision that drives Monsieur  
to find beauty in its opposite...

but it's cooling now; Monsieur  
likes to enjoy that glowing light of early evening,  
the precious departing of the light...  
the light of life itself...  
I'll fetch his rug...these artists seem to  
lose themselves in what they see...  
they don't seem to notice passing time,  
it's as if they think they live where time is space;  
or perhaps, time's so precious for Monsieur  
that he paints it running out...

but I mustn't keep you, M'sieur Proust –  
it was so kind of you to find the time  
to visit, and you too, M'sieur Debussy –  
it has been quite a day to remember, n'est-ce pas? ...  
and now for Monsieur's rug...

Michael Shepherd

## 0022 A Dickinsonian Ode To Hope

Hopes – that soar –  
like kites in wind -  
above the truth –  
with wishes – twisting  
in their tail –  
pulling at the string  
of the heart –  
until – soaring -  
we, up there too –  
looking down on present self –  
from our own future –  
up there too,  
faith, loving-kindness?

Michael Shepherd

## 0022 November

November, I'm almost ready now  
to take you on:  
every year  
you throw all that you can at me –

above all, that sadness which lurks beyond  
the all and any reason; steals into the blood;  
taps at the heart with long-forgotten regrets,  
drains the energy; lurks with all its  
theatre tricks and stage props –

in the countryside, leaves falling like failed dreams,  
their smell underfoot, of earth and rain and snow and mud;  
in the town, the acrid smell of sodden fireworks; then come  
poppies and guns, trenches, death,  
and waste of life, futility and war;

draining the light from brief sad afternoons,  
the grey depressing drizzle of eternity without hope..  
warping thought, draining enthusiasm,  
blunting the sharp edge of pleasure;

you'll carry your campaign right through  
December if you can...as the spirit wearies, daylight fades,  
do all you can to ruin Christmas; already linking arms  
with New Year bleakness to complete your ruthless task..

November, I'm almost ready now  
to take you on: knowing you  
for what you are: the yearly test  
of inner resources and resilience,  
the soul stripped bare; bare branches  
stripped of leaves; king and fool  
together on the heath in storm,  
bare humanity... so

I'll be prepared – turn the heat up,  
stoke the heart's fires;  
drink myself sociable; consider charity;

think of others; play with generosity;  
remember love; stand fast as faith;  
be hope itself; not look outside  
for all that's inner to be found;  
be all that's Spring and strong  
and damn the passing seasons; dance  
with merriment and laughter; be  
strong as roughbarked tree trunk  
bending in a winter gale, standing  
stronger from the test;

Michael Shepherd



## 0022 Unsung Malady

Your messages are so venomous,  
your words so loaded with abuse  
that I would recommend  
a metaphysical health check:  
a subtle X-ray or better still, a Why-ray  
might show up something in  
the spleen or in the bile duct  
before it's too late for  
poetic irony or  
poetic justice

Michael Shepherd

## 0023 The Truth About Truth, Etc.

Suppose the Greeks were right –  
that, though some of us  
may seek to climb Olympus  
(the rocky scramble exhilarating  
in the moist fresh morning,  
the scent of coffee, baking bread,  
rising from the valley below,  
the occasional shout of shepherd to his dog,  
up higher, the tiptilt goats surprised,  
and then the mist, the thinning air,  
the inner urge, ambition  
fading, as humility, surrender, grow)

that all of us, fully although seemingly in some degree,  
yearn for the True, the Good, the Beautiful,  
perhaps not in that order, or at least at first,  
and believing or not believing  
that ultimately, we may know the state  
when in their glory, all these three  
might merge, be indistinguishable;

for this, no climb is needed, since  
the gods - the Greeks were sure of this -  
dwell ever in our hearts; at rest, but  
waiting for their call, or ours,  
to show us to ourselves, and bursting forth  
in what we recognise as enthusiasm..

but for those who love to climb,  
who love the view, the upper air,  
the risk, the challenge and the sport -  
the topmost crags surmounted,  
the scree no longer playing its game  
of snakes and ladders with our feet and hearts and minds,  
the clouds like a white, concealing mystery,  
now below us; the gods invisible to ground level eyes  
run eagerly to greet us in our hearts; we now  
pure oxygen for the others still visible  
through breaks in the white clouds of poetry,

climbing on their way; our hearts breathing pure oxygen for them  
saying yes the climb is worth it,  
the Greeks were right.

Michael Shepherd

## 0023 Angel, Butterfly, Poem

Glance, as you hurry home from work,  
through this lighted window where  
a man taps at his computer

he might be writing anything,  
no-one asked him to write this poem  
which he does not yet know himself

it makes as much difference  
to the world as the wing-beat  
of a single butterfly  
deep in the heart of a distant jungle

but for those few intrepid  
explorers of the jungles of the mind  
who read it

with indrawn breath  
as beautiful as an unknown  
species of butterfly  
flaunting its vivid wings  
in a rare shaft of sunlight  
timed to their visit  
through the canopy of trees  
high above the living jungle  
that balances, without telling, the whole planet -  
earth, trees, rain, sunlight, leaf-fresh air,  
space; and the song of birds

angel; butterfly; poem;  
winged in beauty  
thus disguised

Michael Shepherd

## 0023 Thanksgiving

'Thanks for yesterday evening –  
I really enjoyed myself...'

What a profound statement, is  
that hackneyed phrase!

'Just an impromptu dinner party',  
they invited.

A modest house that shines  
with their mutual and family love –  
his craftsmanship in every detail,  
her sense of beauty at every point,

like the vased flowers  
which seemed to be growing  
out of a spring of love, openly rejoicing  
that they were giving their life to us  
in the name of love; calling to us to be here, and now,  
to enjoy every moment with them..

the perfectly served simple meal; and  
the company, the guests:

the very recently bereaved  
who was the unspoken focus  
of all our attentive care;

the teacher, always smiling and alert,  
so that we feel we know him well– yet  
really know so little;

the man whose career  
has always seemed a series  
of ineffectual starts, who in one more disastrous trough  
bought a laptop, found himself  
as a children's writer; now  
there's just no stopping him;

and the others; and over all,  
a light, a warmth, a steady conversation  
which never mentioned love,  
yet was rich with it...  
and life, a sheer delight;

so that I enjoyed the self in myself,  
knew myself more in that; so

thanks for yesterday evening;  
I really enjoyed myself.

Michael Shepherd

## 0024 Horses In A Field

They seem to be thinking, soft-eyed, snuffling, cropping,  
ears awake to many signals,  
then move gently closer,  
as if they were unaware,  
rub muzzles, necks,  
love each other silently, almost imperceptibly,  
move away again as gently;  
solitude in company may hide  
what we do not hear; what we do not think

the battle horse long retired  
so skilled in life and death,  
proud of many battles  
he and his master as one  
swords flashing, leaning sharply  
this way that way  
rearing for height flail smashed down  
backward now spear and charge  
a marriage sealed in blood  
his master's life saved many times

the packhorse ridden in haste  
through dangerous lands  
with despatches that may  
signal the start to war, or  
sue for peace  
its rider impatient to thoughtlessness

the horses of the range  
sharing the wild vigour  
of cowboys, pioneers,  
breathing the air  
of a new country  
themselves once wild  
knowing the hills, the herbs, more than their masters

the racehorse proud we think  
to test itself, share the victory,  
then at stud, to share its line

knowing perhaps in blood,  
aristocracy; or not, who knows,  
they do indeed look quietly proud

the family stable horses, knowing  
the love of boys, of girls,  
besotted with their ponies,  
talked to endlessly; too many sugar cubes

the tradesmen's horses,  
the ploughmen's horses,  
who have learned more patience,  
more obedience, than many  
of their masters yet  
tended well, most times  
by those who need them  
more than they say; but  
how the children of those  
they visit, run from the house,  
loving to see them again  
like old friends

all remember, maybe communicate;  
we hope they know - or would it make them sad -  
that they too had their golden age.

Michael Shepherd



## 0024 There Is Here; Outside, Inside

My wrist rests on the desk's raised edge;  
fingers splayed on black and silver 'mouse' –  
(did anyone tell those focussed scurriers underfoot,  
they had a new relation?)

And the whole world of mind  
from whatever there may be to know  
of the divine and universal things,  
law behind laws, love beyond loves  
awaits, out there, awaits, in here  
to meet these touching fingers, hesitating on the mouse  
as if holding some real, passive pet  
that yearns to know the world...

I still can taste the breakfast marmalade,  
sweet but sharp; it is enough;  
but in a few hours' time  
the whole world will be tempting me with taste.

Warm in a hoodie; the radiators have woken with a faint vibration  
from their dormant summer siesta;  
outside the window, I see  
geraniums, abundant yet relaxed about it  
in the late summer's peace; violet petunias  
which seem to know more about  
ultra-violet than a scientist could tell;  
my eyes roam round, sitting here;  
out there, the whole curved world awaits the seeing;

Who notices, who knows, unless  
they step to the front door to savour  
the freshness of fresh air, the faint scent  
of geranium leaves brushed, violet petunias,  
the sweet peas awaiting an appreciative sniff,  
- who notices our breathing, subtly irregular  
as a poem cautiously surfaces? Out there,  
a planet, encased in precious atmosphere,  
revolves around a sun, blazing at a lawful distance...

A few sounds from the street drift in; just enough  
to remind one of the lives of others, as these ears await  
beloved voices; while out there,  
the world shouts, whispers; a global cacophony  
near to, far from, music's heavenly cadences  
and perhaps, the music of the spheres;

all this, all this, lives out there; stays in ordered place;  
yet waits inside too, in some life invisible;  
warm fingers poised on questing mouse,  
whiskers twitching as it hesitates  
from this small nibbled hole in the universe's floor  
where there and here may meet.

(after reading Rilke's 'A Walk')

Michael Shepherd

## 0025 How Many Steps To God?

What are you looking at, this moment? ..  
You can answer this question?

Then you're watching the looking...  
And that which watches the watching that watches the looking..

Always, without fail...  
Yes

Michael Shepherd

## 0025 Between (2)

Between each word, what happens in the mind?  
what moves from hearing, seeing, through the worlds  
of thought; emotion; both perhaps enjoined;  
what depth of silent stillness may unfurl?

It's strange: as writer, when the words are set,  
I find myself in some quite other place,  
where writer, reader, hearer, truly meet;  
like talk that's punctuated by deep peace.

For me, each comma, semi-colon, dash,  
or bracket, or long colon's pause, or stop,  
are moments when our minds may truly match;  
communication perfect in that gap:

the punctuated moment, truth may find;  
between each word, meet unity in mind.

Michael Shepherd

## 0025 If You Were Me, I'D Be You, Too - One For Plato

If we were all exactly the same,  
what would the effect be?

would life be simpler,  
and totally boring with it?  
and poetry, unnecessary?

for instance, you'd know  
how much I love you  
down to the very first and last eyelash of a kiss

so I wouldn't need to write  
a poem about it

and you'd know that  
and I'd know that

but you'd know that  
although I know  
you know that

there would still be  
the miracle

that when I look at you  
I see a finer image of myself  
reflected in your eyes

would that go, or stay,  
if I were you,  
and you were me?

Michael Shepherd

## 0025 The Godown Of Knowledge

'The godown of knowledge  
increases by distribution'..

What a lovely picture  
the sages paint –  
like a children's story  
of magic, of that world  
that's truer than you'd think –

A huge warehouse, busy  
at the unloading bays,  
with thousands of white-clad,  
happy faces under the sign,  
'Knowledge Godown – Take  
as Much as you can Manage',  
handing out to eager arms,  
while in the office, email, telephones  
are busy with the orders for despatch  
to those in need who're not so near;  
and a glance over your shoulder  
from the work station  
shows the stock piling ever higher...

a lovely story... except that  
that is how it is  
in that world that children  
just about recall  
and sages know.

Michael Shepherd

## 0026 Listening To A Reading By Robert Hass

There are so many different postures  
that may be adopted while listening  
to a poetry reading especially  
one that's being filmed -  
different tilts of neck and head,  
some natural, some chosen  
to suit the occasion;

it's the panelled reading-room of Berkeley –  
lecture desk, a couple of sofas,  
inappropriately satin-striped for library use;  
various chairs; November mid-day Bay Area sunlight  
filters through the high windows,

the room's comfortably full, a number  
at the poet's feet, mostly younger girls  
and a boy whose clothes say poet;  
but just outside the door, pressing in  
like the background crowd in an 'important'  
Renaissance painting, a horde it seems;  
some fire or other precautions have  
kept them out, as would  
the prissy warnings that precede the video,  
that adult themes and language  
will be used, and  
'viewer discretion is advised'...

Zack Rogow who has introduced the poet  
sits back relaxed – he's done a good and generous job;  
some sit as if they're on screen all the time - which they are;  
some sit as if 'I'm just here with him...';  
the girl on the floor looks at her companion  
after each poem as if for validation  
of some frail cultural bond or fragile claim;  
some look as if they're older faculty wives  
attending more a social occasion, except that  
the one who doesn't like a poet - is a poet;  
one girl's got a note-book and a dreamy look -  
she's gleaning seeds for her own poems;

that girl with the perfectly chosen spectacle frames  
assesses the speaker 'coolly';  
a girl at the back tilts her head  
as if already practising for the time  
in forty years when she'll be a wealthy patron of the arts  
who can afford to be close to culture  
yet detached – she paid for it...

and the man who's reading to us with a smile  
twisted with humour and affection and humanity  
in a face lined with the challenge of the inexpressible  
is radiantly, the happiest human being in the room  
and - his eyes say too - loves them all and individually,  
just above, or just below, his love of words and speech.

Michael Shepherd



## 0026 To Live In Poetry

So often, poets  
with their poetic eyes,  
ears, minds, hearts, souls,  
record actions that  
are already poetry or poetic  
in themselves  
or so it seems  
which makes it easy  
for poetic poets to write  
poetic poetry

as when I watch you  
poised so still, sitting there,  
your face against the light,  
painting meeting sculpture,  
still as any animal,  
still as any goddess

roaming the cosmos in your mind  
seeking, ballpoint poised,  
the answer to some hidden  
crossword clue

living in poetry

Michael Shepherd

## 0026 The Other Poetry

It could be tomorrow.  
Or the day after.  
The important thing will be  
that you'll know when it happens that  
it's what you've been waiting for  
perhaps all your life  
you'll go out of the door as usual  
at the usual time  
but instead of turning right  
you'll turn left  
just that  
and then it will unfold  
like someone else's life  
and you'll talk to different people,  
listen differently  
see differently  
and then find yourself writing  
in a quite different way  
perhaps even in a strange language  
about emotions you never had before

deep down, it's always been whispering  
no singing, in your ear  
like when you were a child  
and there they were behind you but  
you could never turn round quick enough  
to catch them. The other poetry  
you never wrote but you know it's there  
maybe waiting for you  
maybe waiting for someone else  
but there. So close.  
Maybe one day.  
Or the day after.

Michael Shepherd

## 0026 Why Waste Time

Why waste time  
on searching rhyme  
unless the knowledge wants to sing?

why waste time  
on searching rhyme  
unless the joy can't help but dance?

why waste time  
on searching rhyme  
unless the mind is full of sound?

then rhyme with time  
and sing and dance  
and lose your heart  
to happenstance.

Michael Shepherd

## 0027 In Honour Of Honour And Whauden

You asked me which of Auden's poems  
were my favourite, and I sighed  
for memory's fade, then walked to the dusty shelf  
where next to those volumes of Eliot  
with their brown-paper covers for those  
precious wartime books allowed  
a ration of Canadian paper for  
fighting men to read in those  
few moments of leisure for the open heart and  
the vision of a peacetime world, was

'Collected Shorter Poems 1930-1944 '

which fell open at page 54,  
'In Memory of (ry 1939) '  
'Earth, receive an honoured guest...';  
those pages yellowed more than  
the others around them as if  
read often late at night  
under what was still gaslight  
with respectful but unwashed hands  
after cocoa and biscuits with a scrape of butter

and it all came back: 1953, that was the year  
when there was only one poet Yeats..  
and poetry and music were the same;  
I turned the pages – they fell open once again,  
'Time will say nothing but I told you so'...

So many poems there, unread, or unremembered,  
how could it be that I abandoned Auden,  
not hearing his music, while  
other interests began to pull?

Then I sat silent at the thought  
that a great poet of great mind, great heart,  
was writing, writing, most of my lifetime  
while I was wrapt in other things;

sat silent, honouring  
what is to be honoured  
as best we can;  
what is to be honoured.

Michael Shepherd

## 0027 Dog And Man

Beside me as I sit here typing is a golden pool, of relaxation, alertness, patience and trust, uniquely brought together in one glorious being. Do we really deserve each other?

surely anyone who has brushed the coat of, let's say, a golden Labrador, should be instantly converted to belief in God? Or at the very least, in an evolution which is more miraculous, more glorious than many people's view of God...

the long, smooth, silky, strong hairs on the back;  
the trailing, slightly grubby hairs  
of that emotional telegraph, the tail,  
the magic gradations of the head hairs,  
from sleek and flat around the collar; so fine in the ears;  
laid so beautifully on the bony forehead which seems  
so intelligent as you touch it, gently, on the centre,  
watching the brimming, trusting, wary, luscious eyes; with  
those almost hidden, expressive eyebrow hairs;  
to smooth and wiry snout hairs toward the jaw,  
around that moist muzzle, Columbus to the world,  
which you may with his permission  
touch lightly, as you'd touch  
the most delicate of machinery made by man

how we may wonder, what they think of us,  
as surely such magnificence must think?  
Not so much, whether we're God, or  
Domestic Provider, or Leader of  
The Depleted Pack, or simply  
Today's Elected Master –  
no, the more intimate things, like – well, who knows? -

why They don't look us in the eye at all times,  
or what They're so busy doing between meals,  
or why They just keep a boring straight line when  
we go out for a wildness? in that map  
of wind and air and smells and trails  
and messages and mysteries, written

new every day, which They call  
'going for a walk'; requiring Their donning  
of more layers of bedding material, never  
to feel, poor species, the wind in Their fur  
except on that insensitive slightly hairy head which doesn't  
even enjoy the world of smell?

but we have our special moments,  
He and I; we play that game which is  
our special thing; I'm lying there,  
relaxed, alert, patient, trustful, sensing  
it's the time for wildness; we're together in the head,  
sharing the same mind just for a moment;  
He doesn't need to make more than that  
familiar sound in his throat, the man-music  
which as a puppy, I got to know as  
'would you like to go for a walk...? ' –  
now He plays this game, just makes that noise  
in his throat... and my ears prick up – He's mine  
for a joyous whole hour, we're going to live it up  
where life is really lived – Outside.

Michael Shepherd

## 0027 Dreaming Truth

Imagine yourself -  
yourself, to imagine -  
this dream; dream  
this imaging:

the water's so far, far below  
it's beyond this dark imagining, this dream;  
all your attention is required  
by this rope bridge,  
swayed by nature to some immediate, vibrating laws  
of this way, that way, more complex  
than steel or concrete bear in mind -  
five lines of rope, that's all,  
bound from time to time  
but only every few and fearful steps  
so that they do not part  
unless you tread without remembering  
all five of them; toe, heel, as you place your foot...

and now it seems, in the illogical  
precision of this dream - which is in  
league with some dark inner truth  
and so, it must be walked - now,  
it's not five ropes, any more,  
but five strings of some instrument  
vibrating, low and high; while tense, taut mind  
looks for firm frets to tune each step;  
or can you trust their tuning?  
is the tuning now the fingers of your feet?

each fallible or faulty foothold  
will send its string's own warning of uncertainty:  
this bass string, booming failure between the valley's two high cliffs;  
this treble string, nerve-searing scream of pain;  
ahead, this firm support that holds the strings, now  
drops away; the hollow soundbox that's all space,  
all sound, all air, all touch and light and flow of sound;  
the sound of judgment's stern and justly-tempered final chord -



now you awake: relieved, yet with a question,  
born of night, to be resolved by day;  
what does the dream tell to the waking thought?  
what does the waking thought tell of the dream?  
some metaphor for life inhabited your dream;  
some knowledge passed, wrapped in a metaphor;  
you only know, that it was watched – by whom?

Michael Shepherd

## 0027 That Baker Boy

and allowing that  
records only record what's recorded –  
that's, written records – the sounds are something else –

the records say  
that for most of your waking life  
you were out of this world on drugs  
or when you weren't, you behaved  
appallingly; excepting when you sang and played,  
when, all agreed, you were 'out of this world'..

and yet, you wrote an autobiography  
or should we say memoir, that is,  
what you might remember, which  
is a catalogue of innocence, of purity,  
of life as good, well lived..

so I would not like to be  
your prosecuting counsel, taking you through  
this litany, each deed, each word..  
I don't think I could bear the pain..  
was it what you really thought you were,  
or what you would have wished to be?

I'll settle for the love you whisper  
in the 'standards', convincing us they're holy writ;  
pausing just where truth itself would pause;  
and blowing the truth that finds and speaks itself  
between the lips and lungs and trumpet's mouthpiece;

like some ancient seer or sibyl, shaman, visionary,  
speaking, singing, truths which yet you do not know  
or have forgotten. It seems that genius knows  
the greatness of the art of which it is  
(apt phrase) the mouthpiece; and all else  
is of this world; subservient.

Michael Shepherd

## 0028 Written While Queuing Two Abreast For The Rodin Exhibition

Rodin  
was not a leg man

The Kiss  
proves this

He loved the breast  
but liked the rest

often

and availed himself of many a jollity  
by proclaiming women's sexual equality.

O women, beware your erotic fantasies  
of being moulded by a sculptor's hands, like 'Kiss'..

Michael Shepherd

## 0028 Aw....Bless...

I always liked the idea  
of becoming a wise old man  
but I may be too old for that  
now

however

there are moments when  
like today  
the sun's shining on the trees  
their leaves glinting in the slight breeze  
and time seems to be unaware of itself and  
and I feel good about myself too  
in the same blissfully thoughtless way

that's even better  
like a jar of golden promise  
that doesn't need a label

Michael Shepherd

## 0028 Emily Dickinson Considers Her Breasts

White silk gown – Sunday silk – yet  
daily donned – tight-cuffed –  
cool hands – folded – warm lap –  
milk-white – under orange vest – and –  
bearing – or to bear? –  
two Legacies – from You, Sire –  
this simple pair accompanying me –  
twin-mirrored –  
two poems yet to be read –  
two words yet to be said –  
to stimulate – a man –  
circumferencing – unwritten future – to know – perhaps – which? –

kiss of need? as kid of goat –  
little lips – innocent of teeth – tugged  
as pulled red berry? Cherries fit  
such little mouths. Or –

kiss of love? milk-white skin  
brushed first – moustache – then  
body's delirious shudder –  
ecstatic contract!  
two red berries – red-plucked –  
this first?  
Will there be a morning – mooring –  
you as sunrise –  
after wild and feathered night,  
bondage as play – so sweet?

Or – are these berries – to grow parched?  
A rose – cease to bloom – before the flower taken –  
autumn berries – heavy-hanging –  
dropping – unmilked – unmouthed –  
love put away – put in a drawer,  
hiding brave face in hand?  
I thus eventual – be –  
awaiting further chance  
of eternity?

You cannot put a fire out –  
you love me – you are sure –  
but – which is it, sir?

Michael Shepherd

## 0028 Root For The Vegetable Rights Movement!

It's the inevitable march,  
the golden-hearted chain,  
of Ultimate Compassion:

yesterday, a group of anglers,  
danglers in the river for hours on end  
of peaceful anticipation  
punctuated by a rare bite  
from a fish, which then the most sporting  
unhook and throw back to freedom rather than  
yet another fish supper

were set upon by a group of 35  
'protesters'... you do the math,  
how many man-hours to save  
one fish? With the courage  
of their convictions, the trawler fleet  
should be their next sea-green  
seasick target... and on a smaller scale,  
obviously the shore of the Sea of Galilee  
is a high-profile target (assuming that  
it's not in the fighting zone at the time...)

And there's more to come –  
the Vegetable Rights movement  
which so far has kept underground (...)  
has a huge task ahead, as it  
gains ground so to speak:  
those poor baby peas, mown down at dewy-fingered dawn  
like army deserters in the First World War,  
are the obvious target for our grief;  
then the vast plains of America  
slaughtering wheat for our daily bread  
(and here again, the Sea of Galilee comes to mind –  
do miracles have rights too?) these great plains  
must come under fundamental survey...

and as the Compassion Movement gathers pace,  
there's all those mosquitoes in Africa and elsewhere

so cruelly deprived of their right  
to sting like cornered terrorists,  
and don't viruses have their rights too?

Then comes a difficult moral decision –  
what of animals that kill other animals?  
Whose side are we on there? Which has  
the greater rights to life and freedom? Brothers and sisters,  
bleeding hearts, there's much work to be done...  
let's hope that war doesn't interfere with  
our compassionate fight for rights..

Michael Shepherd



## 0029 It's Haircut Day

Oh dear it's haircut day

I guess I should be grateful –  
she comes round to the house  
and cuts what's left up there for  
almost next to nothing, these days

she's a bright cookie but  
no conversationalist  
so I attempt to make pleasant small talk  
for both our benefits I like to think

but if I say something she disagrees with  
like who sells the best fish around here  
or immigration  
she corrects me with such withering scorn  
that I feel I should apply for  
institutionalisation. Or cremation.

my masculine side says stuff her,  
don't even try  
so I have to call on  
my feminine side  
to think, to be like that  
she must have had an awful childhood  
or adolescence, or both

'Fate with the abhorred shears...' (classical quote)

she's due now – report back later

Michael Shepherd

## 0029 Hezbollah

Hezbollah, Hezbollah,  
raining rockets from afar,  
is death really yours to choose?  
Suppose that Allah loves the Jews?

Michael Shepherd

## 0029 Monte Carlo

So this was it. I'd passed through years ago  
as a hitch-hiker, spinning out our 25 pounds  
max allowance, over three hot weeks of France  
until I was sick of tough-skinned monster tomatoes  
and baguettes without butter; as we made our sweaty way  
to Monaco's, surprisingly, Communist youth hostel  
beyond the gas works and the soccer ground,  
around the path at the foot of the cliffs...no romance there.

But here I was, as a journalist, two nights in a hotel  
of grand aspiration, where guests left empty  
the spacious restaurant and its tasteless menu.  
Monte Carlo out of season; shrunken to a provincial town;  
the waves hitting hard and cold against its promenade.

Tired after a day of work, foot-hot amid white-gloved uniforms,  
I felt I should squeeze something memorable from the single day  
as the lights went on. Too travel-stained to enter the Casino,  
placed where the pier would be in an English seaside town -  
but I hovered. It was a stage set which had rashly intruded  
into real, daily life; and waiting for a cast  
rehearsing somewhere else. I made my way (the phrase  
is singularly inadequate) back to the deserted hotel  
where even the lights were sad and still.

In the deserted square outside the Casino,  
a woman passed me, returning home, I guessed, from the Casino,  
but hardly dressed for gambling's evening glamour;  
a middle-to-ageing Englishwoman, from her walk. Her room,  
I would think, would be small, high  
on the steep hill of the working class. She visits  
every day; for several evening hours  
under the shaded table lights,  
everything in the world is possible...The doorman  
at the Casino only acknowledges her  
out of season, when the locals and the regulars  
are tolerated, with their modest bets;  
almost seen as staff.

As she passed,  
she placed some ticket in her purse -  
one of those large purses (as the English call them)  
almost hand-bag size; dark soft but rough material, it spoke  
of 19th-century gentility in the dimly lit and empty square.  
A large purse, waiting; filled with empty hope.

That was my Monte Carlo moment. From that capacious  
but not, not stuffed-with-banknotes bag, reality and romance  
hit me together, as if my brain had been  
bludgeoned with the truth. Here in its lonely addiction  
was the tawdry face of the Casino, denying all the myths,  
the glamour, the stories, the accretions of second-hand  
imaginings, the distant history that might have fired me  
in some bygone age, of cigars and diamonds, furs and powdered  
faces, champagne and caviar, marcelled hair, wild laughter, eager  
for the glittering promise of the best of life; written up  
by some envious, cheap journalist.

The square deserted, the smell of petrol lingered in the roses  
in the warm, tired Mediterranean night. You, this way; I, that.

Michael Shepherd

## 0029 Mouse: Rabbie Burruns Updated

Wee, sleekit, scuttling, technological sairrf,

Hwu wuld ha' gaised yu'd lairrn ta surrf?

(sairrf = serf)

Michael Shepherd

## 0029 Poet In A Wendy House

After death visited,  
they opened the house  
as a museum

it was easier than clearing it  
but as  
Health and Safety officials  
were not happy, only one  
at a time, perhaps two together,  
were admitted  
by appointment only

there were photos of course  
and framed copies  
of the better-known poems  
some ageing better than others  
a scratchy recording  
a rather musty smell

a few years after I died  
I went back to look  
but the house and  
its predominantly green writing room  
and blue glass which  
the sun peered dustily through  
with the hideous 1930s fireplace  
painted crudely over in 1960s taste in white  
looked nothing to do with me  
nor the photos  
nor the poems

so I abandoned what I'd thought  
a rather cute idea of  
being a friendly ghost  
in my own museum

it just hadn't come together  
as a poem should  
or a life

but I left the laughter and the joy  
for those who could hear it

(For Wendy, a concrete image)

Michael Shepherd

## 0029 The Past Is Past - Then It Returns

You asked me  
to destroy  
all your love-letters  
as if that  
would free you -

from what?

I wish  
I had read them  
once again  
before I did;  
that would be  
some sort of  
sweet revenge -

for what?

Michael Shepherd



## 0029 This Night, This Night Of Endless Miracle

On this Mediterranean night with its light breeze  
scented with the sun-warmed herbs  
drifting down from cooling, stony hills,  
a million stars you've never seen before  
shine on a million crickets singing  
as if from eternity to eternity

and you cannot say, and there's  
no need to say, which is which;  
the trembling of the stars,  
the susurrating of cicadas,  
join as in endless praise  
of the imagination of their maker  
who made imagination too

and though the cicadas, singing, may never know  
that the stars they sing to  
are shining from a thousand years ago  
and though the stars may never know  
that the cicadas that they shine upon  
are a thousand years here from their now,

it's all known, to the mind that made the vines  
that made the grapes that made the wine  
singing in my veins tonight  
like cicadas susurrating in the starlight  
as you hear them now  
this night, this night of endless miracle

Michael Shepherd

## 0030 Boldness Be My Friend - From Goethe

How many noble schemes from goodwill's heart,  
how many splendid plans and fine ideas  
have foundered, lost their glorious craft and art  
through hesitancy born of baseless fears?

We do not see the moment as divine,  
thinking that those plans are somehow 'ours';  
forgetting, too, that Providence sublime  
yields timeless good through time in human hours:

the task begun, this heavenly Providence  
begins to move; bestows her love's support  
with means, events, beyond coincidence;  
assistance past all dreams of human thought -

be bold! and trust in Providence above:  
she brings to earth God's magic; power; and love.

Michael Shepherd

## 0030 Breasts

I've only got to say the word...and  
I can hear the male murmur murmur right now  
mixed with a hurhur hurhur as of naughty boys...  
suddenly lips and fingers have their vivid, hungry memories...  
while ladies have their own reactions  
not unaware of the murmur hurhur and the fact  
that some men think they own these, ungifted, as of right...

and some of us, perforce, have memories as intimate,  
loving, detailed, at our fingertips:  
the years that once a day or twice  
I took the soothing cream and powder,  
and with such respect and love and courtesy  
washed as gently as I could,  
dab-dried with even more light a touch,  
lifting those still heavy and magnificent creations, then  
with first the cream and then the powder  
traced with so careful finger, the sweaty sores  
that brassiere and human warmth had made  
under the milky skin, lightly veined in blue,  
the other hand shifting their tender, surprising weight  
to make the task so perfect,  
all the while listening carefully for  
that slight intake of breath that meant that pain  
was a necessary factor in this task...

and those days of delicate comedy  
when I sought with such care among the women's stores  
seeking out the older assistants, prefacing  
my potentially kinky or erotic request, they might think,  
with reasons: the sores, the preference for front-fastening,  
the possibilities of sleep-bras which however  
failed to hold those splendid orbs...  
the sports bras which might be too tight –  
I could have made a career of it...

and when you died, at a hundred years and two,  
the skin unblemished, smooth, unwrinkled  
on your back and round those lovely breasts

I'm left with that strange, unasked treasure – love beyond desire,  
And fingers full of memories of care.

Michael Shepherd

## 0030 Motion Picture Features Central Park

The other day in Central Park  
a park-keeper said, that urban parks  
were motion pictures, before  
motion pictures ... except that,  
they were the picture; you  
did the motion...and  
I savoured that remark which seemed  
to hover on the edge  
of poetic profundity and revelation

and, inconsequentially, threw up a vision  
of Garbo, Swanson, Crawford, Davis,  
taking a quiet winter morning's walk  
behind large dark glasses and an upturned collar;  
and my mind, taking too its mental morning stroll  
in Central Park, walked with a  
new light-hearted springy step, a sparkling eye,  
breathing clean fresh cold green air,  
the sun catching frost on leaf and  
the slow surface of cold lake water,  
winter sunshine lighting expertly  
the long shot, the camera's focus,  
the dissolve, the swelling music  
as the credits gently roll out  
their farewell to a dream;  
the motion picture of the mind.

Michael Shepherd

## 0030 Your 'My Life' Exercise Book...

Buy a child's red-covered  
'My Exercise Book'  
like the one you bought  
all those years ago  
to build a bridge -  
now you realise -  
a warm reassuring bridge  
between school and home  
with its firm hand-rail  
at both ends;  
the river flowing so fast,  
so powerful,  
so beautiful  
between those different banks  
in the blank pages  
of that book with its reassuring tables  
on the back cover which speak of laws  
which you may never read

then with the sharpened pencil  
and the smell of cedar flakes  
faling from the pencil-sharpener  
sweet and haunting to your nose  
and breathing heavier now  
in this exciting, daunting task,  
your head nearer the paper  
than old schoolteachers would approve  
and pencil gripped as firmly  
as you would your life  
write so carefully on the first white page  
as if the beginning holds the whole story  
intended but as yet unfurled,

'My Life'..

Michael Shepherd

## 0031 Beyond The Bounds

Oh it's there, alright  
and very much all right  
although 'there' is not at all the word  
for where it is – or isn't –

all I can say is,  
it's 'beyond' –  
beyond all the knowledge I've acquired,  
beyond the life I love to live,  
beyond the happiest of happiness..

I used to fear 'beyond', to fear  
the boundlessness –  
and yet, between  
(and somehow, the between  
and the beyond seem real good friends) –  
between the thoughts –  
the thoughts of what I want, or don't,  
the things I want, the things I don't, then  
in the stillness and the silence  
which I used to shout 'boring! ' at  
and run away and play –  
it calls, it yearns; the boundlessness  
speaks as familiar as myself

oh it's 'there' all right –  
how could I know, unless  
they were together linked in inner sight –  
the bounded and the boundlessness?

Michael Shepherd

## 0031 A Realist Film Set

downtown  
in a street of tired neon  
between a yawning whorehouse  
and a bar whose regulars  
can no longer remember its name  
there's a small door with the sign  
Bukoholics Anonymous  
it's worth going in  
to read the sgrafiti  
in the restrooms

Michael Shepherd



## 0031 An Arab, A Christian, And A Jew...

An Arab, a Christian and a Jew  
walked into the same Gents loo...  
came out feeling much the same...  
you get my point? Shit's in the name..

Michael Shepherd

## 0031 Autumn's Wild, Rough Days

These wild, rough autumn days  
as cooling Northern hemisphere  
shudders towards its equinox  
with gales and rain and blown-off leaves,  
all the elements stirred up, and  
bringing strange emotions;  
everything is between;

but for children living by the sea,  
days of joy and awe –  
the sea, no longer blue  
but savage brown-red, even emerald green,  
which all the year  
has bashed and nibbled at the cliffs  
like kitchen-boy at panfried half-cut cake,  
throws all its might as if it hated the whole idea of earth;  
knowing that in one night,  
it may do mighty things once in a while  
that change the maps themselves – blocking estuaries  
that have served ports for a thousand years,  
with shingle banks; throwing new beaches  
across bays, with stones so exquisitely graded  
from rock to pebble, that it's said,  
night fishermen thrown onto such a beach without the moon  
know exactly where they are by size of stone...

but for the child, a magic time:  
the air's a gift for lungs, like breathed champagne;  
the sea after the gale is calming down;  
but the beach is new: new toys thrown up,  
seaweed of many shapes, still wild when wet,  
along a new high tide line; stuff off ships, carved wood,  
deck-mats, green globes that buoyed up nets,  
boxes with some foreign words  
to remind us that this same neighbour sea  
has other foreign shores across the world..

and every stone and pebble, which yesterday  
had muted, dusty-coloured, matt-textured anonymity,

now, wet with salty water, are translucent, shining jewels each one,  
glass, white marble (and how far has that pebble come,  
hassled and scoured across the ocean's floor..) ,  
rough granite of so many shades, hard serpentine,  
purple, green, some striped; slate-blues, brick-reds, all  
fit for a palace; gathered in an eager hand  
which sees nothing in the world but gifts and miracles;  
this lovely, wild, wild-hearted shore.

Michael Shepherd

## 0031 Check-Off

'Who was listening  
when I apologised  
for my life? '

I jotted that down  
in a moment of regret  
over the wasted things  
of life, that is, my life..

and thought, that  
sounds a bit like dialogue  
or rather monologue to audience  
stage or stalls  
in Chekhov

so if no-one was listening  
well, that's that

but suppose that 'everything'  
was listening, and made  
changes so subtle that  
they'll go unnoticed except  
that I find I have  
nothing to apologise for  
even to myself

Michael Shepherd

# 0031 Dawn In Bethlehem On The Morning Of Christ's Nativity

This starry dawn - the wise men yet afar -  
the shepherds are abed, their night's task done.  
Is Mary tired? Or, as one untouched?  
All birth's a miracle; not less this one.

The cattle have bestirred at hint of morn,  
the thought of feeding making moist their muzzle;  
straw is rustling, as they, manger-drawn,  
find unfamiliar form- so warm - to nuzzle.

What were the first words Joseph softly said  
to Mary, as dawn broke, this day of days?  
And who, sent from the inn to cattle-shed  
to feed and lay fresh straw, fell still in praise?

How long, this morn, before the murmured sound  
of voices in the street, as Word gets round?

(revisited)

Michael Shepherd

## 0031 Miles Ahead

Do you ever get fed up  
of playing music  
that sounds like music?  
asked Miles Davis

so I'm asking you  
do you ever get fed up  
of writing poetry  
that sounds like poetry?

Michael Shepherd

## 0031 Ted And Sylvia Meet The Marriage Counsellor

'Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
admit impediment' – and let me say  
first of all, that I'm all for that...  
but Dr Freud asked me if I'd call you in –  
that is, invite you – for a little chat;  
there'll be no fee, of course...  
Sylvia, would you sit over here,  
and Ted, you over there?

I've read your case notes  
which my secretary compiled, from  
your previous poems – she's quite  
well-read; indeed, I believe she's now applied  
for a post with Mr. Eliot the poet...

Now I understand you're both madly in love  
and – ahem – can't wait to 'get at  
one another' as they say these days ...  
I guess the 'Do not Disturb' notice  
may be there for days, ha ha?

but a word of admonition..er.. advice:  
although in theory two artists co-habiting  
is a great idea in theory – you'll understand  
each others' situation, help with tax returns,  
maybe use the same literary agent –  
it's not all plain sailing: creativity  
comes in individual cycles; it's known  
today as 'biorhythms'; you're down,  
he's up; he's down, you're up

and since you already, Sylvia,  
have – harrumph – issues,  
these cycles could conflict  
quite vigorously; with considerable care  
you can make this work  
to your advantage; we had marked success  
with a previous pair in your situation,  
Robert and Elizabeth..

But it will require considerable care,  
as I said; and there's always the chance –  
my Hollywood clients face this constantly –  
that one of you may find your public fame  
outstrips the other – this can be difficult;  
I'm treating several well-known couples  
for this very problem; Richard and Elizabeth  
were frequent visitors here in Belair...  
a marriage of two fine creative artists  
can become like crows picking at  
the flesh and then the bones..

So I hope you don't mind this little chat;  
best wishes, and I suggest  
you come and see me again  
not too soon – who needs psychiatrists  
when they're in love, ha ha – but  
not too late?

My receptionist  
will see you out...  
this Hollywood practice,  
though busy and, ahem, quite lucrative,  
brings me much sadness, as my  
wives have often commented...

Michael Shepherd



## 0032 Conman

Silver-bronze...that was the beauty of your voice,  
deep and rich and flexible,  
as you sat yourself down on the bench  
in the waiting-room on Kensington High Street Station  
almost deserted on a dull afternoon  
not long before Christmas

and spun your almost convincing tale  
of the African Union scholarship, was it,  
of which the monthly payout was late this month...

and I watched myself,  
hypnotized by that voice which should be singing  
Porgy and Bess up there on the stage,  
and felt good, dammit, that I was  
trusting a stranger to borrow more than I'd given –  
let alone lent – any Christmas up to then...

yes, it felt really good, as if  
I'd paid for a lesson in how  
to stop thinking of myself as mean, uncharitable –  
an hour with a psychotherapist  
who knew exactly what to relieve me of...  
at about the standard rate

Michael Shepherd

## 00327 Homage To John Ashbery

We drove downtown to see our neighbours;  
none of them were home,  
all that was underfoot was lost,  
cathexis arrived early in a golden coach;  
seems we weren't welcome despite;  
dear spit, the week is turning over.

Yes, I can see I am only in the where –  
What does the loneliness in all this mean?  
How can 'rare earth' be an element?  
NB: what is here is certainly not there.  
Sometimes I think it's all one big affectation,  
Every one has to grow up a little in their life.

My head ached from all those boulevards  
rushing in to fill the unthinkable well;  
outside under a slappy sky the leaves were right on:  
it's coming to a theatre near you.  
Like all good things,  
life tends to go on too long.

I'd like to write you about all this.

Michael Shepherd

# 0032from Shankara On The Chandogya Upanishad

## 8.1.1

Inside the body  
is a little place.

you could say that  
this is like a lotus  
for it floats on the surface of the waters of life  
and opens its petals to the heavens,  
rejoicing to be alive.

or you could say that  
it is like a house  
for it is where you return for rest and re-creation  
within the love of family,  
within the safety of its walls.

or you could say that  
it is like a city  
for it has a palace and a treasury, and many officers  
such as mind and intellect  
to fulfil its needs.

yet within that little place,  
a space,  
as large as the universe itself.

we should know about that space.

within it are comprehended  
the heavens and the earth;  
the elements, sound, air, fire, light, water, all that's underfoot  
that arises from the earth, returns to dust;  
whatever is, and what is not;  
all in that little space  
which because it is space  
is unbounded.

it does not age with age,

with wrinkles nor gray hair, nor  
with forgetful mind;  
beyond all sorrows, since sorrow comes  
from separation;  
free to have desires,  
since it satisfies all desires  
and lives in its own satisfaction;  
that satisfaction, they call bliss – what else?

you need not seek outside for this;  
all this is in your heart.

Michael Shepherd

## 0034 Going To School To Rilke

We could not have counted on it,  
those days when we were children young in years  
but rich with a thousand hopes  
jostling, pushed aside, forgotten in a day,  
turned over in the mind in those few savoured moments  
before a happy-tired sleep

nor did we think even to hope for it  
or think how it would be to squeeze the honey of it  
between our palms into our ready mouths  
leaving the wax upon our hands and laughing  
together or alone, in rainbow solitude

but now it's here, we can savour the honey of it,  
the future which we could not have had before  
the days and years had closed like inexorable cupped petals,  
into a summer evening's sun-hazed past –

we could not have hoped or counted on nor dreamed -  
these days when, all required work now done,  
life's evening hours and the late and lazy  
golden leisure of fruit-filled autumn branches  
stretches out in even though not endless measure –

today I choose to go to school to Rilke,  
a choice as free as we think the birds are free,  
the animals, the trees – yet know so little,  
so very little, of their life –

and pick up the book of his poems at blissful random,  
and read one single line –

'I have great faith in all things not yet spoken' –

and sit here, as the world falls, gently, as somewhere far away,  
the book silent between my hands, having spoken,  
like a honeycomb holding the honey  
of some new, untrodden, unbelievably rich life.



## 0034 Poem With Which To Start A Poetry Reading

Ladies and Gentlemen,  
this is my first poetry reading  
and I'm very nervous  
and nearly cancelled tonight

but I spoke about this to  
a friend who's a therapist  
and he said,  
this is what you do,

you imagine the audience  
in front of you  
all in their underwear  
(as you probably are; but  
without the outer layer)  
with the men  
wearing the most idiotic  
flowered Hawaiian  
two sizes too large  
boxer shorts  
and the ladies  
in the frumpiest  
underwear  
you can imagine

apparently it works

so if I look at you, ladies and gentlemen,  
somewhat strangely  
from time to time  
or giggle uncontrollably  
or my eyes rest on you personally  
as if we're sharing some huge  
x-ray joke,

please forgive me  
and understand  
that's it for your benefit  
as well as mine

and that you will have put your outerwear  
back on  
in the interval  
before the next poem

I hope this is OK with you  
and nobody's too embarrassed  
in fact you could do the same trick  
with me if it's  
any help  
and now  
I think I've said enough as  
I'm OK now  
how about you?

(For maximum effect, pause noticeably at the end of each line)

(with thanks to Ernestine for the idea)

Michael Shepherd



## 0036 Hanging Garden

The pink geraniums  
hanging in their plastic terracotta bowl  
twist gently to and fro in the slight breeze  
as if they're quietly impatient  
for my attention.

It's their third year up there –  
I never expected them to last  
more than a year, but  
half exposed, half sheltering  
under what's less a porch  
than an architectural feature,  
they've decided to make a go of it

this week in late July moving into August,  
they're into their later style of flowering –  
not the profundity of early summer  
when they decide exactly when to burst  
upon the world petal to petal in a huge bouquet

but delicately, translucent,  
both flower and small leaves, letting the sky pass through  
as if they know all about colour slides  
and simply, do it better.

after their first burst of flower,  
they retired into themselves  
as if they were exhausted – although  
I never asked that of them; while  
my respect for them grows year by year

sometimes I think I ought to feed them  
like proper gardeners do,  
since they don't have much soil up there  
and that's fed them for three years now

but then I think, no, that's  
asking more of them than they, abundantly, do  
so I'll settle for what they want to offer me

we seem to know each other's there,  
but sometimes they call unexpectedly  
like today, when I'm not busy with something else,  
and when I give them full attention  
as if I'm asking them deep questions  
which I've never formulated for myself  
yet which they're prepared to answer,  
they pour out information about  
what I'd call God's glorious Creation  
(what they call it, if they need to call it  
anything, gives the mind pause)  
in a list which, as they speak it, quality by quality,  
gift after gift, invention after invention,

seems no is, as endless as humility

Michael Shepherd

## 0036 National Gallery

A 'School of..' painting, it's sometimes on display,  
sometimes in the 'Secondary Collection'; rather like  
its subject, it's subject to circumstances  
beyond its own control. But this is no pupil's homage  
to the master; quite the contrary. He's telling us  
something very clearly – but, he's just not telling us exactly  
what he's telling us – as might a living artist tell  
for a curator's fussy footnote; all the 'program';  
it's art, you have to look...

So shall we start from foreground? It's a horizontal canvas,  
a road runs straight across; in the middle of the road  
a golden-haloed, blue-robed saint is being stabbed.  
The helmeted pair of ruffians  
are clearly sent by secular authority  
to do the deed; this we may guess. The saint  
at this sharp freeze-frame moment, leans slightly back –  
not aback in reaction or retreat; but rather,  
to make it easier for the knife to do its work.  
Had the painting been two centuries later,  
the gesture would be called 'Baroque':  
he, leaning back, open hands, as if he's yielding up  
an acquiescent soul; surrendered faster than a prayer,  
faster than a plunging knife. Might we so wish to go?

His priest companion (they wear the Order's colours)  
will I think be questioned sharply by the Order's Governor:  
is he simply fleeing for his life?  
Is he running off for help? But that's not likely, since  
there are would-be witnesses right by the roadside there; or  
does he in his wisdom know that what will be, will be?  
(In which case, did he really need to flee?)  
That's something, someone at the time would know;  
It adds to the irony – we're disturbed; the victim's not...

And now a further very visual paradox: right beside the road,  
two woodcutters are at work; swinging their axes, quite oblivious –  
not, as hoping to be spared, as in 'didn't see nuffin, gov...';  
maybe they knew they weren't the target? It's more as if

they represent a world apart; chopped trees an allegory  
of life cut down to other world's decree;  
but did the artist have to make this quite so blatant?  
Another disturbing paradox still unresolved.

And then, in this strange painted layer-cake  
of world on world, the top, green layer:  
the sloping verdant hill, serene in the lush and dreaming, radiant  
peace of summer nature undisturbed; here, nothing untoward  
has happened; ever might; beauty's unimpaired.

From this strange layer-cake of art, we'll take  
some indefinable visual memory out into the street -

saints live, saints die; man's work goes on; and nature, simply, is.

Michael Shepherd

## 0037 Ode To The Patience Of A Yawning Audience

O come sweet sleep, and close my eyes with verse!  
with drowsy metre, meet a deeper sleep;  
to sleep, to dream, I never am averse -  
to slumber numbed by poet's numbers deep;

so, here's a verse that's very brief - a sonnet:  
just fourteen lines to challenge your attention:  
please rest your weary ears, I pray, upon it;  
head up; back straight; let go of any tension;

count the passing seconds to that time  
-I'll indicate it with a final couplet -  
when glorious English in immortal rhyme  
blesses you with torpor's blissful duvet...

and after tribute paid to Orpheus' charms,  
with stifled yawn, depart to Morpheus' arms...

Michael Shepherd

## 0037 To, For, Sheila W.

This evening, I thought of you  
after, how long, forty years:  
you, sitting across the oak table  
in the old forge's kitchen, that John had made  
from salvaged shop fittings,  
his sleeves rolled up, workmanly care  
mixed on his face with amused dissatisfaction;

you, looking across at me with a girlish joy  
which, daughter, wife, mother, grandmother,  
was always there – a girlish joy  
that could hardly believe its luck  
to find its understanding in another;  
enthusiastic excitement rising like a blush;  
then a little check of breath, as if  
in company, courtesy required  
it be controlled, or else  
it would flood out and fill the room,  
burst open the doors, out across the fields,  
to seek out every other soul that welcomed it...

in such a moment shared, (it is as if)  
one knows everything one needs to know  
of earth; of heaven.

Michael Shepherd

## 0038 On The Day Of Christ's Epiphany

Their wives were not too keen about it all:  
beyond the call of duty, so it seemed;  
for, if they read the heavens' portents so well,  
what need of proof, of presence at the scene?

And then, to go without due retinue  
through unforgiving deserts; foreign towns;  
and forests hiding thieves and wild beasts too?  
And carrying rich gifts? And worse, their crowns?

And so to risk three kingdoms, not just one?  
And for the sake of some religious creed  
not even ours? 'Nay, love - it must be done;  
we crown our lives and kingdoms with this deed;

these crowns are symbols of our rule on earth,  
to yield the King of Heaven at His birth.'

Michael Shepherd

## 0038 The Stein Way

she said you ask me  
what the poem's about  
and I'm saying it's about  
whatever it's about  
to you that's a poem  
and there's another poem  
which is what it's about  
to me so you see  
I write a poem and now  
it's two poems  
that must be good  
and poets must be good  
to do that yes  
we are good like, oh,  
parents, and teachers  
who make two from one  
or three from two  
yes good and  
yes to good I say

Michael Shepherd



## 0038 Underthings

See this table top. Smooth, waxed  
to a point, a soup stain which perhaps  
a finger nail will lift. Beneath the surface,  
atoms, molecules, tension and release,  
law and freedom play out a drama  
which the teacup does not know or tell.

And so, much else. All. And so the mind.  
As if, webcamming the family at play,  
the screen jumpcuts, plays on the screen  
your inner life for all to see; the family freeze, cold,  
open-mouthed...

Two years ago, I eased myself into a chair,  
anticipating pleasant conversation – but instead  
the camera of the mind presented, in full colour,  
a glowing red-hot sphere, like  
a sunset on a dusty day. Or Mars, more like,  
in all its fierce, fearsome anger – anger  
stayed on that screen for six whole weeks  
while body, mind and soul perhaps  
played turmoil with its outcome quite unknown.

Just now, I lift my gaze from the crumbs on plate;  
the camera points at what it should now screen,  
the window; but the mind sees something else,  
as clear as mind but rarely seen in mind.  
It's saying something new about myself.  
Watch the screen; but watch the camera too.

Michael Shepherd

## 0038 Why I'M Ashamed Of Being British

It was so easy being a British child  
in the 1930s:  
everything was – or so it seems to memory's  
selective mind - so ordered:  
how old was I, when I stopped  
raising my school cap  
(‘Don’t just touch it, Michael;  
lift it! ’) to, not just staff at school,  
but anyone to whom my parents talked  
or who had talked (‘My, hasn’t he grown! ’  
as if this was some personal achievement) to me,  
or more likely, over my head, as I  
shifted from foot to foot,  
trapped in a grown-up world  
of politenesses; which however  
my mother loved and rightly  
as one now raised in her station  
from being polite to customers  
in grandma’s terrace front-window shop  
where homemade cooking was the income  
now that the cotton dust had got to grandpa's lungs;  
but now the wife of a man retired  
at thirty-eight, stone-deaf...

The history books at school were slender – since  
we’d won every war – or if some foreigners thought  
we hadn’t, it had all the same brought out great courage,  
incredible bravery which was a lesson to us all,  
fortitude and leadership and deeds  
‘surpassing the call of duty’. We’d even  
won wars in places which technically weren’t ours,  
called The Empire; over which we ruled  
because we did it better than the natives;  
because we were born to rule..

And we were taught by haunted heroes who’d fought  
in the war to end all wars – the PT instructor  
had a face like camouflage, white, greenish, brown and red,  
where he’d been mustard-gassed; our heroes

were still close to us, although  
they didn't talk about it much. That was  
another lesson in how to be British.

Geography was happy natives  
(only the National Geographic Magazine  
photographed their tits, and then only if brown)  
moving export crops, balancing trade  
and the occasional water-pot – which was always full.  
And the sun never set on those red bits on the map  
which were the British Empire...

How easy it was to be proud of being British,  
and to take for granted  
that gift of birth, our birthright  
which, unearned, we would seek  
to earn anew by living up to it..

But then, haven't all of us, by some  
trick of space-time unexplained by Einstein,  
lived, as a child, in better times – or at least,  
if any didn't, we never heard of them;  
or if we did, it was because the missionaries  
were putting all that right, if we just simply  
put a penny or two in their box, and here's a flag to pin  
on your jacket like some painless medal..

\* \* \*

So, no more nostalgic trips now down that memory lane;  
let's start from now and work backwards  
on why I'm currently ashamed, after all these golden years,  
to be British; and despite  
all that there is left of those things of magnificence –  
fair play, free speech, freedom itself,  
not yet quite worn away

I'm deeply ashamed this week  
that three British subjects,  
despite Habeas Corpus, Magna Carta, and the rule of law,  
were handed over – and in irons –  
without due process of laws promptly promulgated

by reason and humanity; and  
if they did indeed steal a million each on paper  
yet never charged here, where it occurred,  
we can guess that it's because  
such unearned money is  
the game of all financial deals,  
in City circles, as in other countries...

I'm deeply ashamed as of last year,  
that after a history of 'responding to a request'  
and just defence of the oppressed,  
we made a pre-emptive strike  
in the oily name of exporting democracy  
while our governments at home  
confuse democracy with 'spin'; we are the spun  
in the woven lies of history.  
We have dirtied the name of democracy.

I'm deeply ashamed, as of this decade,  
that we have found no way  
to enable our uncontrolled immigrant population  
to feel as proud of being British as are  
Americans of being American;  
ashamed that politicians  
put party over conscience;  
ashamed that – yes, young and old alike –,  
we have lost respect for others  
both in action or the lack of it;  
that 'neighbour' is now a mere  
geographical location;  
that we apologise for or demean our religious sense  
in a world where those we fight  
are more religious than are we;  
and last of all, I'm ashamed  
that one day soon we may become  
ashamed of being British.

(Please read Tara McHale's poem on the same theme, it's a group effort - or add  
your own!))



## 0039 On The Morning Of Christ's Nativity

This starry dawn - the wise men yet afar -  
the shepherds are abed, their night's task done.  
Is Mary tired? Or, as one untouched?  
All birth's a miracle; not less this one.

The cattle have bestirred at hint of morn,  
the thought of feeding making moist their muzzle;  
straw is rustling, as they, manger-drawn,  
find unfamiliar form- so warm - to nuzzle.

What were the first words Joseph softly said  
to Mary, as dawn broke, this day of days?  
And who, sent from the inn to cattle-shed  
to feed and lay fresh straw, fell still in praise?

How long, this morn, before the murmured sound  
of voices in the street, as Word gets round?

Michael Shepherd

## 0039 Well, Chop My Prose!

...for that's the way that poetry goes...  
and goes...mere pose, tapped out as prose...

Yes, most of us, these days, undisciplined,  
approach the temple of pure poetry,  
when some thought stirs in deepest heart and mind, ,  
with all the earthy tread of careful prose...

yet with a certain hope, a faith, a love,  
a purity of heart – that if we tread -  
unmetered and unrhymed petitioners -  
as pilgrims, sackclothed, ashen from the urn  
of some poetic crematorium;

that, as we stumble on the heart's true path,  
the Muse, with long and patient, weary sigh,  
- the music of the ages in her ears -  
will catch up with our steps along the road  
and guide us to that sacred, lovely place  
where, with a gasp – our verses dropt from hand –  
we'll be where goodness, truth and beauty dance  
and sing and laugh and love – now three; now one.

(thanks, WD)

Michael Shepherd

## 0040 For Tara's Friends Named And Unnamed

They're trained to do the work of love  
dispassionately  
as if they are the most loving friends  
that you could ever have  
and, miraculously,  
there to help you in your hour – no, those vital minutes –  
of your need (and ours) , with every skill  
that human beings can devise  
to save their fellows;  
if they were angels,  
could they do a better job?

and today, if we tried to thank them  
on the phone – they'd have to call us back...perhaps...  
that's if we could ever get through – no,  
sorry, we don't know their names, that's  
why we're phoning...yes, security, I understand...

or if we left a message,  
picked up as they, weary, leave their shift  
that's been extended due to an emergency or three,  
they may have difficulty in remembering  
just which that case was, which they dealt with  
as lovers even could not,  
as angels; human beings as human as could be..

or know how many wept, how many  
held their breath, how many prayed;  
how many wondered how to pray;  
how many are more grateful  
than they might ever put in words -

you nameless ones,  
I hope that somewhere in your hearts  
as you take a few hours' sleep  
before your next redemption of humanity  
you may take whatever strength you may ever need  
from  
yours truly and sincerely,



Her Other Friends

Michael Shepherd

# 00401 The First Time

There's a first time  
for everything  
said God  
giving the Word  
to start it all

there's a first time  
for everything

I've just read  
your poems

and I feel so good  
that for the first time  
I laughed at Envy,  
kicked it around the room,  
laughed some more,  
kicked it some more

I feel so good

in the corner  
there's Envy taking the count

thanks

Michael Shepherd

## 0041 Goods Train In The Night

Film meets the poetic image,  
and in some things never fails – as when

out there alone in the prairie -  
the steppes, the tundra,  
snowfields, desert -  
past midnight, the heavens  
a carpet of stars, maybe a flash  
over the horizon of Northern Lights,  
or the centered assurance of the Southern Cross,  
silence broken only by a howl,  
was that a wolf,  
just one observer as  
a camera, a poet, whom  
we never see..

and then a distant sound and  
one plaintive assertive impersonal wail and  
almost too soon, the fast rhythmic rattle  
of a goods train on the railway line over there  
but near enough to shake the scene, and  
seemingly endless; minutes pass? then as suddenly  
it's past, it's gone... and the silence following  
is deeper, huge, saying something huge  
by the absence of anything said...or

back in the city, the child rewarded for trust by trust,  
allowed to wander the railway goods yard  
next to the gasworks down the sulphured end of town,  
miniatured rail tracks leading to the glowing maw  
of the furnaces; but all afternoon-sleepy between trains except for  
over there, the ceaseless smack and clang and clink of chain and  
barely audible sigh of wagon wheels and buffers  
as invisible engine and railwaymen shunt and couple,  
shunt, uncouple, couple, empty wagons for return  
to far-off places named upon their sides...

was this how I learned to make poetry,  
shunting, uncoupling, coupling

empty words into lines of trucks that have direction,  
to return to heart's-truth and poetry

and timely, late at night, out there in the waiting solitude  
to disturb that great silence under a canopy of stars,  
singing their rhythm in the dreaming night  
with the assurance of human company,  
leaving behind them  
a deeper silence in the listening heart

Michael Shepherd

## 0041 In The Rifle's Foresight

In fifty years, when Jerusalem's gone,  
flattened by an Arab atomic bomb,  
to whom will be the spoils, in this tear-stained land,  
lifeless, radio-active in its blood-drenched sand?

Michael Shepherd

## 0041 Unaraluk The Shaman

In the very earliest time,  
when knowledge was love  
and truth was goodness  
and words had power,  
people and animals  
lived as brother and sister,  
parent and child.

Sometimes they were one,  
sometimes they were the other  
and it mattered not,  
for all spoke the same language  
and words were magic  
and made things happen.

In later times,  
only the shamans remembered  
and even they needed  
the help of spirits.  
Unaraluk the shaman  
was helped by his dead father  
and his dead mother, and  
the sun, a dog, and a sea scorpion

and these enabled Unaraluk  
to know everything about  
what was on the earth  
and under the earth,  
in the sea  
and in the sky.

Nobody could explain this:  
that's the way it was.

Michael Shepherd

## 0042 For Billy Collins

Chess is more than dancing queens,  
hockey's even played on ice;  
a little difficulty too  
gives poetry an extra spice.

Michael Shepherd

## 0044 Liste Ye Thertyl Allé Thynges Ye Speke

Allé thyngés speke the name of godde.  
Trete allé thynges as lichsome lissom mayde  
thatte fore thu yearne to daunce as cheke to cheke  
as for to sense the savour of here blome;  
Ware thu watchen; thenne alle thynges schal speke  
and telle al worldés hiden metodés  
than speké not thatte godde speke of him self;  
thorough goddes brethe hem brethe thy yeres thereinne  
hem sondés, hwile thatte ye stonde and boté stare;  
Hwaet thu! Tak boté steppés quicke and close  
as alway maydé mak menne brazelich bolde –  
for til godde speke thee in Hys allé thynges,  
so ware thu watchen; alle thynges slepe inne godde.

Michael Shepherd



## 0045 In Honour Of Ahmad Shamlu, Poet, Teacher

She so loved Him  
was so beloved of Him  
that He spoke to her and said  
my beloved  
ask of Me whatsoever you wish

and she said  
without hesitation  
my Lord,  
fill my life  
with difficulty  
for at those times  
I cry out  
for You  
and feel nearest to You

and if, for the working-out  
of my own destiny  
or for the love of Your world  
must I be born again  
have me born  
in the most difficult of times  
in the most difficult of places  
and make me a man  
that I may walk barefoot  
and bloody  
with only one leg  
over a path of swords

Michael Shepherd

## 0045 Like, Iconic, Man...

Iconic.

It's one of those media buzz-words  
coined out of some personal conceit  
like 'magisterial' some years back  
or 'superbabe' or 'uberdiva'  
to indicate a class beyond class

but though, yes, ikons follow you with their eyes  
round the room, like a B-list babe spotting  
a press photographer –  
once done, they're copied for centuries  
by wannabees and  
less and less well, until  
some hep-cat thinks up something new..

so, mmm, I'd quite like, me or a poem perhaps, to be called  
'iconic' just once or twice  
in the broadsheet press or glossies -  
just once or twice only, without  
having to live up to it  
by being kinda dead

Michael Shepherd

## 0046 Cursory Nursery Hairy Tail

Can a leopard  
change its spots?  
'In a way...'  
said Darwin,  
tied in knots...

Then would  
a leopard  
spot its changes?  
'Evolution  
might arrange this...'

Michael Shepherd

## 0046 Jewel Of Blood

A fine morning and the side-streets empty  
then turning the corner,  
in the middle of the road  
a pigeon - grey-mauve, plump and feather-perfect,  
one wing half-spread in flight,  
sprawled sideways,  
dead

and at that moment the sun shone  
cruelly  
on the blood that shone on the dusty road by its head,  
a jewel, redder than any red,  
that shone like a message  
as if it were the blood of the world itself  
so rich, so rich...

and I felt guilty  
that I saw it so beautiful,  
that jewel from the heart of a dead dove  
of peace,  
and thought I should suppress the thought...  
and, now, that further thought which hovered in its train  
that this whole world in such a jewel of blood,  
more precious than a ruby, or than gold, or much fine gold,  
a jewel beyond price  
is what a devotee at communion or at Mass...

while cool reason  
(what has reason to do with this?)  
countered  
well you value your own blood above most things  
don't you? Why not a pigeon's?

but all words spent and poets silent and associations dropped  
and thoughts at rest,  
that pool of blood  
in the winter sunlight that shone on the dusty street  
was just so beautiful.



## 0046 The Measured Life

Here in the garden at the break of day,  
the air's been washed with holy water overnight,  
and it's so peaceful, as if nature at this hour  
replays Creation's dawn; takes a heartfelt pause  
before it launches, first itself, then us,  
into the business of the day and, so it seems,  
to lose ourselves somewhere inside ourselves.

Sitting here, I meditate upon the silence and the stillness  
at this thought-free hour of dawn; as if I and nature both  
share that sweet mystery that movement, action,  
arise from stillness, remain behind it all the day...

To measure out the use of this fine world –  
to live, neither too little nor too much;  
to be both actor and the watcher of all this,  
sitting in delight at one's own play...

And in the kitchen of the spirit,  
where rolling-pins and herbs live lives of metaphor,  
weigh out with balance, measure in the jug of life  
the usage of this world;  
in these scales, balance gold;  
the gold that's earned, the gold that's given out;  
from this jug, pours pure joy.

This evening, bruised and battered by the day  
that I allowed to, worldly, use me thus,  
I shall return to this same garden seat  
showered and refreshed  
by spirit's bathing - mercy, grace –  
to find again that peace which never left  
this seat of love

Michael Shepherd

## 0047 Ode To The Goddess Of Punctuation

I sing of punctuation....'What? ', you say,  
'I've never heard a sonnet on that theme! ';  
and thus this modest goddess, clothed in grace,  
performs her holy task; unheard, unseen,

except in trivial printed marks (- like this -)  
punctilious editors put in - or erase;  
yet, she's the Sherpa to the mind's high bliss  
who leads our thoughts to peaks of silent praise;

immortal consort of the god of speech,  
handmaid of mind, bestowing measured pause  
between each thought; their silent truth to reach  
by resting mind in mind's divine true cause.

O worship her, her power so great and blest,  
whose shortest silence, wildest mind may rest!

Michael Shepherd

## 0048 On First Reading Rilke

Out of the cage  
you had not known you were in  
with a freedom  
beyond what you thought it to be  
into the spaciousness  
which was boundless  
and a joy  
which redefined itself day by day  
around a firm centre  
which was everywhere

for Joanna

Michael Shepherd



## 0049 One For The Inner Child

Me, I prefer a long tale  
with a happy ending,  
said the python  
glancing at the  
Readers' Digest  
on return from  
the restroom

(for Jerry,  
who likes  
short poems)

Michael Shepherd

## 0050 Margaret B.

You knew her better than I – you'd  
looked after her when her splendid  
eccentricity which the English do so well  
went beyond the bounds that others set...

I only write obituaries, dear Margaret,  
when asked; somehow the others can be messy;  
but now of course, I wish I'd known enough...for  
how do we know, when we're so busy  
enjoying their company, their joyously,  
modestly eccentric company—no showing off –  
that we'll so miss them, when they're gone?  
Who wants to question and accumulate,  
with obituaries in mind?

In the 1930s, the only child in that foreign school  
to refuse to Heil Hitler before class... that set the tone;  
the young ATS, sergeant-major, was it,  
who made her way in tin hat, through the wartime bombs,  
to attend the evening philosophy and economics classes...  
and later, possessed of a comfortable private income,  
spent a life of good deeds and giving generously,  
money too, in utmost secrecy...

Wartime leaves its traces – for the serving ladies,  
it's often booze or fags (and of course,  
romances never spoken of) : but even her unsteady steps  
as we met for what was supposed to be serious work -  
an hour or two of joyous laughter, at the tragicomedy  
called life – her walk was ladylike, as if  
the alcohol was drinking her, not she drinking it...  
and when after a life of love for others,  
she discovered sex in her late 70s...we did not tut or pry...

And when you said the other day, who knew her well,  
and loved her like a brother,  
'she was a hurt lady', I was at first surprised,  
then poised to feel compassion; but all  
I could remember was laughter and

open hearts and goodness.

The rest I'll leave, dear Margaret, to you and God.

Michael Shepherd

## 0050 Morning Rain In Early Autumn

Today the soft rain is  
not falling, rather blessing,  
as gentle as mercy,  
making the air  
more airy, if that can be,  
nature's air conditioning let's crudely say,  
and the geraniums blessing, in their turn,  
the front door to my heart's home, are, manifestly,  
exhibiting pleasure.

It's almost a century since the Indian, Professor Bose –  
mark the day with unpicked flowers –  
was drummed out of the Royal Society, no less,  
for demonstrating to his satisfaction  
and the delight of non-members  
that plants had nerves, felt pain, revulsion...

and it's pretty obvious that the  
subtly-named Venus Fly Trap  
has very effective, non-rust, non-gymnasium  
vegetable muscles

while Hinduism, I read yesterday,  
completes the picture – plants  
feel pleasure as well as pain  
and show it

so from today, no idle chat over the garden fence  
like 'the geraniums are perking up...'  
it's 'the flowers are pleased today! '  
and stuff the raised eyebrow...

I, who normally treat gardening as  
a spectator sport, now in the light of  
this clearer knowledge, dead-headed,  
yesterday, the geraniums which looked like  
the week after the week before,  
a serious hangover after a burst of private  
garden show, and today I look at them

tenderly – on this day of soft rain.

And, I feel dead-headed too; maybe today  
a poem is flowering gently close by  
the heart's open door; and the geraniums  
are – if not, anthropomorphically, pleased –  
showing pleasure, in the measure  
that Creation permits them to; and I  
am pleased; for them; for it; to say the least.

I'll leave that door open  
on this day of soft and gentle mercy.

Michael Shepherd

## 0050 Tears Stolen From Tara

tears and fears,  
run away;  
run as fast as  
fears run high,  
run as fast as  
tears run dry,

yesterday  
is now today;  
nor should sorrow  
think tomorrow;  
tears and fears,  
run away,

(with apologies, with love)

Michael Shepherd

## 0051 From Plotinus: Enneads 4 And 6

Often, I awaken to myself,  
as from this earthly body lifted up;  
and feel external to all other things,  
myself the single knower past all thought;

I marvel at the beauty I then see,  
a beauty all around, yet seen as one;  
then, know myself to live the noblest life,  
at one with highest being in that realm.

Only when, from this high state past thought,  
I afterward descend, I ask myself  
how can so great a thing - that soul I own,  
take mortal body? How may these things be?

And this, the life of gods and blessed men:  
alone with the All-One; none alien then!

Michael Shepherd

## 0051 The Blackbird Of Truth

Waiting for the train, listening  
to the blackbird singing  
across the railway line  
I whistled a musical game with it  
of call and response,  
variations, show-off riffs;

the blackbird listened,  
held its head a little to one side,  
crisply hopped onto the iron rail  
and I thought myself mighty clever

as we played our musical game, and  
it flew across the line, a few yards nearer,  
swiftly, with clear intention  
onto the platform two yards from me

and the whole world turned on me  
as I realised I had no idea  
whether it was playing at  
blackbird makes friends with man  
or whether it was planning  
a swift dart at this rival's eyes

and I felt humble, stupid, ashamed, and yes scared,  
to have intruded in this blackbird's life;  
stopped whistling, turned away  
and pretended it was just a game,  
knowing now  
it wasn't.

Michael Shepherd



## 0052 Herrick On His Julia's Clothes

Whenas in silks my Julia goes,  
Till, then, methinks, how sweetly flows  
That liquefaction of her clothes!

But when she dons her miniskirt, me-  
-thinks but briefly; asks her curtly -  
Mistress, let's get down and dirty...

(for Marcy)

Michael Shepherd

## 0052 English Fore Forriners

Look - I can spell it - 'tongue'!  
Now isle never get it wrongue!  
And see this bottle - 'Lite' -  
Now isle always get it rite!

Michael Shepherd

## 0052 The Child In Me - A Postmodern Lyric

flutter by,  
butterfly..

no crime  
to rhyme

or sin  
to grin

Michael Shepherd

## 0053 More Heartstone Than Headstone

Here lies the grave  
of the very, very brave -  
pray mark it with a song

who died defending  
the arguably right  
from the army of the  
arguably wrong.

Michael Shepherd

## 0057 Strict Tempo - A Poem To Dance To

One Two Three Four  
One Two Three Four  
Forwards. Sideways.  
Sideways. Back...

Victor Sylvester, Victor Sylvester,  
I thought of you yester-  
day, white tie and tails,  
trousers as tight  
as a ball without a ballroom,  
Cuban Romeo moustache and  
patent leather hair...  
drumming out strict tempo  
the tempo of our lives  
learning to dance girlfriends  
into bed or into wives...

do they still teach ballroom  
to your hissing records,  
down in Cheam or Purley,  
head up, shiny shoes,  
pressed tight, breast to breast,  
adolescents wondering  
if a jockstrap would be best?

now it's coming back, I see,  
One Two One Two  
swing her round and pronto,  
but watch, don't dropp her onto  
that shiny shellacked floor...

Ou sont les disques d'antan, je me demande?

....gone and played, the yesteryears..  
our sweaty-sweet Sylvester years..

one two, one two,  
our memory's locked embrace...



## 0059 Another Tribute To E E Cummings

Much we have from ever,

much we fear from never.

\* \* \*

(with thanks to a j saywell for the inspiration)

Michael Shepherd

## 0060 Melanin

Melanin is a polymer, most often of  
two molecules with very long names,  
indolequinone, and dihydroxyindole carboxylic acid,  
which are in all of us, affecting  
skin and hair color and even  
present in the eye and its color  
and the brain too; the word  
comes from the Greek for 'black'

It is believed that all of us whose ancestors  
lived near the Equator, and  
that could be all of us yeah  
originally had black skins,  
inherited suntan if you like  
but that those who moved up north  
got whiter – which helped  
to absorb Vitamin D from the sparse sunlight and  
stave off rickets and such.

All pretty cool so far, right?

My clever schooldays friend  
later researched melanin  
finding in the course of his studies  
that a rubber factory in South America somewhere,  
tires I think not condoms  
used a compound that accidentally turned  
black-skinned workers into white  
which caused some social consternation

So, are you wondering where this poem  
Is going? Or is it a bit too obvious?  
Well, I'll stop there, and  
you can follow it up yourself.  
No point in spelling it out  
In black and white.

Michael Shepherd



## 0062 Robinia Pseudoacacia Alba

Its trunk is right next to the front gate  
so that as I go out, there's a faint flicker  
of guilt and anger - next door's insurance company  
want me to have it cut down, which I resent; it's just  
so beautiful. It calls out love.

All of four feet high when I bought it,  
slender, almost unnoticeable, and a glorious mistake  
since I'd confused it with a 'real' slow-growing acacia;  
now it towers over the house, superb, generous and delicate,  
gently shaken by the breeze as if to speak of eternal youth.

It's the one you see punctuating with its bright green fountain,  
urban 'developments'; unaffected even a few feet from a 24-hour freeway, as  
incongruously itself as a geisha at a bus stop.

It hasn't forgotten it's really a forest tree, and reminds us daily  
with aristocratic pride and a generous beauty,  
which should shame those same 'developers'  
who know it'll melt the hearts of photographers and clients alike...

If I pause at the gate, I see its bark - rough, pitted, gouged,  
as if it has put in a lifetime of the most arduous work  
to shame our human lives. An older substance  
than a human lifetime, too; the more you look at it,  
the more ancient in its knowledge.

What is it protecting, like some old and wizened man,  
his arms around his grandchild? Within this aged bark, in some mysterious,  
magic way, substances are on the move; so well  
protected, and disguised - to unfold, like some divine magician,  
those delicate, pale green fronds of leaves, through which  
the morning sun shines translucent like an unearned blessing.

At night, its leaves fold up upon themselves  
as hands in prayer. This is a tree to love. And it is loved.  
It deserves this poem; which though it may not be divinely inspired,  
celebrates a tree which surely is. And there we meet.



## 0066 The Cell

The cell was smaller than a bedroom  
or a life sentence  
but the second night,  
the first of sleep,  
S. was awoken  
by a knocking on the wall  
and so the wall that separated them  
joined them

when walls  
become shared words  
we are in the presence  
of ourself.

With acknowledgements to Simone Weil

Michael Shepherd

## 0068 The Connoisseur (2)

Is there a god  
sleeping in this room?

even the doorhandle, gently turned,  
seems to speak a message  
before the room entered, the first breath taken  
of the room's own air

and on the table, the grey-green vase seems  
to be the host; the silent messenger: the furniture  
somehow eternal in its order; every line and curve  
within the room speaking of some  
divine geometry; the shaded sunlight seems  
to fall on tiptoe, touch in silent praise;  
the air, to be refined; and the silence –  
what does the silence say unspoken

as if it holds some god-smiled word,  
some solemn laughter, about what  
is there and is not there, has made  
of this room, this ordinary room,  
a shrine where one can worship without form  
oneself?

the vase too holds itself both  
open and reserved; its perfect curves  
the subtle decisions of a history  
of centuries, of generations  
of human hands; of things made  
for oneself, for others, for all else  
where all else is known;

silent the vase; the room full of its sound.  
Is there a god  
sleeping in this room?

you; moving forward with respectful quiet step  
to touch this grey-green  
Chinese vase

Michael Shepherd

## 0074 Spider Spider...

Do spiders do what spiders do  
with no alternative?

Or can they wake up one fine day  
And think 'today I'll LIVE!

'I'll take the morning off today -  
no repair work - (miss my lunch...) :

'then move my website far away  
from that poetic bunch...'

Michael Shepherd

## 0075 The Connoisseur

Do come in. I'm so glad that you came –  
it's good to have someone to  
share one's pleasures and delights with.  
Some of my family think I'm  
some sort of misanthrope, hiding away  
with my collection of Chinese porcelain...

I tell them, it's the opposite – I feel that  
I'm in touch with the finest work of  
contented men, creating some sort of memory of  
perfection, for others to enjoy – I guess  
you feel the same way about those poems  
you write? Now –

your hands are clean? Not because of  
this celadon Sung vase, let's start with that –  
but I'd like you to feel the outer layer  
of skin on your fingertips touching  
the surface of the vase and yet  
not quite touching, feeling  
the air between – silk on silk,  
almost – I was going to say, the skin of  
a young girl's cheek greeting  
another young girl's cheek, but that wouldn't  
sound quite right – you must have  
the same problems, with choosing just the right  
similes and metaphors, that are  
thrilling without being 'clever'?

I don't want to be pretentious about  
all this – just feel the surface: not matt,  
not shiny, the colour not bright, not blatant,  
but not in hiding – and see  
how the potter takes the vase's curves and contours  
from neck to belly, like a yacht,  
like a horseman, like a lover – put  
this vase in a room to itself and its stillness  
fills the room with presence...

they talk a lot of nonsense about  
connoisseurship – it's just loving what  
is fine, and long reflected over, and  
as human an activity as can be. You meet  
the maker in the art. And yes,  
there are other connoisseurs who  
love the roughness of a cracked, irregular  
Japanese tea-cup, a one-off from a woodman's kiln...

I expect you feel just the same  
about poetry? How fortunate  
we are, you and I..

Michael Shepherd



## 0075 The Events Of 12.25

the stable door shakes in the cold night wind;  
the cattle snort and snuffle in the straw;  
by city wall the lanterns glint on steel;  
what will become of Mary's child this year?

for are we sure that miracles stay true -  
if lost to mind, to heart, to memory?  
will Herod have the last laugh, one year soon?  
wise men and shepherds miss the heavenly?

will children fail to sense, soon, in the light  
that glints on tinsel and bright packages,  
the holy present in the gift's delight;  
nor sense the angels' textless messages?

this baby, gift-wrapped in its shawl and stall  
just may be - may still be - the Lord of All?

revisited

Michael Shepherd

## 0078 Thanksgiving Day

A celebration of the grace  
of the past, or  
a celebration of the grace  
of today?

For thousands of years,  
the Native Americans  
whose origin is so mysterious  
held, as do all the peoples in the world,  
a celebration of the harvest  
now brought home, rejoicing  
in its abundant wealth and  
offering gratitude to that source  
from which it comes - as do we...

And how ironic, looking back,  
that the Pilgrim Fathers, unprepared,  
as many townsfolk among them were,  
for the art of farming in a foreign land,  
were taught, from those thousands of organic years  
of experience, by those very native Americans -

Wouldn't you like to have seen, been there,  
that day in 1621, as settlers  
and the invited Indian chiefs  
sat down together to celebrate the harvest  
in brotherhood?

And then, today: beside remembrance of the past,  
how beautiful to dedicate a day  
to thinking, listing, all the many things  
which we may be truly grateful for.  
Will a day be long enough?

It's said, that every year  
the day after the Thanksgiving feast  
the wild turkeys of America, gathering,  
as Native Americans of ancient, brown-faced line,  
with lively turkey-trot and song and

stuffing themselves in rather  
more natural ways, celebrate  
survival

Michael Shepherd

## 0081 The Metaphysical Path Of Love

Of God Himself can no man truly think;  
Creator He, beyond all human thought;  
yet questing intellect oft scans the brink  
of what of Him may yet, in truth, be sought;

and if that questing grow to firm intent,  
it clears the mind of all that blocks its path;  
takes on a godly aim, all on Him bent,  
and sharpens our devotion's godly dart.

And yet, though God's not thought, He may be loved;  
so, leaving all those things that we can think,  
take up - our mind now clear - the path of love,  
and choose in love, that thing we cannot think.

God's grace: when thought surrenders all to love,  
Love's bounty showers thought from heaven above.

2002

Michael Shepherd

## 0082 The Myself Place

When you were a child, where was it? For there's always  
some place: somewhere you go, when all you want  
is just to be yourself - because  
it's all too much, or not enough;  
you've lost what matters most, or  
not sure just what you're really looking for;  
and so there's nothing else to do but go  
to that friendliest place on earth, that's all your very own;  
the myself place.

Street cafes, bars, can sometimes be that place:  
the sun shines; relaxed, you watch the passing scene  
with an assumed slight superiority  
that goes with the seat price;  
or alcohol soothes all in friendly gaze:  
they're just the actors, extras in your play; so sit; enjoy;  
smile at the world with goodwill, even love;  
a few more visits, it can soon become  
the myself place.

Porches, stoops, verandahs -  
what a brilliant idea:  
put it all aside; you've fed well, so now watch the play  
from the best seat in the house:  
you're there in lordly public stage box, if they want to stop and talk; and  
backstage there's love enough to script your every dream: meanwhile,  
the myself place.

Michael Shepherd

## 0082 The New Grave

You brought your watercolour kit.  
For it's so picturesque – the smallish church  
in the centre of the village  
like a mother hen at drowsy midday  
surrounded by her chicks;  
the red-white flag of Saint George  
the only sign of life, fluttering like  
an aerial footnote to history  
(or for some, a corner of a foreign football field...)

but there's a new detail in the picture  
since last you sketched here:  
the newest arrival is the oldest: death;  
the oldest signifier is the fresh-turned earth.

The uninvited thought squirms across the mind  
like the exposed worms of that rich soil,  
how reassuring to be buried in this ideal  
picture-book of continuity amidst the change,  
a country churchyard. A cemetery  
has no geography and thus no history  
save in the hearts of families;  
here, all is reassuring  
except to broken hearts which time will heal  
all but the scar.

Already, the bunch of daffodils  
in the empty honey jar  
have bowed to that same death;  
reminding us that graves are spun around  
a hundred and forty years of family history:  
she'll remember how she loved her Nan  
who died at seventy-something  
for all her own seventyish future years.

Rest in peace means something here.  
Meanwhile, the daffodils thrive, dotted  
among the graves, as unconcerned  
as the soft rubber tyres of the hearse

now catching at the Spring's reaching foliage  
as it approaches at a perfectly-judged pace  
down Church Lane, returning peace to peace.

Michael Shepherd

## 0084 The Quiet Room

Into this quiet room; with sweet relief  
the sense of oneness with oneself returns;  
the glorious, restless world no longer thief  
through thought, of all that for that oneness yearns;

and now, in peace, outside the window shine  
all life's specifics; all its passing show,  
now from this peace, seen as a play divine;  
all restlessness now gone; time, ever now;

and in this heavenly peace, the heart's laid bare  
in all its nature, born from heaven above:  
a nature that with all its all may share;  
since in reality, that heart is love.

O that self-education thus might bring  
to all who thirst, love's ceaseless single spring.

Michael Shepherd



## 0085... Ne'Er The Twain...?

So many centuries of Indian thought,  
so many saints who found their inmost soul,  
so much of observation of the mind,  
so much of consciousness itself revealed...

and all this given due language and due terms -  
that we, the distant heirs, yet that same self,  
may struggle, in our word-hoard so much less,  
to stretch our minds to comprehend this wealth;

thus, make a virtue from necessity,  
and as perforce the English mystics did,  
with heart-warmed mind, speak true simplicity;  
with mind-clear heart, reveal what's God and hid:

and trust that godly silence, godly sound  
shall yield that self-same truth to Western mind.

Michael Shepherd

## 0086 The Radiance

a radiance.  
sometimes you can almost see it.

those who see it  
keep it to themselves or  
take it for granted, as  
a sort of birthright, though  
sometimes, later perhaps, or  
even too late for you to hear  
or to themselves with regret as of a gift withdrawn  
remember it and marvel

you yourself –  
does it ever dazzle you, or  
is it too soon followed, smothered,  
with some guilt, a burden born and borne?  
or for a moment, quiet at home,  
dazzled, ecstatic, heart melted by that radiance?

you, sitting so still in the waiting room or  
patiently standing  
at the bus stop, in a crowded train,  
radiance withdrawn, disguised  
as no-one, anyone,  
everyone;

mother

Michael Shepherd

## 0089 The Top Floor

Up that top flight of stairs  
whose old, unvarnished wood  
scrubs up so well and welcoming,

where it's so quiet at the top of the house  
that even the sunlight enjoys the silence,  
there's a room kept ready, welcoming,  
for every poet I respect:  
and yes, for you...

Open each door  
and there's such a subtle, same-yet-different,  
fragrance in each room - eluding definition,  
yet so loved, and so familiar:  
a field of wildflowers in the sunlit morning dew,  
or grateful after later April shower,  
or is it freshly laundered sheets dried in the wind?  
a hint of that precious, faintly perfumed scrap of silk  
from Grandmother's wedding dress?  
A dried rose in a drawer lined with cedarwood?  
And just a hint of honey-soaked tobacco,  
and once-a-year, and very fine, cigar?  
a horse's sweat on crisp and frosty day?  
the zinging air on pebbled beach in aftermath of storm?

or freshly-showered skin,  
and all the wild and gentle  
scents of love?

All that, in these so living rooms,  
peaceful, welcoming,  
and full of you

Michael Shepherd

## 0091 The Scholar - A Dutch Portrait

The scholar, in his book-lined study, sits,  
walled in by printed thought in black and white;  
silent; by a pool of lamplight lit;  
now still in reading, or now drawn to write;

inaudible, the music of his mind,  
invisible, that dazzling light, his thought;  
unknown, the destiny of human kind;  
unwrit, the future glories to be sought;

he like a human hour-glass: single grains  
passing into future mind from past;  
and in his presence, all Creation reigns,  
the history of the world from first to last.

this secret glory, scholars are allowed;  
so fragile; mortal; subtle; noble; proud.

Michael Shepherd

## 0092 The Signs Of Love

What are the inward signs of truest love,  
beyond the smile, the kiss, the touch of hand,  
that joins our actions to the heaven above;  
that constant love which shall for ever stand?

I see two inward signs above all else:  
the first, expansion of the bounds of mind  
so that no barrier stands 'twixt that and this,  
'twixt one and t'other, or 'twixt 'mine' and 'thine';

the second sign, a fine attention brought  
to every single action, every need,  
as if in loving care, there's but one thought  
from constant heart flows into every deed;

these two - a boundless mind and ceaseless care -  
pass space and time: the proof that love is here.

Michael Shepherd

## 0093the Soul's Wedding Chamber

Night falls, so gently, from the darkening sky,  
soft calling us to leave all that the day  
has shone upon; from universal light  
to turn to homely private lamp, and seek  
what evening's quiet brings our close-knit souls.

Then, love, as midnight calls us to our rest,  
lay down the things of day, and mount the stair  
to that so private chamber where our love  
may seek the oneness in our otherness,  
enjoy distinction in our single sight;  
put out the light, lay down the he and she  
to seek the god and goddess of sweet night.

Thus is the soul to God, and God to soul;  
in loving dark unknowing, love known whole.

Michael Shepherd

## 0095 The Title Of This Poem Comes At The End

If you've read  
136 poems  
by one poet  
in, uh, an hour plus,  
which is a stupid thing to do  
normally  
to any poet  
and insulting  
if you think that way

at least when you do this  
you get an aftertaste  
of a sort – you get  
tired beyond boredom, or  
the guy has only three things to say  
again and again or  
he's posing as a poet or  
subtly unloading his negativity  
or his hatred for life or  
exploiting your emotions or  
even more subtly pleading  
for your sympathy

but no  
I don't feel any of these things right now  
I just feel  
a huge huge love which  
somehow isn't  
just focussed on you and  
I've even tried to set against this  
cold lit-crit sorta thoughts  
but no

I see you as a man  
who looked the ordinary  
in the face  
and didn't want to alter it and  
asked nothing of it but was  
contented in a way

beyond definition that  
I can understand  
would piss off anyone  
with ambition or  
so-called American values  
although many of your poems  
are the stuff of ordinary Americans  
in the bar chatting about life  
over a beer in B movies

but I'm thinking that maybe  
this is the way God sees the world –  
'this is what you've made  
of what I gave you and  
so be it'

I'm a little scared too  
that if I met you face to face  
unexpectedly with that  
wise beat-up face like a  
thoughtful ape I might  
recoil or something  
and be ashamed afterwards  
but I hope not

I just hope that  
somewhere deep down  
you loved yourself  
as much as so many people  
and you can read them here  
love you  
for real  
and as is

the title of this poem is  
A Homage to Charles Bukowski

Michael Shepherd



# 0096 The Two-Left-Feet Waltz - For Jerry

(to the tune of The Blue Danube)

The  
Two-Left- Feet Waltz  
...left...now  
what do I do?

The  
Two-Left-Feet Waltz  
...left...I'm  
feeling blue, too..

The  
Two-Left-Feet Waltz...left.. I'm  
treading on you...

I'm through! You, too? Let's vamoose.

Michael Shepherd

## 0097 The Vintage Of A Lifetime

As some sun-ripened vineyard-owner, rich  
in slow maturing wisdom gained through time,  
before that noble rot of trodden grape  
yields untold harvest of a well lived life-  
and proud that with his daily-tended skills  
he'll win a vintage he will never taste -

so I, who seek to daily tend life's yield,  
distil a vintage I shall never taste.  
Mayhap some pencilled notes from wisdom's root  
shall grow new generation's richer fruit.

Michael Shepherd

## 0098 New Term At Evening Class

Sit here, in the entrance hall which  
they've cleaned to spotless in the vacation  
and watch them arrive,  
early, one by one;  
that's much more fun to watch.

Some walk a little faster than they need  
as if impelled by their decision  
to make this time full of worth for them.

Some walk slowly, yet deliberately, with a relaxed quiet;  
we guess they're teaching staff; while  
the ones who seem in a controlled acceleration tonight  
are probably on duty.

Some seem almost unrecognisable  
from your memory of them last term;  
something magnificent must have happened  
in the vacation; you wonder - do they know?

Some walk slowly, as if they belonged here  
before they arrived; they bring the purpose of the place  
visibly to light, as if bringing it back to itself;  
even, as we watch,  
bring ourselves to ourselves; as if the school  
has come to life before a word is said;

if this were an ancient temple,  
(and why not?)  
they would be in solemn, joyous procession towards  
the stone or place that is the building's centre,  
bearing in upraised hands  
a gift of gratitude, with shining eyes...for  
who can forget that Greek statue of the 'calf-bearer'  
who walked this way, shining-eyed, to that temple; who walks  
for as long as marble lasts?

But this is today; we watch them in their street clothes  
on their way down to the cloakroom,

two brown leaves, damp between,  
shed on the doormat.

And now, elevated by this passing show  
so, knowing now humanity always this so beautiful,  
I too go down to the cloakroom; where in the perfect mirror  
I see a person whose face has softened;  
and yet who's taller, with some almost unfamiliar authority which  
I did not see when I last looked at me  
in the steamy bathroom mirror back at home -

yes, this is a good place to be.

Michael Shepherd

## 0099 The Reading

The EX IT sign in the Town Hall Theatre  
was lit by gas. A smell you never quite forget.  
It serves to pin the memories of those other times.

The sister of the junior mistress at the local school  
was here to give her reading: 'Scenes from Shakespeare';  
whole scenes and all the characters.  
Imagine.

But she had a very special voice.

Oh who can know  
the where and when  
that life may give its life to life  
and give it full, and give it whole?

And who may know  
how many years  
before the fruits  
burst in the soul?

Or what the lights  
and where the sounds  
and what they speak,  
and where the whole?

The performance ended.  
As the lights came on,  
the audience were still for - seconds? -  
as if they had forgotten they were not already at home;  
then walked out into  
the rainy darkness of the seaside town,  
past the gaslit EXIT sign;  
the sea a distant seethe and roar

and some were changed for life.

So, poetry.

.

Michael Shepherd

# 0102 This Is A Disposable Poem

This is a disposable poem.  
Under each stanza  
is a perforated line

-----

you may read it stanza by stanza  
and throw away each as you read  
or having it read it through,  
shorten it stanza by stanza

-----

since many poems on this site  
benefit from curtailing  
because amateur poets  
tend to be uncertain  
about their work

-----

and as a result either repeat  
the essence of their poem at the end  
or comment on it which takes  
the power out of it

-----

you might want to save that  
previous stanza but as for  
the other stanzas, here's  
a suggestion

-----

enjoy being a critic and  
dispose of them with a flourish  
in one of these ways  
certainly not both for reasons  
which will become apparent

-----  
one method is to place  
a waste-paper basket so called  
at an optimum distance  
far enough away to enjoy throwing  
the ball of scrunch-up

-----  
but near enough not to miss;  
do it with a flourish,  
feel good, feel judgmental,  
feel superior, feel right

-----  
or alternatively take this disposable poem  
into the smallest room to read  
for as long as it takes, this varies,  
then put it behind you so to speak

-----  
again with a decisive gesture  
though of course due care and  
you may wish to accompany this  
with some rather biblical utterance

-----  
such as, I shit in judgment upon  
the works of the ungodly  
and as for the works of the infidel  
I put them behind me

-----  
and they shall be carried away  
by the waters of righteousness yea  
as though they had never been



-----

aaah that felt good

Michael Shepherd

## 0103 These Late Autumn Days

these late autumn days  
leaves fall like poems  
green as new thoughts  
yellow as wisdom  
red as late summer love  
brown as old speech  
dry as the past

these late autumn days  
old poets  
look out at coming winter snowclouds  
but hope like trees might hope, unknowing,  
for a miracle of rebirth  
beyond their dry boughs' reach  
of words

new buds  
green as  
new songs

Michael Shepherd

## 0105 To A Nam Vet

You came back to the USA, but you never made it home...  
and yet, you're still around  
for us to meet and greet and thank  
or try to avoid, or to forget,  
or try to join, in some vague sense of shame...

At what level of experience  
may we try to meet you, back from hell  
with decorations visible, wounds invisible?  
What use are words - they just make us feel smaller and inadequate?

Just perhaps, to be there for you,  
silent.  
But there.

You're still around...but is life worse than death for you?  
We don't like to ask; and we certainly cannot answer.

But you're still around, even just to remind us...  
We the embarrassed. You're still around.

And God - God is not mocked.

Michael Shepherd

## 0106 To Rilke

Unending one, you've shown myself to me.

In the place you wrote into being  
where the image of God made Man  
and the image of Man made God  
meet – there, in that friendly place

where such daunting names quite disappear,  
where the eternal becomes practical  
and the Word is heard as if I spoke it,  
and myself is every self,

and I am free of all preconceptions,  
neither Christian, Jew, Moslem, Hindu –  
the place where all may be discussed,  
where all may be heard,

where two voices become one certainty,  
where unicorns may be seen,  
where there are no secrets,  
where poetry arises

in that place  
you've shown myself to me.

Michael Shepherd

## 0106 To Rilke From Poemhunters

We're living just as the century begins.

A great leaf, that God and we  
shall cover with our writing  
turns now, overhead, in strange hands.  
We feel the sweep of it like a wind.

We see the brightness of a new page  
where everything yet can happen.

Unmoved by us, the fates take its measure  
and look at one another, saying nothing.

And we write.

(Following Rilke's poem I,8 in his 'Book of Hours')

Michael Shepherd

## 0106 Winter Sunlight In China

The cry of the stork echoes  
from the cold cliff where the mist  
is clearing for an hour or two  
this winter morning  
so that when nature has found a place  
among the stones at the edge  
of this broad slow river  
for this empty  
Coca Cola bottle  
it may catch the sunlight  
between the clear water and wet stones  
and find itself beautiful

Michael Shepherd

## 0107 To Jh On The Birth Of A Daughter

She'll love you 'til her dying day,  
and just to prove it  
she'll take it out regularly on her Mom,  
frequently on her sisters,  
and later, sometimes on her partner.

You got yourself a deal.

Michael Shepherd

## 0108 Today I Read A Poem

just now, today  
and for a moment, thus  
forever,  
the heaviness of devil-darkened thought,  
death in some disguise yet to be called out,  
threatened grey ruin to the day  
which is not mine  
as that same devil, named, will not be mine -

so pushed aside my dinner plate  
and read a poem

and rejoined the world of now  
of sunshine, families, all  
the heart loves  
and mind turns grey

and into devil's grey, and death and life  
stepped gratitude.

Michael Shepherd



## 0108 Two Poems About War

see that woman  
flung over her son's dead body  
howling from the depths  
of her womb

what has she  
to do with war  
or war with her?

\* \* \*

if all the mothers in the world  
denied war in their mind  
and in their speech  
what would happen  
in the mind of men?

what is the powerful  
compared with the power? \*

(\* ancient belief: man is the power-ful, woman the power)

Michael Shepherd

# 0109 Upon The Feast Of Saint Valentine

roses are red  
(well, some are white) :  
Saint Valentine says  
he needs poets to write...

roses are red  
(well, some are pink) :  
Saint Valentine says  
he needs hearts expressed in ink..

poems are read;  
that's the good news here;  
Saint Valentine's day  
could last all year...

Michael Shepherd

## 0110 Visiting Billy Collins

The gate opens easily -  
someone's oiled it quite recently.  
There's fresh gravel on the path  
this winter day.  
There's a dog kennel out there and  
a single warning bark from inside the house but  
your shins are safe.  
Those neighbours of his seem  
quiescent today..  
The doormat has said  
WELCOME for  
some frayed years now.  
There are lights on and  
the door opens quickly although  
they weren't expecting you so soon.

'How about a walk around after  
coffee, this crisp morning?  
Just as far as you like? There's  
lots to show you..'

We walk further than  
I intended, laughing  
over the word  
'accessible'.

Michael Shepherd

## 0111 Visitor's Card

I love a poem that  
you can walk into  
as if you know the owner,  
settle into,  
wander around,  
stay a few days,  
return to visit,  
find a secret room,  
and be surprised

I love a poem that  
you can love  
without wasting time  
admiring it

Michael Shepherd

## 0114 Winter Sunlight

Delicate, so frail now, almost  
apologetic for their presence,  
like the longtime bed-bound  
taking their first unaccompanied walk,  
hardly able to believe their fortune, on  
this unexpected day of sunlight  
offering hope to weakest winter body -  
yet exploratory, determined, in  
their frailty; invisibly heroic –

the tendrils of the jasmine explore,  
survey with vegetable mind, the frontiers of the empire which  
they plan to flood with scent some secret  
time ahead; how can a stem that looks  
like fine, dead wire, carry all the ruthlessness  
of Nature's will, in so tentative disguise?

the sunlight on this white winter wall,  
as a slight breeze waves the exploratory tendrils,  
throws up the sharp shadow of this filigree  
like twin explorers of the year's new world  
dancing with each other;

a Japanese artist, seeking a new kimono  
patterned to show where nature,  
truth and beauty meet, might feel the need,  
confronted by so delicate a sketch  
of Spring's new plans,  
to grow as this jasmine,  
exploring the unknown so carefully.

Michael Shepherd

# 0115 Windows Nothing Reading

Windows nothing reading  
thus goes  
pretty letters  
human companion  
immediately  
mentioned rich

surreal life  
nonsense  
surreal poets  
make sense  
now  
everyone  
today  
ngs  
gertrude stein  
our language  
new  
fresh view  
you too

the first stanza  
comes with  
acknowledgements  
to Miss Laurice  
who hoped  
to slip her  
special offer  
of Viagra's  
love Niagara  
or Cialis bliss  
penis strength  
orgasmic length  
through the detumescent  
Puritan fathered  
filter  
into my email  
using this  
surreal text

random-scandom  
this sober morning

but alas  
and alack  
Miss Laurice's  
surreal thesis  
like stockyard sow  
is labelled now  
(but wham and bam  
and thank you, ma'am...)

as Spam

Michael Shepherd

## 0118 Wyeth County

We knew the history of the area, of course;  
reckoning that with a Heritage Site  
just over the hill  
planning permits would be hard to get  
and the rolling landscape, and our own prized view,  
would stay that way.

Clearing the ditch beyond the orchard,  
by the line of old trees,  
I found it.  
A musket.  
still loaded (I realised later, cleaning it up)  
and a scrap of disintegrating coloured cloth  
still with a button on it.

A button.

It was the button  
that put paid to my former life:  
as if with the harsh scrape of iron cartwheel on stony track,  
the past had arrived;  
stolen the present from our comfortable grasp,  
with a cartload of heavy, worn,  
war-weary baggage,  
and taken up residence in our front parlour  
with its proudly sourced 'folk furniture'  
that now looked like imposters in hiding.

It was when I drove into our small town next day  
and the faces of the locals whom I thought I knew so well  
looked at me with eyes that seemed to own  
clothes heavy with history  
and fierce division  
that I knew that the past had claimed us  
and that our lives would never quite be ours again

And that we must discover, not war but human pride  
under the no longer picturesque  
landscape



which we can no longer  
pretend to own.

Michael Shepherd

## 0119 You Great Ones

How is it, you great ones,  
when I read your poems  
whether with  
too quick an enchantment  
or, impatient again,  
almost giving up  
in the care to know exactly  
what you mean

that you are in the room with me  
watching as I read  
listening as I read  
without judgment  
watching, listening,  
with the sublime detachment  
of the immortal

while I, have learned  
not to fear your judgment  
not to be concerned  
but just to read

in the radiance, the radiance  
of your presence

(for Hugh Cobb who reminded me)

Michael Shepherd

## 0120 A Tribute To James P., Poet

Every five years or so  
since you were a boy,  
a slender book of  
maybe a dozen poems

gently human, like  
a summer seashore  
lapping at the heart,  
leaving washed bright pebbles  
like jewels

for each five years  
a quiet poet, bright-eyed  
with an inner smile  
has walked around unnoticed

waiting for a poem to come to him  
and yet  
leaving the air around him clean  
like a walk by the sea-shore

cleansed by the listening sight  
of a world full of unwritten poems

Michael Shepherd

## 0120 Child On A Swing

playground  
higher and higher  
the swing squeaking, creaking  
but firm  
the child laughing  
testing the limits of freedom  
the freedom of limits  
sensing but forgetting  
the firm post on which it swings  
firm as a parent's love

unmoving stillness  
the child swinging  
both held in love

for Skadi meic Beorh

Michael Shepherd

## 0121 4 A.M.11 November 1918

A still night; crescent moon; the faintest breeze.  
Some wit might say, 'Peaceful, innit, Tommy? '  
Two hours before the usual time for attack.  
I wonder what they've got up their sleeve for today.  
A bit too quiet right now, I'd say

Careful how you breathe or talk  
this chilly night, out there in the open trench;  
frozen breath will draw the sniper's rifle sight

The sharp nose of some human terrier  
passing over the familiar smells -  
cordite, rifle oil, linseed for the wooden butt, the stench of death,  
yesterday's corpses half submerged -  
may detect, just over there, the unmistakeable smell  
of fierce French 'Caporal' cigarettes;  
there in front, strong German 'Zeppelins';  
round here, cheap Woodbines linger in the air

hardly a human difference  
worth fighting over.

Michael Shepherd

## 0123 A Grave Judgment

Sometimes sentiment sublates the stark cold truth  
On gravestones, memory's mourning heart to soften;  
This stony judgement I'd carve for myself:  
'He loved not wisely - but he loved quite often.'

Michael Shepherd

## 0124 A Dead Poet Comments On 'Comments'

Erstwhiles,  
of candle-laboured hours and screwed-up eyes,  
the quill scratch-scratching, the paper ragged rough, the ink  
unwieldy, black and unredeeming  
as a judge's cap –

fame – or barely fame,  
the least to be hoped for, a mere 'name' – a  
mere sheet of scrawled, curled paper  
passed around a smoky coffee-house: they  
so shrewd of eye and savage oft of wit;

or at the best, the whim of jobbing printer:  
then, fame or forgetting lay beyond this life.

The grave's a humbling, private place  
where even poets labelled 'metaphysical'  
begin their education quite anew...

and yet, and yet - some centuries ahead,  
some divine post-classic irony may devise  
a means of universal access  
to poems quite unread  
(alas, and oft unread their readers too...)

and so, humbled by cold grave and death,  
there's one more humbling yet to bear:  
the stripling's comments on a verse that lives,  
the poet – would he know it – dead:  
'Not so great – keep writing'...

raising in these bleachwhite bones and grimjaw skull  
the faintest meta-physical, unseen  
ghost of a smile

Michael Shepherd

# 0125 A Footballer Kicks A Cliché Into Touch

(British readers only)

At the end of the day  
that's what it's all about

sunset

Michael Shepherd



## 0126 A Longstanding Question

It's rather a delicate personal matter...  
I could of course say I'm just asking for a friend...  
but I guess You'd see through that, from what I hear...

I wouldn't trouble You, but  
it's not a question that concerned Adam  
since he had no comparative physiology  
any more than he had comparative theology...  
so it didn't matter a figleaf to him...

and Moses had the bigger picture in mind, and in his position  
had to keep up with the Tablets  
to use a medical term which  
we might refer to later...

as for Jesus, well it didn't affect him personally, of course,  
even as Son of Man,  
unless of course the Da Vinci Code is true  
but I'd rather not pursue such maudlin thoughts  
with You...

and the new Pope hasn't yet pronounced on this  
though I can guess he won't be keen  
even if he's slept on it;  
anatomically, at least...

it's like this:  
I get an awful lot of emails from complete strangers  
who seem to know my wife's mind better than I  
suggesting that, well, she'd be happier if,  
you know, my \*thing\* were longer  
(and presumably thicker, though  
they make less of this...as if that's slightly indecent...)

and then, they go on to say that my wife  
(who likes her eight hours, and  
I have to leave early for work)  
would be even happier if  
I took certain tablets...

even insidiously suggesting that  
if I don't keep up with the Joneses in this  
I might lose her to Mr Jones...  
I guess they haven't met my wife, or Mr Jones,  
as I was saying to Mrs Jones only the other evening:

Now as the Creator of men, who seems to have handed out  
a pretty wide variety of these anatomical details, rather  
than, as we might expect, a Standard Size (and I don't like to  
question Your authority, but  
it has led to some heated thinking and emoting; perhaps there are  
other factors of justice, destiny, etc., involved here?)

and as Creator too, of eternal laws at all levels, which means  
that science can only make these things with  
Your – indirect, of course – consent, and  
human ingenuity (not that I'm trying to throw  
the blame back onto You...)

but as there are, as Donald Rumsfeld says,  
things we don't know we don't know  
like side-effects we haven't dreamed of, which –  
well I won't say, tear apart the fabric of society  
as that's a bit of a cliché, but You must know what I'm getting at...

or can this be some giant step for Mankind,  
in the providential, ongoing plan, the Intelligent Design,  
of (Your) evolution of species?

I hope You see my problem (well, it wasn't a problem before, and  
Mrs Smith has no complaints, at least not yet, she doesn't  
read the emails) , so I'd be grateful for a brief response to my  
longstanding ...(excuse my little joke) ... question?

A postcard or equivalent would do; I wouldn't like  
to inadvertently spamtrash Your email. Or a quiet word in the ear  
during prayer. But not the confessional box route please; I don't think  
this problem has arisen for my local priest yet.

Thanks.  
Your humble servant,

(retd.)

Michael Shepherd

## 0127 A Poem About Gertrude Stein

a poem slept  
the poem slept  
nobody knew it slept  
it did not know itself that it slept  
it slept like a baby  
and that was refreshing  
it refreshed itself before it was born  
as babies do  
it did not then know itself that it slept  
but when it woke up it knew that it had slept

while it slept this poem had a dream  
it was a good dream  
it did not know that it was a dream  
it dreamed itself awake  
but when it woke up it remembered  
that it had had a dream  
it remembered that it was a dream  
when it was awake

when it woke up  
it remembered itself  
and dressed appropriately  
and told itself to friends and strangers  
it told itself the same way to friends and strangers  
that was its duty because it was  
it did not mind whether they were friends or strangers  
because it was a poem

I know  
I know this  
I know this because  
I know this because there is a because  
I know this because the poem told me  
I know this because the poem told me it had a name  
A poem about Gertrude Stein

Michael Shepherd

## 0129 A Sketch Of The Poet At Work (Wcw)

a happy man  
saying,  
life

Michael Shepherd

## 0131 A Quiet Word About Peace

Peace is natural.

Peace is life-giving.

Peace will remain for eternity.

Anger is unnatural.

Anger is life-consuming.

And that's how it is.

Michael Shepherd

## 0131 A Sufi-Ish Reflection

walk the world in wonder

and think who created thought.

Michael Shepherd

## 0132 A Tribute To Ws Merwin

You know when you meet them,  
they're going to take you somewhere  
you didn't know was there so  
couldn't know you wanted for them  
to take you there

there being a there to where  
he has a secret key which opens  
a connecting door between  
nowhere and somewhere  
and anywhere and everywhere

nowhere being a little scary  
to be there but then with him it's  
somewhere which is an interesting  
where to be and when  
you're there with him he unlocks  
anywhere and you look around  
and it's all new and now you look  
why look it's everywhere

and everywhere is new and strange  
and you're living a new life where  
what you thought was the ordinary where  
full of nothings and anythings and  
not worth a passing thought  
is everything  
and now you have to look again

and it would be scary if he hadn't shown you  
how it all connects and how  
the pinned-up sleeve of the one-armed boy  
is there to tell you about everywhere

Michael Shepherd



## 0134 All Things Shine

Everything is full of its own essence;  
so full, it shines beyond itself  
and makes its own space,  
an inner space so great  
that it meets ourselves in its own radiance;

so full that if we name it –  
blade of grass, thunderstorm, darkness, angel –  
it sighs to be named, lowers its eyes in sadness,  
silent with a certain regret  
at being parted from the name it shares

and even when we say that name –  
say it quietly, listening as we breathe,  
call it some name like God, or poet –  
even then it sighs a little  
like a child knowing its first fear

yet shining with forgiveness  
like a tree, like an angel, like a feather.

Michael Shepherd

## 0135an Informal Note To God

In case you were on holiday, this nice sunny weather,  
(and may I say, what a great idea the Sun is?)  
I thought I'd drop you a line to say, in case you missed it  
that our great President, the Bush  
who burns with virtue like an oil well yields,  
approves that 'Intelligent Design' should be made  
along with the Theory of Evolution  
a cornerstone of the education of our great nation.

So just in case you felt a little reduced in function  
and come back from holiday to  
'Oh, were you away? We hadn't missed you...'  
and your new official status, that you were simply around  
(around? hmmm) to 'flick the switch'  
while two something-or-others got together  
to evolve a Creation with its quaint old ideas, like love,  
(and by the way, your bright idea  
of one, two and three, etc., was cute, too...)

I'd just like to take this opportunity to say  
that in your modest role of  
Intelligent Design  
you certainly flicked the switch on  
a pretty spectacular show - including those laws  
which, understood by some quite impressive intelligences,  
enabled the rather smaller, but impressive  
'intelligent design' of the space-shuttle  
to.. er.. 'evolve'.. and  
to fly a fraction, Icarus-like,  
nearer the sun...yep, some show...

So 'intelligent design' would be, like,  
from those two proto-thingies that happened to  
to meet across a room crowded with...emptiness? or everything? -  
to whatever intelligent design might be needed  
from Now, and every new 'invention' in the world  
until...well... Then...

That seems something even better than Evolution

and a bit similar to Providence and  
well, sort of.. eternal...? And universal too...

So if You are still enjoying your seventh day of rest  
this pleasant sunny weather (somewhere  
ecologically balanced, like the seaside, may I hope?) ,

thanks.

Michael Shepherd

## 0136 Agitation In Hundred-Acre Wood

'CR..' said Pooh, holding his paw tight round CR's hand as he did when he had a Disturbing Thought, 'how do you pronounce St? '

The Animals were agitated. It was like a day in March when the wind blew leaves and things to finish up where they shouldn't be. Some tourist had thrown aside an academic paperback with an essay on 'The Divine Symbolism of Dante and Hundred-Acre Wood' by someone called Po... (the page was torn just there) .

'St, Pooh? That's not a real word...'

'It says I'm really St Peter, CR, and you're Jesus Christ and Eeyore's St Thomas... CR, who's Jesus Christ? '

'Oh that's a swear-word that grown-ups use, but it must be a silly book, 'cos I'm not allowed to say it anyway... Silly old Pooh' said CR fondly.

'Oh that's all right then. I thought I might be someone else and not know it', said Pooh. He relaxed his grip on CR's hand, and the boy and his bear walked happily together down the path towards the Poohsticks Bridge, the occasional twig cracking under their feet, like they do after a mad March wind has put them in the wrong place...

Michael Shepherd

## 0137 Afternoon Love At The Lawyer's Chambers

I kissed her therein, wheresoever;  
hereinunder she cried 'Furthermore...! ;  
we conjointly set down notwithstanding,  
ensconced thereupon heretofore.

Michael Shepherd

# 0137 Around Botticelli's Primavera - For E E Cummings

so the blue-with-cold wind came from  
onto the country-awkward girl who spoke florally with  
stepping easter-dressed towards  
while Cupid aimed an arrow without  
and hit Chastity of course since  
while Apollo reached with his wand for  
and the clouds revealed  
while the golden apples waited with  
and all the while Love for  
in the centre of the merry-go-round when  
all lovers love to  
looking modestly not mary-blue as if  
extended a toe delicately in a dance describing how  
the blue-with-cold wind came from  
Michael Shepherd

## 0140 André Agassi

Over the years, his business-like humility -  
as if he's here to serve our sheer delight -  
his human sweetness - rarely so visible  
in the male of the species - and  
that inner beauty that seems  
to shine through human eyes -  
they've just grown, so that  
just seeing him makes me -  
makes you? -  
feel good about being human

and an artistic note: over the years,  
especially with his pate so shaved,  
his head is like a sculpture in itself -  
more and more like some informal  
Egyptian, Persian, work in baked and coloured clay  
gazing over the centuries  
as if to say  
come win, come lose,  
here is a man

Michael Shepherd

## 0142 Buttering Bread

Yesterday

I was buttering bread for sandwiches  
when I saw myself doing this  
as I must have watched you all those years ago,  
and forgotten ever since 'til now -  
the butter firmly spread right to the edges of the crust,  
pressed into the yielding bread,  
and then the surplus gently scraped off on the knife

with all the careful but not mean economy  
of a family which after your father's lungs  
gave in to the cotton dust of the mill  
where he worked so proudly for John Bright  
the reformer (and there's a thought)  
and your mother opened the front door of your home,  
whose street-front window now became  
a front-room shop for home-made cakes  
so that the neighbours' help was charity with dignity and fair exchange;  
the butter for the scones  
you made before you left for morning school  
came from out of a wooden tub  
from the 'Italian warehouseman' or  
the very first Co-op, down in Toad Lane...

Whether the tears poised at the corners of the eyes  
were of sadness or of gratitude  
for this so unexpected memory of the living dead  
I couldn't say. But now,  
gratitude. And, and, beauty.

Michael Shepherd



## 0143 Coming To A Retirement Home Near You...

Stop me if...

The story is,  
The Queen visited our local  
Old Folks' Home (well, it's called The Senior Enclave now...)  
and walking along the wheelchair line, drawn up  
like some parking lot along the promenade  
but without the view  
stopped at one old dear who looked  
as if she hadn't quite got the point of this unwelcome  
change to routine, and said  
(in case the old darling regretted later  
she'd missed the great occasion)

'Do you know who I am? '

'No dear - but ask the nurse,  
she'll tell you...'

Michael Shepherd

## 0144 Clickety

Clickety.

The old-fashioned slide machine you thought that  
you'd abandoned long ago  
suddenly goes clickety out of nowhere, and throws up  
an image you didn't particularly want  
to remember. And you wonder why  
it's still there, and why now, and why then?

I was cast as the visiting celeb in Midsville, when  
all I wanted was to drink it all in  
without being anything except  
a privileged observer, fly on the wall, tourist with a visa. No dice. So  
I had to do the things that go with a paid ticket which  
they don't tell you with the invite -  
I had to meet the local press and TV. That was  
part of the deal. I felt that  
the egos, maybe even careers of others  
depended on my unscripted performance. Who was  
this stranger in the town? Who was I, for that matter?  
What part was I to play? Uncomfortable.

Was it a small town in big America,  
or a big town in small America,  
big-town aspirations in small-town minds?  
Money lurked behind culture;  
oil wells jiggled in rural fields;  
that was uncomfortable in itself;  
I was sponsored; that seemed to be significant;  
I felt I'd left one class structure for another,  
the same differences, a different sameness.

We lunched at the local exec's club, I guess:  
black professional staff crisp in white,  
well-scrubbed smart white students  
also in black and white. Silver service, impeccable;  
aspiration I'd not met before in my previous laid-back world.

Then I saw her - the press.

I'd never considered the phrase, 'bandbox-fresh' - but  
she could have walked straight onto the set  
of Meet Me in St Louis, and her make-up girl  
and costume designer would have been looking on proudly;  
I guess she wrote the social column.  
She interviewed me. I doubt it got printed. I had the feeling  
that whatever she was looking for, I didn't have it. But what was it?  
All I wanted was to love America. Just that.

Other people's everyday lives; my American Moment.  
A frozen slide in the forgotten film of life; and  
I'm none the wiser.

Clickety.

Michael Shepherd

## 0145 Chinese Landscape

The old pine tree  
leans out from the rocks  
over the still lake  
with respect  
though no-one guesses this

once a month  
the pine tree is silhouetted  
against the rising moon  
though no-one knows this

its roots drink gratefully  
from the generous water  
though no-one sees this

its branches murmur to  
the lapping lake-water as old friends  
though no-one hears this

except you and I and the artist -

nature

Michael Shepherd

## 0146 Contemplation's Metaphysical

The height and depth and length and breadth of God -  
that's what is promised to contemplatives:  
and God, the sphere whose centre's everywhere  
and whose circumference is nowhere found:

geometry without coordinates  
and integral beyond all integers,  
description of the indescribable -  
can this reveal the measure of godliness?

God's height: the soul, which knows but upward flight;  
God's depth: the depthless deep of human heart;  
God's breadth: the mind with limits beyond sight;  
God's length: how long He'll wait, while we're apart;

this does but limn the sphere which yet awaits  
the soul and heart and mind which contemplates.

Michael Shepherd

## 0147 Do Only Poets Know...?

Do only poets know  
how every word is born,  
comes winging from eternity,  
to be tasted, savoured on the tongue  
and then returned  
with love, humility and gratitude  
and that huge thing, the human heart;  
and just a modest hope  
that others will accept this thought, this offering?

Do only poets know?

I hope not.  
Otherwise, what's the point?

Michael Shepherd

## 0148 Dear Jenny Joseph...

Dear Jenny Joseph,

How are you getting along these days?  
Now that you've hit our 'top poems' list?  
I'll bet that, as a National Treasure  
you're asked to give readings  
at a minimal fee  
with the request  
'please wear a red hat and a purple cloak -  
our members would like it...' aw shurrup...

I'm contemplating a parallel  
to raise the status of old men  
God knows we need it...

Where shall I start?  
I guess the secret is  
it's fun confounding expectations,  
so, first on the list,  
anything that labels you British - out!  
(then we can start again from scratch) :

out with the stiff upper lip -  
weep in public - preferably a full rush-hour commuter train  
from Surrey or Gloucestershire  
or Berkshire would do;  
and watch the men freeze  
into emotional ineptitude;

Get on a jam-packed tube train  
around the evening rush hour, when they think they're tired,  
those poor 20-year-olds who clubbed all night on E  
and say very loud  
'Which of you young people is going to give up your seat to me?  
(And if there's no move  
and everyone hides behind their papers or suddenly closed eyes,  
repeat the question louder and louder  
until even the kind-hearted of your own age  
hate you...) :

When the train stops in a tunnel  
and everyone goes quiet,  
whistle out of tune one that everyone knows;

And don't forget that  
garlic and an open mouth  
can gain you valuable personal space.

Open doors for all ladies, and especially those  
wearing pierced noses and lips and eyebrows, tattoos,  
SM gear and/or short haircuts  
and when they walk past without a glance  
say 'Thank you...?' very loudly;

Walk round the snootiest 'boutiques'  
and the more the assistants bridle,  
stand near you  
or raise their eyebrows at their fellow assistants  
the longer you hang around, natch,  
and when you say 'Just looking...'  
look them in the eye  
like Clint Eastwood who just hit town;

At formal weddings,  
when it gets to the butt-clenching 'just cause...?' bit  
clear your throat loudly  
as if about to speak...  
it will give the dry cleaners  
extra work.

Talk to all children with their parents  
especially those whose parents quickly pull them away;  
feel free to embrace all and especially sundry;  
just check you have the address of your Citizen's Advice Bureau  
for free legal representation;

Talk to Friends of Friends whom  
you're meeting for the first time  
as if you know them well;  
it's amazing how many 'friends'



you can cross off that way;

Cold callers

who introduce themselves  
with their Christian name  
(even though Hindus calling from India..)  
and are pushy (be kind to the others...)  
- pretend you know them  
and discuss some past  
scandalous relationship with them,  
then accuse them of misleading you;

Be natural - but very very publicly so;  
in Victorian times, you could pee in the road  
on please, only on the offside of horses;  
so don't choose motorways  
(though the central reservation is OK - I mean, who's going to stop  
to be offended in the fast lane, or ring the police on the mobile while driving?)

and if anyone objects to your peeing in the gutter  
that's what gutters used to be for  
and who asked them to look anyway?

Clothes-wise, it's up to you -  
though of course if 'dress-code..' is requested, well, that's obviously  
inviting trouble - do they want to see you in person,  
or what you bought or hired?  
Or are they wanting free film extras  
in the home movies of ego?

Oxfam permitting,  
wear the clothes that 15-year-olds do -  
that really pisses them off.

If people dropp a word  
about your undone zip in public  
and they're polite about it  
thank them with a smile  
perhaps explaining the circumstances  
in friendly fashion;  
but if they comment disapprovingly

threaten  
further measures.

Sitting on the pavement, that sort of thing -  
well, that's personal; if you enjoy it, do it...

Above all - Embarrass Your Children. Mortally.  
' D-a-a-d....! '

(This Poem is an Expanding Poem -  
there's more cringe-making stuff to come just here...  
as Rusty says, that's what parents are for...)

Doesn't sound very exciting, you may be thinking?  
OK, just try one of these, and see if  
you can't cut the atmosphere with a knife.  
-That's not yet court evidence, but it could be,  
in a nanny state - 'The witness observed  
that you could cut the atmosphere with a knife, m'lud...'

But I'm very open to suggestions  
from others, to make this  
second childhood  
even better than the first, OK?

And Jenny, by the way, are you married?  
It could be fun...

Michael Shepherd

## 0149 Donald Rumsfeld Meets Descartes

which is why the Greeks  
trudged off to Delphi  
to find out  
if 'Know Thyself'  
was consumer-friendly or  
as sore-footed a path  
as Oedipus trod

and if you think this  
doesn't concern you personally  
let me ask you about a 'known'  
that you know, but don't know  
that you know  
- or have forgotten...

that moment in childhood  
that we've forgotten that we remember  
when just for a moment, time stood still  
and we knew we knew something  
with absolute certainty  
but didn't know what it was, that  
we knew...

you remember?

Michael Shepherd

# 0151 Donald Rumsfeldt's Guide To Love

As we know  
(or like to think we do)

There are known knowns  
(we all need more love)

There are things we know we know  
(we're not getting enough of it)

We also know  
(like I know I love you)

There are known unknowns  
(but will it last?)

That is to say  
(according to me, anyway)

There are some things  
(especially about love)

we do not know  
(is there someone better around the corner?)

But there are also unknown unknowns  
(scary but exciting – flip those sex-tech tomes)

The ones we don't know  
(and hey, who cares?)

we don't know  
(and, will we love it when it comes?)

Michael Shepherd

## 0152 Ecology Needs A Fine Balance

An active eco-warrior he;  
he loved all trees and frogs;  
that's why, before he drowned, he upped  
and shot the legs off dogs.

Michael Shepherd

## 0153 Eine Kleine Morgenmusik

Dawn entered on time. The warning flash  
of lightning like a conductor's upraised baton  
demanding thunder's drumroll  
echoing round the mountains. Salzburg  
was never so musical. In his garden  
a pulsatilla flinched with joy. Beneath  
his fast pen, music wrote itself. In this house,  
the waterpipes made music with the cistern,  
doors made harmony with window catches; wet shoes  
with wooden chairs scraped back. Mathematics  
scrawled on walls sang number.  
Piano lessons were from youth to age,  
no need of cane for errant fingers. Yet  
too many masters still to come; for him  
never a false chord save in life.

Michael Shepherd

## 0155 Dreams, Dreams, Dreams...

The phone's just rung: 'Hi this is Rosie  
you've been selected for a five-day  
luxury cruise to the Bahamas'...

dreams, dreams, dreams

one of the few things all religions, all philosophies  
are agreed on: it's the state  
between waking and sleeping.  
beyond that, they're rather coy.

for Freudians, precious clues;  
for Jungians, universal archetypes;  
for other theorists, just  
a mental and emotional shit, conveniently  
achieved without a convenience

but for religion and philosophy, pretty much  
a keep-off territory: maybe there's a church somewhere  
where they sway and sing  
ah'm dreamin' YOU sweet Jeeezuzz  
and if so, does it work?

and we seem to have such individual dreams:  
mine are such a bore, forever  
missing that last train; the more I walk  
the further home's away...

whereas a friend who lived through the Nazi occupation,  
beloved, inventive grandfather,  
actor, writer, director, teacher,  
dreams without cease of killings, murders –  
surely he deserves better of his dreams?

another friend claims he never dreams;  
this annoys me intensely for some un worthy reason:  
but how can I prove him wrong?

maybe it's the last frontier for

the good starship Commercial Enterprise:  
'Dream yourself to all you ever wished  
in ten easy lessons: send  
a stamped, self-addressed rainbow  
to Somewhere Over Inc....'

do we really have to leave it to Hollywood?  
must all our dreams these days be violent daydreams,  
regardless of expense? or do we need that violence  
to wake up to a loving kiss; to love life's pastel shades;  
to smell the roses round the door?

Michael Shepherd



# 0156 Edward Estlin Coming(S)

[Back](#)

loved her  
every green garden

loved the amazing

and the how  
of the grow

in her  
every green garden

Michael Shepherd

# 0157face Beyond Face

Sometimes a moment of the highest grace -  
which comes as unannounced as does our sleep -  
allows our vision, resting on some face,  
from the familiar, pass to unknown deep:

and there, beyond the contours made by thought  
is shown to us a finer, nobler brow;  
magnificent, heroic, wise; yet not -  
and this so moving - far from whom we know;

this wonder makes me humble; questioning  
what duty might this vision lay on me,  
who's seen that self in self's own fashioning:  
am I to act, or simply let it be?

But this is certain: all man's self-respect  
be known, should self in others so reflect.

Michael Shepherd

## 0158 For Fjr; Here's To Poetry

This is the illicit still of poetry  
half hidden in the dry ditch beyond the hedge  
firewater drunk from an old tin mug  
it takes the skin off your throat  
and drops it into your glowing stomach

and you don't ask but maybe  
wild crab-apples, turnips,  
a handful of stolen barley, an old boot,  
perhaps an incautious rat  
who drowned in the middle of  
drinking a wild dream  
such as rat never had before

this the raw stuff  
untaxed by rules  
out here in the unfenced fields  
not much spelling, punctuation,  
vocabulary, grammar,  
metre, euphony; if Emily  
had been a prizefighter  
she'd have breathed like this

but drunk, frozen breath steaming in the night air  
seated on an old apple box  
the stars never were so bright  
the heart so near

Michael Shepherd

# 0159 For Jerry Hughes

Who can doubt that  
the heart is greater than the body,  
Jerry?

Michael Shepherd

## 0160 Happy Poem For Danny

'Everything that lives  
is full of the Lord'

observed Eeyore,  
his mouth full

of thistles

Michael Shepherd

## 0161 Heaven: Thoughts From 1350 Ad/Ce

Heaven is not a place; it is a state;  
not in the clouds, nor here on earth beneath;  
heaven's not in front, behind, nor left nor right -  
and yet, in love it comprehends all these.

God is not found by silence, nor by speech;  
not found by fasting, nor by finest food;  
not by seclusion, nor by company -  
and yet, within all these, and all around.

There's nowhere, thus, to go; for all is here;  
and nought to do but, present, here to rest;  
and resting, wish and will and love God dear  
with full intent; no other interest.

All's within the heart, so vast, so great -  
for heaven's not a place; it is a state.

Michael Shepherd

## 0162 Greatness

How great is greatness? asks my questing soul:  
scouting behind that quest, eternity;  
that dark which, studied, lights the dazzling whole  
and brings to finite thought, infinity;

as when great singers sing, all hearts can sing;  
great dancers give us sense that all can dance;  
great actors speak for all of us; we think  
to know all painted greatness at one glance:

we know already, greatness' unfenced whole,  
we know that boundless place, the human heart;  
Creation is no secret to our soul;  
all being sings its song in every part.

How glorious those sages who can see  
in everything that lives, totality!

Michael Shepherd

## 0163 Gratitude

It's a curious time of year -  
one day warm and sunny, mild,  
the next cold and rainy;  
one night frosty, the next night mild;

a pointed reminder that we're about to be  
overwhelmed by an abundance of beauty  
which we call summer, and which -  
can we pretend we've earned?

a little hesitancy on Nature's part,  
a little touch of hope deferred  
does wonders for the grateful heart.

Michael Shepherd



## 0164in Mind

It's only now, only now, that I remember, that I can see,  
how you made your presence felt so often;  
so long unlooked for, seeing only absence, never believing presence;

for in the subtlety of your wisdom, the wisdom of your subtlety,  
you leave reminders of that presence in that secret place  
where it's as safe as childhood happiness  
forgotten, then remembered...

for you speak a closer language to a child,  
closer than the growing child comes to believe.  
When was the first time - now I can remember who you are,  
when you first spoke to me?

Wasn't it that day when I could toddle unsteadily  
but with wide open eyes, where the lion's head  
poured water from its mouth into the basin?  
and in the paving of the bricks - which anyone could see -  
you left me that private, secret message,  
knowing that I'd not notice, (so I'd not forget) ,  
until one day it swam out of memory?

For this is your so secret, open generosity: you leave every one of us  
this secret message: that moment when we knew  
that we knew something certain - and yet,  
did not know what that something was?

And then, that time after a year or two - a lifetime for a child -  
when you announced your presence by your so painful absence,  
and I made that solemn decision for a four-year-old,  
never to trust a grown-up ever again; not because  
of being a helpless child - but because there was that in me  
which knew when you were there, and when you weren't?

Then you left so many messages I did not need to heed  
-or so it seemed, because they were so obvious -  
and only in your absence was your presence felt:  
the day after a gale, the ozone of the beach, the sea  
now brown but calming, seaweed salty on the stones;

the field of flowers and dewdrops –the moths in ecstasy;  
and in that silent glade of woodland, as if you had made that space  
between the trees, to leave a message loud and clear: that  
you live in space, so visibly invisible...

then later, on the tennis court, green grass just newly cut,  
that exhilarating smell; lime-white lines just newly marked;  
and when the ball hit the centre of the racquet, just so,  
I missed your message, in the will to win...

And then, grown up: how are we to know – until we know –  
your messages left all around, in so many places, all so different?

When, like the unicorn, we know we'll never see you,  
yet know we know that in our minds, you live?

That single horn upon its clear-eyed brow,  
that dips in recognition of innocence,  
how could we miss your message, so gently elegant,  
one-pointed image of yourself, in mind?

Michael Shepherd

## 0165 Ironing

On the top unlooked-at shelf  
of the cupboard rarely opened  
there it was.

A tidy, self-effacing, neat and ordered pile  
of mother's ironing  
- after how many years? -  
of those seldom used, worn almost to holes, frayed,  
white things, for the house and family:  
their worn yet serviceable hems and stitching  
ironed with a jeweller's perfection...

and suddenly the living and the dead  
were intimate and closer than any sought or unsought sentiment,  
and I was a child again  
silently watching,  
taking in without commentary  
as children do,  
yet in every fine detail,  
a mother's love;  
a love simply watched, observed;  
not, for a change, demanded  
or expected  
as a matter of course:

the iron nosing with supreme care  
across the smell of hot and just-wet cotton  
with a little, smooth, smooth swish,  
over the warm bed of cloth and blanket,  
taken from their special drawer;  
the hand and elbow moving with a dancer's grace.

and I knew then,  
in the nose, the nub, of that just-rightly-heavy iron,  
the whole love of a woman and her life -  
repetition and care, duty, love unspoken -  
all the emotions raised by family  
who'd never dream of thanking Mum  
for the ironing...

'Where's my special shirt? ....M-u-mm....? '

No wonder that so many women hate  
this incessant, unthanked act  
of holy communion.

And I reflected:

every child should have the chance to watch  
without commenting - as children do -  
but seeing what they will remember all their life,  
in every fine detail,  
some to imitate it and remember;

some to find it after years,  
on the shelf unsought  
within the cupboard seldom opened,  
(in the rose-garden, beyond time,  
and time past is time present; and the time is always now...)

this act, this ritual  
of purest love.

Michael Shepherd

# 0166 January Sunlight

January  
and the afternoon sunlight  
lasted that little bit longer  
like an unexpected, perfect Christmas present  
that got delayed in the mail  
and I'm filled with a sheer gratitude  
that somehow passed me by  
in long, hot, lazy, selfish, glorious  
summer

Michael Shepherd

## 0167 Just Beyond The Angel's Reach

I don't know much about what I'm writing  
except that I'm writing;  
I don't know much about what I've written either,  
except what I read;  
I don't know much about what I'm going to write  
except what I hope;

but I do know a little about where I'm writing:  
it's there, in those paintings of The Annunciation,  
between where the angel's outstretched hand with lily,  
and sometimes open, sometimes closed, but silent mouth  
and Mary's crossed, clasped hands, her body  
curved in obedience and humility;  
eyes downcast; so be it unto her; there

just beyond the angel's reach,  
just in front of mankind's hope,  
where nothing and everything is happening,  
and your eye runs out to the distant horizon  
only to focus on infinity;

that's where I'm waiting.  
that's where I'm writing.

Michael Shepherd

# 0168letter To A Troubled Youngster

you come from a family that –  
well, I've known better and,  
I've certainly known worse..  
but all you want right now  
is to get right away from them,  
live your own life, make  
your own mistakes.. and  
half of you is looking forward to  
doing just that, and  
half of you's not sure..  
OK so far? I'm trying to be fair...

now here are some sketches of  
what life may hold:

there's the random, no-plan plan –  
life happens; no plan, no control;

or there's the existentialist view:  
I make my own life, I'm in control,  
and then I live it; that's it,  
I'm strong.

or there's the Indian view:  
that in some timeless way  
which may be, how you played it  
in a previous life; or right now, as outside time;  
you've set yourself this scenario which  
you've got another chance, now,  
to improve, resolve, in order to..  
live fully? be your own real self?  
be happy? help the world? ..  
fill this one in yourself

or there's the view that God,  
the gods, the Fates (fill this one in, too  
or leave it blank for later) , anyway  
Someone Up There or  
Someone In Here

has – as the Stoics believed –  
set your life as a series of  
lessons to be learned. The right answers  
that you may or may not have got right  
may or may not be at the back of the book  
but with a bit of luck, you'll have a pretty clear idea  
with this in mind, of how it's going

But whichever, the great thing is –  
treat all the hurdles as  
challenges to overcome; even,  
if you're that strong, look forward every day  
to what may happen; and when it does,  
be glad, whether it seems 'good' or 'bad',  
give it your full and glad acceptance, 'cos  
that's how it's going to be, anyways..and  
you may learn more that way

and have a lot of fun in the sense  
of freedom, that this view will, shall, bring

and sorry if all this is trite.. it's the best that  
I can do; have sometimes done;  
and no, I haven't always followed  
my own advice..

so enjoy, and good luck.. for, who knows,  
it may not be just luck

Michael Shepherd



## 0169 Lines In The Sand

Is there a greater privilege  
than to breathe sea air? And here, it's like  
a front seat at the greatest  
open-air theatre in the world:

I'm sat here on my coat upon the rock  
which reappears each time the tide recedes  
leaving the sand so smooth as if  
the sea were demonstrating beautifully  
the relation between its ferocity and power,  
and innocence, perhaps forgiveness; there's  
a little runnel of water around the rock  
where I sit, notebook and pencil, just as if  
this must be the very centre of poetry  
in the world;

the notebook blank  
as I watch the long-haired dog  
taking its master for a walk; its poem  
is the ballet it makes, leaping, racing, panting,  
looking back, leaving its long hair  
patterning the sky a fraction after  
every leap; does it know  
the ballet is entitled, joy? If I say,  
poetry in motion, will you read it  
as if you never heard the phrase before?  
Racing towards me now, hurling reckless limbs,  
one sniff at me, but then there's something else  
more interesting here in the sand to paw.

Some long intoxicating sea-breath minutes now, of mind's content  
to be and just to be; the page stays like the sand,  
innocent, as white as salt and white as surf;  
and I, the silent poem that nature has just written.

Michael Shepherd

## 0170 Love

Hopes die;  
dreams fall;  
and, subtlest stroke of all,  
love sharply, cruelly, hides her face,  
lives lost within the mind a space;

until one day in presence new,  
love - whose love was ever true -  
leaves the cold, hard, hungry heart  
and plays love's everlasting part;  
and once again, the wiser we...  
are wild and bold again  
and fools again;  
so, love

Michael Shepherd

## 0172 Love's Nosegay

Celandine, saxifrage,  
buttercup, needle whin,  
tormentil, vetchling,  
agrimony, cinquefoil,  
nipplewort, hawkbit,  
ragwort, groundsel,  
biting stonecrop, yellow bedstraw,  
crosswort, comfrey,  
bog asphodel,  
tansy, sneezewort,  
crowfoot, scurvy grass,  
mouse-eared chickweed,  
stitchwort, goutweed,  
water dropwort, cuckoopint,  
bryony, goosegrass,  
ramsons, mayweed,  
pennywort, wintergreen,  
grass of parnassus, burdock,  
figwort, lady's mantle,  
heartsease, cinquefoil,  
scabious, loosestrife,  
plume thistle, knapweed,  
bugle, fumitory,  
ragged robin, saintfoil,  
dove's- foot crane's-bill,  
lousewort, rattle,  
corn cockle, willow herb,  
cross-leaved pink heath,  
blue bottle, vetch,  
milkwort, harebell,  
wild succory, speedwell,  
viper's bugloss, alkanet...

there's poetry in wildflowers  
and rightly so.

Michael Shepherd

## 0173 Memory's Fast Rewind

Sometimes memory  
runs back like an instant fast rewind  
like it's said to do at death  
and hits you wham between the eyes  
with your own life

today – what, November 19 – I was  
chilling out in the pub  
again  
relaxing into life  
and there, framed in the window was  
a lady (as she was today) crossing the road  
dressed, this cool-cold day, in black tights and  
a woollen two-piece suit in Christmas red, and  
the red...  
took me back so many years  
that I didn't know whether to be grateful  
for the glimpse, or  
regret the fast grey years between...

it must have been when I was two and a half  
and for the first time in my life  
my parents sought a hint  
(first time in their lives too)  
about The Big One for my Christmas –  
walked oh so casually with me through  
the glittering store as if for  
no-one, everyone, anyone  
but me ... and there it was –  
the pedal car in gleaming, buy-me red  
with all the details I still can't bear to describe  
enamelled like a glimpse of paradise

and sure enough, come Christmas Day  
there it was – except –  
(I punctuate like Emily D when out of breath...)  
in blue

how can a child be adult enough to be

grateful for a second-best? And how  
can parents be a child again and know?

I had forgotten until now how the seasons had their colours –  
pink Valentines almost merging into complex mauve in  
Easter cards, and icing, marzipan, and yellow chicks, summer days  
needing no coloured herald but the sun  
then autumn colours ambivalent  
with the apprehension of new classes, and  
new threats...

and all this time, at just this time of year  
Christmas red shouts loud its herald's trumpet  
of paradise; promised; lost;  
perhaps, regained

Michael Shepherd

## 0175 Love's Butterfly

As butterflies with beauty grace the air,  
so love cannot be lazy in its love;  
true love brings lovely energies to bear;  
love's actions grace the true contemplative.

devoted action is the path we tread  
when stirred at first by love of love's first cause;  
to purge our souls of that we wish us rid;  
such tasks may grace our caterpillar days.

humility - which is to know pure self,  
seen clearly as the light of bad and good -  
brings contemplation's share in godly wealth;  
those shining works which are love's neighbourhood;

then we God's goodness, truth and beauty share;  
as butterflies with beauty grace the air.

Michael Shepherd

## 0176 Letter To A Well-Known Contemporary Poet

I wanted to write to you about your poems,  
that is, about something I couldn't quite put my finger on  
so I didn't write in case it sounded inconsequential  
and it's silly to write to a poet who handles words so expertly,  
inconsequentially..

Inconsequential. That's it. I appreciate that you want to stress  
life's inconsequentiality - this happens, that happens, but  
we're none the wiser - that's a modern concern, I appreciate,  
no neat wrapping life up with a brisk end-rhyme...

but how can I put this tactfully, inconsequentiality  
or is it tangentiality  
can seem to the reader eager to extract meaning  
that is, the poet's meaning, as near as can be...  
inconsequentiality can seem...obscure...  
for this very reason, since it's difficult  
to share the same inconsequentiality  
if you see what I mean

and this unintentional obscurity  
can sometimes seem  
of course I know you wouldn't  
but let's say to an uninformed superficial reader -  
like pretension?

I hope you don't mind my mentioning this  
it's only because I do admire your writing so much  
and I know that the prizes and awards you've won  
proves that no-one could possibly accuse you of pretension  
it's just that I thought I should say how it seems  
to a very ordinary reader. I hope you will read this  
in the spirit it's meant. And I do look forward  
very much to reading your next book  
now the library stocks them.

Michael Shepherd

## 0177 Merde!

It's the word you hear  
when anti-French views are aired -  
MERDE!

when their secret liaisons have been publicly bared -  
MERDE!

when they lose a lover for whom they deeply cared -  
MERDE!

when a planned seduction hasn't fared -  
MERDE!

when a promising mistress is running scared -  
MERDE!

when by censorship their free speech is impaired -  
MERDE!

Le ci-dessus  
c'est pour vous  
Marc (Ronberge) ..

Michael Shepherd



## 0178 Mother And Son

I'd known her all my life,  
nursed her for seven years  
night and day

yet when last night I lay down to sleep  
I heard myself say  
as if to someone else,

what a splendid lady,  
I wish I'd known her better

Michael Shepherd

## 0179 My Parents

'We begin by loving our parents; '  
said er,  
'later, we hate them;  
rarely if ever do we  
forgive them...'

I'd like to live long enough  
to forgive them;  
then,  
go somewhere where  
I can tell them I love them,  
always did, always shall.

Michael Shepherd

## 0180 Let Sleeping Dogs Lie

At the far edge of the expanding cemetery  
in its uncertain spiritual limbo,  
its small gravestones re-emerge only in late summer  
like a clipped coat, the tall grass annually machined; of  
those who made no will or testament  
that we know of and we may be wrong  
nor do we know their last thoughts if thoughts  
nor do the stones reveal the names they knew themselves by; and  
was the human love their inscriptions indicate  
less or greater than that evoked  
by their own kind? What sort of peace  
do they rest in?

It's not the most imaginative corner  
to have chosen. There's a perfect place  
by the 16th tee of the golf course,  
high on the hill, facing west,  
riddled with a rabbit warren  
where on a summer evening  
more rabbits than you'd guess, of every size  
bob around and sun themselves  
and seem to feel so safe that they ignore  
the humans, dogless at that hour,

an elysian field where dogs might dream and twitch  
for eternity; repent, or lie down in peace with brer rabbit,  
their natures everlastingly fulfilled;  
where in the summer evening sun,  
facing the glowing sky and gold-tipped clouds  
cottontails and men might sit, philosophise and speculate  
together, about the little that the species know  
of each other's knowledge.

Michael Shepherd

## 0181 Mr And Mrs Andrews Seated In Their Estate

Beware, if you're a portrait painter,  
of being born in England. And if  
you're skilled at background –  
the rolling landscape which they're  
so proud to own – or painting highlights  
upon a silk or satin gown...be doubly hesitant –  
we ruined Holbein and we ruined Van Dyck,  
with our demands to make us victorious,  
happy and glorious, long to reign over others  
in our stately home, later in  
the auction house, in  
the 'collection' of the recent millionaire, in  
the public gallery; though while you live, Sir Portrait Painter  
we'll enrol you in our club as temporary gent...

Beware - if you're a potential patron -  
of being painted by the great:  
in the corners of their flattery  
whose price you resent but need in greed to have,  
lurks truth. You, sir, looking so judicious,  
why are your lips so meanly pressed?  
You, young man, aspiring to a lordly rank,  
why are your eyes already lined  
with wenching, gaming, debt?

Beware - if you're an 'art critic' or a lecturer -  
of your so ready, easy, redbrick politics  
which masquerade as 'context' – for  
there may be traps..

'Here, ladies and gentlemen – would you  
stand back a little so that everyone can see? –  
are Mr Robert Andrews of Sudbury, Suffolk, and  
his wife Frances, painted by that  
enchancing painter Thomas Gainsborough  
around 1748 to 1749... they chose  
the right man for the job: here are the rolling miles  
of this royal throne of kings, this  
sceptred island, this jewel set

in a silver sea, this earth, this realm, this –  
England – which they have the impertinence  
of the nouveau riche to think they own – note,  
in contrast to Gainsborough's customary lovely touch,  
how awkwardly they pose – is this the  
first black cloud that presages the fall  
of ancien regimes? The first comment  
on social class in England's much-delayed  
Enlightenment? The socialist critic Peter Berger  
says of this revealing document in paint...'  
etc.

Alas for theory  
about this awkward pair: the painting's raw  
because it's not quite finished and now  
over-cleaned, no mellowing brownish final varnish;  
and notice the bedroom shadows under  
her eyes, above the prim finishing-school mouth  
that almost smiles: they've only married this very  
month: he's twenty-two, she's just sixteen.

and they have had their  
first lovers' tiff: should Gainsborough  
paint in the pheasant which her Bob's just shot,  
which is already outlined in her lap -  
and spoil her new, so sky-blue satin dress?

They haven't yet decided; Gainsborough's left  
the painting unfinished, while they kiss, make up, decide;  
he has another appointment booked.

How much more interesting than what we know  
is what, alas, we don't.

Michael Shepherd

# 0181 Ouch! You've Been Prioritised....

You quite like going to school,  
'cos your best friend's there  
and you hang out together;  
then this morning, they're with  
their new best friend..

don't take it personally,  
you've been prioritised

You like your job,  
you're doing good work,  
and the boss knows it,  
gives you the special jobs;  
then this week someone else  
is in the boss's good books  
and due for promotion..

don't take it personally,  
you've been prioritised

You have the happiest,  
most secure relationship  
you could ever have hoped for;  
then as you dance in your elegant outfit  
cheek to cheek, your partner  
looks over your shoulder, and  
looks... and looks again...

don't take it personally,  
you've been prioritised

and you wonder  
what angels find to talk about?

Michael Shepherd

## 0182 Parents (2)

OK, you don't have to believe this;  
but it's worth thinking about.

Here's the theory – it's as beautifully  
simple, and as subtle in its implications,  
as any mathematician would enjoy:

In the succession of our lives,  
leading by so many, many rebirths  
to our perfection, each life  
is shaped by our actions  
in the previous life

and, deep, deep in our soul -  
which wants only the best for us,  
while we live through what's laid down  
by our past – some sublime reasoning  
sets up the handicaps which we must  
transcend in our next life; that is, this one

rather as if a jockey or a show-jumper  
sets up the hedges, fences, walls, and water-jumps  
for themselves, so that they themselves  
may test themselves to ride a greater course,  
maybe a perfect round..

I'll cut the moral, here. It's all  
beyond acceptance, and personal forgiveness, though  
that's a start; just a lifetime of  
opportunities to 'make something of yourself'  
knowing in your heart that ultimately -  
that is, right now -  
it's for the good

so, for a nice friendly family start:  
you yourself chose your parents..

OK, you don't have to believe this;  
but it's worth thinking about?

Michael Shepherd



## 0183 Poem For Kay

Praise be to Him,  
our One Creator  
who built into Adam  
the Great Vibrator.

Michael Shepherd

## 0184 Poetry's Triumph

When that strange stirring to a poem comes -  
half-heard, half-formed, some seed deep in the mind -  
the heart lights up, so eager to explore  
the unknown path that listening may find:

obedience, awe, devotion, humbleness  
all rise to meet the offering of the word,  
and gently, like new father with his child,  
tend precious stranger granted to their care.

Then silence turns to music in the mind  
and all too solid words form, black and white;  
behind the magic of the manifest  
remains - less noonday, than unbroken night...

The poet's failure? No, his Muse's power -  
if readers hear that seed which spoke the flower.

Michael Shepherd

## 0185 Political Incorrectness

Sometimes a single misprinted word  
brings a daylong smile to my cynical face:  
as today, when the next month's political campaign  
was said 'to have cliched into place'.

Michael Shepherd

## 0186 Praise

'Whatever that you think you lack - give that! ' -  
this saying, heard, lodged in my mind a space;  
like seed that seems inert - yet, not inert;  
its hidden clock an instrument of grace;

the mind, that soil which meanwhile does not know:  
it neither knows what lies in its embrace,  
nor its own precious nutrients which grow  
that seed; nor knows the Sower; nor His grace -

until the day that in some Spring of light,  
I realised: I, meanly, denied - praise:  
the praise of human beings in my sight;  
and thus, the praise of that one source of praise.

so sought occasion, each and All to praise;  
now Praise, with golden hand, seeds all my days.

Michael Shepherd

## 0187: 1580 - Ish

Round 1580 - so some scholars write -  
the finest poets of England sought accord  
on what fine form of verse might most delight,  
and render fullest homage to our Lord.

They found iambics, in a five-foot line  
tuned best with English speech to native ears:  
more simple, steady, musical in mind  
than Racine's stately tread of French hexameters.

The thoughts sublime which these our poets teach  
-Sidney's sonnets, Shakespeare's poems and plays -  
enter our ears in childhood, shape our speech,  
and tune our hearts to hear, and speak, God's ways;

in still and silent rapture there to find  
the music of that other world: God's mind.

Michael Shepherd

## 0188 A Marvel To His Coy Mistress

me, the bow,  
you, the cello;  
me, mc squared;  
does it follow,

sexual activity  
relates to relativity?

my energy,  
your mass;  
can we equate  
such love,  
my lass?

Michael Shepherd

## 0189 A Maybe Tribute To E E Cummings

it was the sound of  
the daffodils  
growing  
that woke  
the ear of their ear

on the sun's birthday

and the lilacs of the scent  
said it's time to wake up  
so we can dream

and the amazing  
of the roses  
woke the eye of their eye

and the words tumbled out of bed  
and took an April shower  
and dressed by the wrong which was right

shook out the box  
of breakfast food called freedom  
and rush-houred street-wise see them  
words came tumbling

dogs they grinned with mastered feelings  
cats were caught off-guard washed  
to recover their dignity pretty girls felt prettier

as the words sang  
no-ones became someones  
anyones became everyones

nothing was as it was  
because was wasn't  
and isness filled the air

the words danced in the squares  
and smiles peopled

the words laughed through the graveyards  
dancing on dead minds

laughed through the brothels  
making tired whores to smile and  
schoolmasters ate their words  
in the eyes of their pupils

and the words shouted through the letterboxes  
of critics called nameless shameless blameless  
come out and play tomorrow with your  
yesterday

words played leapfrog round the toadstools  
with each's other  
hand in hand with strangers  
laughing till they cried  
crying till they laughed

all day it was all day  
and therefulness and thenfulness  
until the words had scattered  
hello among humanunkind

and forming perfectly irregular lines  
danced a song and sang a dance  
at sunfall dayset nightrise  
all happy tired like children  
into a farm  
called joy

Michael Shepherd



# 0190 A Novel Fairy Story For A Poetic Multi-Faith Giftmas

'Cinderella' (I'm using this pseudonym to protect her identity, now she's ex-hot, ex-famous) , while sweeping, dusting, fire-lighting, all that deprived childhood stuff - felt that she had more to offer; had not realised her full potential; so in a cheap exercise book, wrote her fictionalised life-story, suitably worked up, in her spare moments; even, when short of incident, setting up some neat situation with her ugly sisters etc.

thanks to her friend Buttons who was computer-literate, hence his name, ha, she self-published and, with a wand-wave from her Fairy Godmother by 'sheer chance' when her sisters had a famous critic and, unusually, discoverer of talent, to dine, hit the headlines – Booker Prize in an off-year, interviews, weary book tours of the US, life-style articles, all that, - a gift to journalists, rags to riches story – was courted through many photo-opportunities by ex-hot celebs in search of boosting their waning reflected glory... in short, Hit It Big. 'We always knew her talent' wrote her botoxed sisters...

until one day, her Fairy Godmother winging past late as usual and slightly tetchy with it, reckoned that Our Heroine had had her fifteen minutes and wondered what to do to slap her down; until she remembered that she'd fixed that too – Famous First Book Novelists

have to spend the following year  
while the rest of us are having fun out there,  
seeing their name fade from the headlines  
and the gossip columns and  
the stories planted by their PR  
and cutting down on the parties  
and those they do go to, they  
are only half-there as they watch  
for 'material', as a break from  
sitting at their desk while confidence  
dwindles into self-doubt  
and the critics sharpen up their talons, as Last Year's Winners  
scrape out that Second Novel..

and the Fairy Godmother (who  
doubles as the Wicked Witch, it's  
a divine joke) chuckled in a somewhat  
double-edged way, whilst checking  
the time and remembering that for fairies,  
arriving late increases the dramatic tension.

there's a moral here for poets too but  
to point it out would be  
uncool

Michael Shepherd

# 0192 Abundance

I am overwhelmed  
by the abundance  
in my poverty;  
the riches that I find  
in knowing that I own nothing

I am dazzled  
at the ugliness  
in my mind;  
seeing  
the beauty in my soul

I am humbled  
by the truth of my lies  
when I understand  
that to lie  
one must first know truth

I am radiant  
in the invisibility  
of goodness  
when I close my eyes  
to all else

(to Rilke)

Michael Shepherd

## 0192 Always There Is Wisdom

Always there are wizards.

They don't hide themselves.

That would be wrong for them.

They don't advertise themselves.

That would be wrong for them.

They wait.

That could be boring. Or painful, even.

But that's their job.

There may be one in the next street.

You need to look.

Then they meet you halfway.

They may look like anybody. Or nobody. Or everybody.

When you go to them, they may dress up in cloak and pointed hat.

That's just symbolic.

Just at the point of the hat, there's space.

That's what they'll tell you about.

That space is full.

Like your heart.

No one cares much about wizards.

Except those who seek them.

Wizards are wise.

But only if you ask them questions.

Then the answer comes out of space.

And lives in your heart.

Of course.

Michael Shepherd

## 0193 American Poetry

Pithy, precise,  
wry, wise,  
flinty, real,  
democratic,  
true

that's how it's  
been defined

you'll question that  
of course

as you should

I'll leave you to it

how powerful  
eight words  
can be

Michael Shepherd

## 0194 A Boy's Vision

The boy walks past the window;  
you can see he's  
got something clearly in his mind;  
walks firmly on both feet as if  
he walked on grass;  
his carriage upright,  
a half-smile on his face;  
his eyes are bright;  
he swings his hands from side to side  
in front of him.

He has a vision.

Ah yes.

His captain's just tossed the ball to him;  
it's his spell to bowl.

This is what he was born to do;  
he has the skills;  
he knows he can do it; can't wait; but  
no hurry, as he's confident,  
switching the ball from hand to hand,  
warming it with his love.

The boy walks past the window.  
He has a vision.

Michael Shepherd

# 0194 At Last

At last I'm old enough

old enough not to be  
embarrassed when  
it happens

it can be when  
some athlete stands  
and mouths the words of  
their national anthem  
as the flag waves

or a young musician  
makes their first, fresh  
debut playing some  
often played classic  
as if it had never  
been played before

or a cloud passes and  
the sunlight reaches into  
the room and says  
look at this crystal vase,  
look at this flower  
look at this dewdrop

or someone who was anyone  
a moment ago  
smiles

oh so many so little big things and  
my chest heaves, shudders,  
and my heart not my eyes  
is shaking with tears which  
cannot be explained but  
only recognised for  
whence they come  
beyond tears



at last I'm old enough  
not to be embarrassed  
by this joy  
though  
I make the excuse  
to go into another room  
in case

Michael Shepherd

## 0195 Autumn Gardener

Gathering rosebuds with my rake;  
the wooden tines scraping  
over the gravel path  
bringing a token of order  
to the autumn of a life;

rosebuds, nipped at the neck  
by frost; dead leaves  
curled like begging or covetous hands,  
coloured like rich memories, red, orange, brown,  
dry husks, spilt seed,  
now crisp, eager to surrender to the fire,  
its scented smoke curling like a pyre against  
a cold blue sky now welcoming  
a tidy offering up; □  
how clean, how sharp the autumn air

darker under the trees  
the leaves still wet  
limp and flat as hope defeated,  
pressed together as  
words not meant, or  
something missed;  
next year the leaves  
will remember innocence,  
the tree broader, eager,  
brown as wisdom tipped with exploratory green.

gathering rosebuds with my rake  
the season with its woodsmoke, evocative,  
tempting to metaphor, hovering,  
a garden of lost meaning;  
no longer, this cooling autumn, a construction,  
but speaking its own seriousness.

how clean, how sharp the autumn air  
scented by surrender



## 0197 Being In Mind

Poets seek in poems, a truth that's yet to be:  
to catch those glories half-formed in the mind,  
those tantalising visions which we see  
for fleeting seconds; fear may never find

again; yet leave a presence in the air,  
the evanescent substance of a dream,  
like half-remembered, half-forgotten care,  
but known to be more real than they seem;

like friendly ghosts who share our rooms awhile  
and conjure memories of their treasured kind:  
a scent; a taste; a light; an echoed smile  
from knowledge of some farther truth in mind:

O these are angels, heralds of the whole;  
a golden rain that showers the dreaming soul.

Michael Shepherd

## 0198 Buddha Meets Christ, Says Nothing

The Buddha (is that one or multiple, theologically?)  
sits at his total ease in our back garden  
such as it is  
in his plastic only partially disguised  
pool, with today a white ranunculus  
floating at his feet

he's externally nicely moulded of fine concrete  
and since the fig tree with its leaves  
big enough to make yourself an apron of  
though you'd need apronstrings, –  
has been cut down, he's emerged  
from the shadow of it which made him  
unpleasantly greeny-mouldy; but now the sunlight  
has dried him into a light and Springy green  
which is almost fluorescent and sorta floaty

he gives interest to the garden, makes a space  
of his own and also makes the garden  
shapely, a focal point or some such  
decorator term. He seems very happy there  
-perhaps anywhere; he certainly makes me happy  
to see him; he wipes thought away.

It would be poetic to say that  
he was already contemplating all peacefully  
when dawn broke this day of solemn days,  
the Good or Bad Friday depending;  
but then he seems not to worry about time anyway  
under his demure, downcast eyelids

but he's so there he's here, and was and is,  
no mere garden ornament and whatever  
he sees inside, it's there in me too  
as Emerson said of this sweet contemplation

what he makes of the events of this day  
is certainly a question – just suppose he'd been there  
discreetly in the crowd, saying nothing, just

contemplating the scene;  
and the roving cameraman spotted him  
and asked for a quote

big answers deserve big questions;  
maybe this half-formed question  
deserves more contemplation.  
I'll just shut up and go look at him again

as the evening light reflected from  
the windows of the house opposite  
bathes him in an intense sunset burst of glory  
with no apparent source so that he  
glows with a radiant promise of peace forever  
to all men; a promise as Christ's prayer-book  
puts it so memorably –  
past all understanding.

Michael Shepherd

## 0199 Constantinople

Two sisters separated soon after birth  
one dark-haired, one fair, both beautiful, with shining eyes  
run towards each other, eagerly, yet shyly, wonderingly,  
from the two ends of a bridge  
high over the water that joins and separates – run to meet:

Constantinopolis, Byzantium;  
a city never here and always there,  
a city made of images in the mind and heart  
its jewelled, aqueous, shifting light  
promising and hiding  
like a jewelled dancer swirling, whom our senses yield to  
but may not touch

provoking us with mystery, clouded fables,  
many interpretations as to her history  
to which we bring our own uncertainties;  
choose what we can, but, transfixed, gaze upon her seduction  
and marvel at her,  
glowing invisibly with an imperceivable unity,  
a knowing of a history of bloodshed, odious intrigues,  
with a dazzling sense of the divine, of holy wisdom,  
defying us to judge her, by her charms;

like an oracle,  
speaking with her silence;  
like an ikon,  
gazing at your soul;  
if you lack perception  
her smile will seem like sorrow;

she asks nothing of you, yet  
waits to greet you as graciously  
as a goddess; as a queen.

From the Cypriot Greek of Vera Korfioti





## 0200 Dementia

Now what did I come upstairs for?

Of course I haven't forgotten your name,  
young lady, it's just that I can't remember it

Why am I going upstairs?  
I only just got up

No dear, you're wrong,  
I always pay on account

Where's my bed?  
Isn't this upstairs?

Take the paper back  
to the newsagent, someone's  
already done the crossword

Of course I'm undressed,  
I just came upstairs

Of course you can sign my name dear,  
they know me at the post office

Why is it so dark downstairs,  
I've only just got up

Why should I give you money for the gas,  
Young man? I don't even know you

I'm sure there are more stairs  
than there used to be

Stop being so insulting, young man,  
it's only money

No of course I don't need help with the stairs,  
I know my own house

No dear, you sign for it, I'm sure  
your boss will understand

Somebody changed the stairs  
when I was out, they  
aren't the same

Why are people so rude about  
money these days?

Ask my father to speak  
to that young man

The stairs are steeper than they were,  
somebody's changed them

Who are you, I didn't  
ask you to come in...

Of course it's my house,  
it's just that you changed the stairs

Tell the bank manager to  
come and see me in the morning.

Why does that man upstairs  
move the stairs at night?

Michael Shepherd

## 0201 Two Skins, One Thick, One Thin

No, don't open that door. Don't try.  
It's locked anyway. Or should be. Some people say  
it's worse than seeing their first dead body  
half dead half alive, they never quite forget it.  
Me I'm used to them. Them? Well OK,  
I shan't let you look but I'll tell you.

It's my two body suits.  
Thin skin, thick skin.  
When I go out in the thin skin  
life's more exciting but god it's tiring.  
A trip on public transport and I come back finished.  
I see things, feel things rather, that are scary.

I see people's next lives they're creating for themselves.  
There's this blind school round the corner;  
I saw them all on the station platform once and I could see  
those who were going to see properly, next time,  
those who were making themselves blinder...  
then next day I saw an ordinary 'seeing' man talking to a friend  
without using his eyes, just dead ahead...how could I tell him?

Another time, I sat next to a man  
who looked as if he'd slept rough  
but the scary thing was, he was giving off such intense heat  
that I knew sure as sure, he'd just murdered somebody...  
I never knew that was a clue...

I see everybody's perfection and their present self  
simultaneously. You might think it's wonderful.  
Yes and no. Not when you're wearing your thin skin.  
Yes, of course it's great for poetry...that's why  
I bought it, why I wear it.

The thick skin's for business, interviews, being fired,  
the Editor's office, the dentist, the doctor,  
the mother-in-law, the footfall  
in the dark alley, all the times you just  
want to be tough, insensitive, eff the lot of them,

guess I don't need to list all that?

And yes, sometimes you can go out in the wrong one.  
A friend tells you of some awful family disaster  
and you think, thick-skinned, well that's their problem,  
let them sort it out... and hate yourself for even thinking it.

Or someone looks at you on the wrong day  
like you're looking at me now,  
sorta disbelieving, disgusted and pitying..  
gotta go. Seeyerlater.

Michael Shepherd

## 0202 Elocution Practice For Verse Speakers

The life  
on Mars  
meets mainly in  
the bars

they're found  
by Underground,  
that is, the Metro  
they're mainly  
hetero

so you may meet your  
Mr Right  
or maybe just  
a meteorite

a Mars bar can  
mislead a man.

Michael Shepherd

## 0203 Evensong

As the evening cools  
and I go out to water the front garden  
watched by the guys  
who lounge outside the house opposite  
as it opens for its illegal evening business,  
looking at me as if I'm expressing  
some unnamed insult by my presence  
on their turf

I wonder if they are as awed as I  
that as the evening light from the west  
glows radiant, boundless, just as the sun disappears,  
then slowly pales to dusk,  
the reds and crimsons, scarlets,  
magentas, madders, vermilion, rose,  
infuse with an almost ultra-violet tinge, live new lives,  
and glow with the passionate intensity of prayer  
in their vibrant evensong as if they know  
that colour can outsing  
any works of man when lived  
on petals that know only innocence

Michael Shepherd

## 0204 Every Dog Will Have His Night

The prick of tears around the eye when reading poetry  
is reassuring - that despite what happened  
this morning, yesterday, in childhood,  
in your last life, whatever -  
you're still human.

Philip Levine - whose poems prick my eyes  
so often that I'd like to think him  
to be the heart of America  
or ought to be,  
reckons that man is the only animal  
that has visionary power.  
But I wonder. Can't do more than that; but wonder nevertheless:

my dog,  
who lays him down on the hearth at night  
with a sigh that shakes his whole body,  
as if he's not planning to do anything between sleep and wake,  
twitches his hind legs in dream;  
and I, unimaginatively, assume he's chasing rabbits -  
too intense a twitching for just some playful thrown ball:  
does he catch them, or like in my dreams,  
get further and further away, the harder he tries?

But psychologists of the human mind  
reckon that dreams are the sewage farms  
of emotion: cleansing the mind of fears  
(and, it seems, for an astonishingly high percentage of Britons,  
having a very friendly afternoon tea with the Queen...) .

Which suggests that those chases of failure or perhaps ideal success  
that my dog dreams, cleanse emotions too  
- and who can doubt, seeing his dog hang his head in shame,  
with that strange straightness of the neck like human spine  
which can touch his master's heart like nothing else,  
who can doubt that dogs have emotions? -  
imply that dogs could have ideals  
(and am I God, or just  
the leader of his pack - how do I, then, measure up?) .

And if they have emotions, and ideals, then  
should we not enquire of them more closely  
what is dreamt of in their philosophy?

My dog, haunched here beside me,  
looks up at me with liquid brown eyes  
brimming with faith, hope, and love;  
trusting that I'll make the right decision about all this.

Michael Shepherd



## 0205 Front Porch Days

London, six o'clock in June, two-o-o-five:

These streets were built in nineteen-five or thereabouts  
in unimaginative grid, on London clay and previous watercress beds  
by builders and those, quote, 'developers',  
whose sudden stroke of luck was that the Tube line was diverted  
and foreshortened, now to pass this way all overground;  
it took a century, and climate change, to prove  
that cracked-out summer clay and winter watercourse,  
and building onto earth, are not the best foundation...  
but these terraces of modest houses  
(alternate houses gabled, bayed, to suggest they're twice the size)  
have stood the test of time, when, often, underpinned;  
intended for the aspirational working-class,  
they've now become, these last few years,  
'first homes' for the equally aspirational middle-class;  
tonight the streets are nose-to-tail with silent, gleaming  
four-wheelers looking down their grilles  
at nifty runabouts - some, I regret to say,  
parked where suburban front-gardens once declared respectability  
in token concrete-and-flower three metres square of space  
as subtly expressive in miniature  
as any grandly-vista-ed and avenued ducal drive.

All is very quiet at this hour; doors firmly closed;  
front gardens are for show just like front parlours were.  
Across the road, for all I know,  
(for this is London; one does not often chum across the street)  
our neighbours may live sunburned Southern lives  
in long back gardens which face West (ours, East and overshadowed) :  
while on this side, just one front door is out of line:  
like some beached whale (or dolphin sounds more cute)  
providing a double-take but just too late for passing pedestrians,  
I sit at open door with paperback, in jasmine heaven,  
which may last - three weeks? but which in this first year of flower,  
is both a song of praise and Southern holiday;  
it's lost its first exhilaration, but acquired  
a subtle maturity so that, one lungful gloried in,  
one's ready straightway for yet more perfection;

a week or so, and its poignant sharp-sour scent  
will bring back memories of summer's ripe Venetian back-canals.

This new-found gazebo, to you in Southern climes  
will be just commonplace - as afternoon front porch,  
or sociable evening verandah or leisured stoep,  
where West Indians, for instance, wait to pass the time of day  
with passing neighbours; for me, exotic new delight;  
so that I'm quietly proud when the Trinidadians from two doors away  
take my presence, sitting there, as invitation to pause there at my gate  
and pass the time of day.

On one side of the door, vermilion geraniums  
survived a mildish winter; their colour in this evening sun  
incredible: blazing colour from one petal, sun-glowed in another;  
can vermilion really be, as reason and art-teachers say,  
a mixture of yellow in with red? Not here, today...and so, itself,  
that you can feel it hit the retina and demand  
more than the physics of the eye can stand....  
and then, the other side, the pink geranium  
sings quite a different song - one hears, but cannot say  
just where the difference lies in colour's music scale.

Metaphysics, for three thousand years or more  
in East and West, has held in high debate  
whether what, like this, the senses' scene, provides  
may be direct connection with what's called divine;  
or whether this must be transcended in some mindful way.  
The answer, here, today, for me is in  
one glimpse of sunlight through geranium.

Michael Shepherd

## 0207 Hover Fly

The hover fly  
that's just demonstrated  
that it's one of the Creation's greatest  
and smallest, most compact miracles of lawful  
imagination (imagine flying, then stopping  
quite still in the air, no slowing down,  
just, zap, like that, dead steady,  
and it's smaller (!) than a helicopter, wow)  
right here in front of me in silhouette, but  
illuminated on one wing by the PC screen,  
and pausing for a freeze-frame moment of eternity  
as if to tell me something  
(illumination, too?) -  
all this, and yet it  
doesn't know I'm writing about it.  
Presumably.

Michael Shepherd

## 0208 If Poets Had A Tail To Wag

As your beloved, faithful dog  
returns to his dear master's hearth  
after burying deep some promising fine bone  
as hostage to the future,  
and with the long-lunged sigh  
of those who know they could not have done better,  
lays him on the hearth (with nose too near the falling coal)  
to pass the sleep of a blissful clear conscience  
broken only by the twitchy dream of chasing rabbits  
(and like humans, does he never quite catch them before he wakes?  
we'll never know...)

so the poet closes the notebook, switches off the PC,  
and with the clear conscience of one  
who knows that his poetry may not be all that good -  
but that he couldn't have done better -  
retires to bed, satisfied, content.

If bliss is then the emptied mind  
the Muse of Poetry is kind.

Michael Shepherd

## 0210 In A Japanese Garden

How fresh the air is today.  
A poet has walked this way,

as silently alive as the breeze  
playing with the almond blossom.

Michael Shepherd

## 0211 Infinite Riches In A Little Room Unquote

In but a few years' time  
when every poet and their critic  
has the internet on their videophone  
we can relieve ourselves  
of our mutual antipathy  
as demonstrated on poemhunter  
shit-quick  
and face to face  
by taking to the smallest room

and standing on our dignity  
though seated  
call up without fear  
of logorrhoea  
and take the piss  
out of each other  
and having relieved ourselves  
quick as a slash  
arise  
undeterred and  
flushed with victory

thus  
leaving more time  
for rhyme  
or for better or worse  
free verse

Michael Shepherd

## 0211 It Takes All Sorts

It takes all sorts to make a world, they say  
(how do 'they' know anyway?) :  
but it certainly looks like that here this sunny day:

some just want to be as ordinary as they can be.  
don't want to stand out in a crowd.  
some don't want to be noticed at all.  
some are the opposite - pompous, arrogant, reckon they've made it..  
some have fallen flat on their face - as happens.  
some get fresh flowers every week from secret admirers.  
some are only smartened up once a year when their distant relations come to  
look them up.  
some would like us to know that they know Latin or Greek or both.  
some have a ready biblical text on their lips. Or a favourite hymn.  
some are war heroes but are truly modest about it.  
some are genuinely famous and want you to know it - or their relatives do.  
some are unashamedly sentimental.  
some are at the mercy of relatives who know what one should do.

The tombstones in Brompton Cemetery are a shoulder-to-shoulder lot;  
too many to take in or care individually about  
unless you check the one you've been sunbathing beside.

But as you rollerblade down the broad main avenue  
in your sunglasses  
with your sweater around your waist,  
an ice-cream in one hand  
and a small paper bag from the chemist in the other,  
you may have missed that

every tombstone has a cheerful soul sitting on it  
all looking about 35 years old, curiously,  
swinging their feet in the sun and chatting with each other  
and commenting lightly as you pass  
with your doctor's prescription from the chemist,

wondering what you'll make of your life. Or have done so far....  
You should listen to them one day.  
They're pretty good judges of character by now.

But not everybody notices them.

Michael Shepherd



## 0212 It's Just An Age Thing

it's just an age thing - should you be concerned?  
I'll spell it out; it may just clear my mind:  
that, in impatient youth, ambition burned  
to have the answers to all things defined -

but not, I haste to add, from teacher's notes,  
but from experiences uniquely mine:  
a random, fun-filled quest to find the goal  
which, when defined, would ease the ceaseless strife;

yet now, the mind's so sceptical, and all  
that passed for thought, just mental indigestion;  
the quest, forgotten, changed, or redefined;  
what passed for answers, are now up for question:

it's braver fun, with answers thrown away  
to seek the greater questions in this play.

2003

Michael Shepherd

## 0213 Late Night Reverie

One in three of us, the stats say, lives alone. Sad;  
but fine if you prefer it that way.

It's late at night. You're alone. The PC off at last. The TV off.  
Finally you put aside the book you're reading. The attention's drifting.  
Too late too, for reading in bed. You should just  
get up from the chair, switch off the light,  
etc. But you don't. You just sit there. This  
is one of life's great private joys. Far better than  
all the bathroom stuff, the almost idiot moments  
of waiting for sleep, knowing you'll never catch the moment  
when sleep takes you; and the more you try, like a child,  
to catch it, haha got you, the longer it will be before - zap - zzz.

So you sit there, drifting into a glorious haze of irresponsibility  
as the thoughts fade, the cares fade, you're just two thoughts away  
or perhaps two non-thoughts away, from something like bliss,  
and this peace doesn't dwindle you - there's an expansion  
as if 'someone' doesn't become no-one, but everyone...  
and there comes to mind, curiously, those greatest moments in the  
greatest films, when there they are, looking out over Paris or Algiers  
or wherever, with the soundtrack playing, hardly there but there,  
and nothing is said, but the whole cinema audience of hundreds  
is silent, focussed, feeling in those seconds of emotion and stillness  
that everything real, everything wished for, everything that matters  
is there. In full.

Or in the theatre - sitting there, hundreds of you, weeping silent tears  
that even those stoic Romans found a phrase for, lacrymae rerum,  
the tears of things: you all know, she won't take that first step  
out of herself, he won't try for that job he knows he's wanted  
all his life; they'll never go to the Moscow of their dreams...yet...

It's like that for you in your armchair.

The key to all of life is there, out of reach perhaps, yet  
known, not out of reach... beyond sadness, beyond happiness  
in a strange way. It just... is as it is. And that's OK.

Better than just going to bed. Yes, it's a good time.  
Sleep well.

Michael Shepherd

## 0214 Me And Lazarus

'Since your breakdown, Michael,  
you've changed out of all recognition...'  
Was I supposed to feel flattered,  
since this was evidently meant as a compliment -  
leaving a vapour trail of implications  
about past behaviour across the clear sky of my mind?

No, I did not feel flattered;  
though agreeably unconcerned  
about the degree of un-observation in an old friend;  
how could he not see  
that I was as I ever was, though  
minus some things I could happily do without,  
acquired along the way?

Now I can begin to imagine Lazarus  
called back from the dead,  
unwinding his lifetime's shroud -  
you wake up with a touch of cramp  
to see a goggle-eyed bunch of familiar faces  
telling you some frankly unbelievable story  
in which you appear as the unwitting  
central character; apart of course from Him;  
and you should feel grateful for this?  
when you're a beggar, the milk bill's not been paid,  
and you're right out of wild honey?

Ah, here's the pay-off  
that the Bible omits to mention -  
(unless I'm some special case) -  
that like Lazarus, I entered the breakdown van  
the world's beggar,  
and emerged, a hell-and-back,  
with new-found freedom and happiness,  
and not a little gratitude,

rich beyond riches.



## 0215 Name The Devil And...

How long?

how long before the measures  
put in place by the state  
'for our protection'  
become the apparatus  
of a repressive and  
totalitarian state?

'Oh it can't happen here, we're a free country'...

but children never know the experience of  
their parents' lost inner freedoms of the mind.

How long?  
Start counting

Michael Shepherd

## 0216 Nobility, Humility

Early on a fine morning in June,  
everything so still, the air  
as if air had just been invented,  
carrying scents, and  
taste, and touch, and sparkling clarity -  
it could even be singing to my contented listening;  
cool air, waiting to be warmed by the sun;  
at this magic hour, it matters not whether  
countryside or town;

and I'm suddenly, unexpectedly  
filled with the nobility of life -  
and simultaneously, or perhaps just after it,  
humility...

and this strange, agreeable pair, I bask in,  
live and move and have my being,  
this fine morning in June

Michael Shepherd

## 0218 Paradise Known

O God - or may I call you Lord? -  
I remember when I was a child,  
You were my best friend, one who knew me  
better than I knew myself;  
and so I talked to You all the time,  
especially when I'd been naughty;  
then later on, it was taught me  
that I'm made in Your image - that feels good...

I know, just as all children do,  
what Paradise is, and where:  
when the sun is out,  
it's in that wood beyond the field,  
where I feel most myself;  
but not quite out of sight of home;  
and lots of other places just like that;  
then when the sun goes in, I go in too,  
and Paradise is - when I'm tired and fed,  
and then all nice and read to, tucked up in bed;  
and Paradise is in my head.

And then, I read in Genesis  
how, out of Your immortal bliss,  
the way You did it all;  
and so, since we're good friends  
and I'm made in Your image,  
I have some questions: You did a brilliant job  
with fields and woods and animals  
and human beings - well, some of them, the ones I like...  
and it makes good sense  
to have Adam there to look after it all, and to enjoy it;  
and a nice idea too to have Eve as his companion -  
who else could do the cooking while he's out at work,  
or remind him of the jobs to do around the house?  
and if Adam had to have the babies too,  
he wouldn't then be able to go out and work as well...

But why couldn't You have left it just like that?  
you must have guessed that when grown-ups say



'You're not to eat the apples on that tree! '  
then you want to do just that,  
not for the apples but  
because you want to know  
just why you shouldn't do that anyway?  
I mean, it's human, isn't it?

And if You don't mind my saying this,  
throwing them out of Paradise,  
that seems a bit severe for such a crime?  
couldn't You have let them off, first time?

My teacher says 'it's all symbolic' – that the message is  
just to be ourselves, and not divide the world  
into the 'good' and 'bad',  
or always split our mind in two  
or to think we know too much–  
(did you tell my teacher that?) :  
and that there are some of Your laws  
which we must keep, which have just cause;  
well, I'll go along with that;  
I never wanted – afterwards – to be naughty, anyway;  
I've talked to You about this often, and explained...

I'd like to think that when Adam and Eve  
realised what they'd lost, and then said sorry,  
they didn't have to go around in guilt and sin  
(Like miserable old Auntie Min..)  
and, if Paradise is lost by us, but yet that's known,  
we can then return to what we own?  
'And they all lived happily ever after'  
is what the old storybooks all tell me...  
or is there perhaps some hidden clue,  
like, we often 'grow up' and forget about You? ...

\*

My teacher says I've 'simplified' –  
but didn't You say, 'Be as a child'?

Well, Lord, that's how it seems to me;  
and I'm Your child; would You agree?

Michael Shepherd

## 0219 People People

It must be fun - or so I'd like to think -  
doing a 'people' job,  
if that's what you really like to do;  
like being a born bright barman in a not-too-busy bar  
where everyone you meet's a challenge of some sort -  
to spark the eyes of strangers, or  
to plumb the depths of lonely mind and heart;

and postman, on a regular morning round -  
not the early one who drops through blank, closed doors  
of houses where only the dog's awake, and finger-hungry;  
but the one who has the parcels, has to knock,  
and meets you face to face; and meets your gratitude,  
maybe your full-on smile...

but now, the latest guy (where do the happy ones all go?) -  
he's really weird. He must know by now  
that I'm eager for his ring, because that means  
another poetry book; and yet when I unleash unshaven joy  
and greet him like a friend I've really missed,  
he hands me the parcel with his face  
turned full ninety degrees to the right, as if  
my smile, my breath, bears loathsome foul disease,  
or as if in some shared past, I'd done him some unpardonable hurt.  
I sometimes wonder if he has some history of abuse, and now  
he's scared to meet anyone who might be kind to him...

What a pity that he'll never meet  
Mr Weekly Organic Veg  
who's born to live in joy, it seems,  
whose smile is larger than his face,  
whose eyes are shining with a friendship that's unqualified,  
and who reminds me in five seconds flat  
what life's all about.

Michael Shepherd

## 0220 Poetic Justice

I forgot to look  
where the sidewalk ends  
so now I'm  
one inch tall  
and spread all over the road  
I should've taken  
the road not taken

Michael Shepherd

## 0221 Rain In May

It's May and it's raining  
and I'm standing at the front door  
as if I were the first rain itself  
on Eden, blessing and blessed  
before there could be  
any division between the two,  
rejoicing in the scent of rain  
and green and singing gratitude

a boy again, rejoicing in the scent of rain on earth,  
being, without thought,  
all these things

Michael Shepherd

## 0222 Return To The Golden Age

We are like salmon, swimming back upstream:  
leaping against waterfalls that thwart,  
cut and bruised; but strong; our only dream  
return to source; no thought save source of thought;

and in that fight, our iron age turns to bronze,  
and we to heroes, in a war of soul,  
as nature seeks the nature it had once;  
though wholly lost, remembering the whole.

We silver salmon, sparkling as the sun  
shines on our fierce and loving enterprise:  
to rear our children where the world is one;  
the source remembered, nature's greatest prize.

The golden age is ageless in its gleam  
and we, like salmon, swimming back upstream.

Michael Shepherd

# 0223s O M M E + 9 0

Picasso  
defined his art as

'une somme des destructions' -  
'a sum of destructions' -

a fair definition, too, of  
the art of war

Michael Shepherd

## 0226 Self-Hate, Self-Love

When did you cease to love, then hate, yourself?  
What terrible event? How long ago?  
What slight misunderstanding, view of self,  
that led to fading love, then bitter hate?

What silent judgment of yourself, believed,  
without a witness, umpire, counsel, friend?  
Where was that childhood friend you loved, called 'God',  
who knew you better than you knew yourself,  
and understood your every thought and act?

What black and vicious weed grew secretly  
while all your thoughts - you thought - were of the Good?  
What demon whispered sweet and viciously?

Alas, no clue as yet. The only way,  
to love that self that never went away.

Michael Shepherd



## 0227 Soap Opera

The Hebrew language  
has such sacred power  
that you shouldn't sing it  
in the bath or shower.

This compassionate concession:  
you're still allowed to hum  
any music that you fancy  
while you're soaping your, er, tum.

Though some would say with Mendelssohn -  
that a 'song without words'  
is the bathroom equivalent  
of a \*\*\*\* without \*\*\*\*s

Michael Shepherd

## 0228 Streetwise

I was looking at this guy in the street  
wishing I could walk with his swagger  
as if he owned the street  
when he caught me looking -  
'you got a problem? ... '  
so I thanked him for asking  
and said yes  
and explained  
how I really wanted to express my manhood  
without any suggestion of violence  
or not respecting others' rights  
but rather as a figure to be respected for myself...

and you know what  
he just quietly walked away

seems he'd left his blade  
stuck in the last guy  
and was going back for it

Michael Shepherd

## 0230 Thanksoffering

As children, lost in worlds grown-ups forget,  
pass by some anniversary day unmarked,  
then, gently minded, run in childish shame  
into the garden, there to seek and bring  
some wilting flower in warm and loving hand;

or proffer favourite toy, without a thought  
that such a gesture might be their own loss;  
so I, who seek to bring you, Lord, some gift  
in words for all in life I have not earned;

a childish present, offered to observe  
the everlasting birthday of Your world,  
with flower You made, and toy wrought by Your skills;

accept, I pray, as father does a child:  
my thoughts were elsewhere; Your world me beguiled...

Michael Shepherd

# 0231 That Day

It's the day that everybody in the world remembers  
because they can 't forget it:

The eighth day of the week;  
the thirty-second day of the month;  
the thirteenth month of the year;

The day that's not on the calendar,  
Yet never off it in your mind;

The loneliest day of your life  
which everyone shares;

The most unreal day  
Yet most real;

The longest day  
which hasn't ended yet;

The day whose hurt you want to forget  
Yet want to remember in every detail  
So that it can hurt more;

Yes, how can I forget -  
it's the day you went away.

Michael Shepherd

## 0232 That Spider

I'm still waiting for an answer:  
does that spider on the hedge  
just do what spiders do;  
or does (he, she, it) think?

Is it just a robot, programmed  
by a pretty skilful God?  
In which case you could say  
God does its thinking for it  
which is surely even more impressive  
considering the number of spiders  
and other species. Like us.

So where does that leave us?

On our knees  
with a lot more questions.

And don't tell me it's evolution -  
who made the laws of evolution, then?

Michael Shepherd

## 0233 The Blest

The authority on poetry pauses;  
the world holds its breath. This head – greybeard,  
skinhead – forehead already lined  
with self-imposed responsibility for  
the continuance of the known world,  
applies itself. The word is,  
discrimination. The fingers curl  
like scalpel? like talons? around  
the ballpoint of the turning world,  
the keys that tap the dew of mercy  
or beat the bitter rain of judgment on the poet's brain

somewhere in the world  
a childish head bent  
over a desk clutching  
awkwardly a chewed ballpoint  
with total absorption  
summons the unwieldy letters  
that one day will greet each other in  
the boundless heart  
and write the first great poem  
of a new age beyond all  
imagining save his or hers

nestled in her favourite secret place -  
look, there she is, where  
the sunlight catches the leaves at  
the end of the garden, by the woods –  
a girl, her head caught in a golden halo  
of magic, reads a book in a land where  
time and place have paused  
to read with her

blest are they that give.  
blest are they that receive.

Michael Shepherd

## 0234 The Book To The Reader

The book said:

I serve you. And  
as you take from me, I  
give myself to you; even  
before you begin  
to read me.

I note how gently  
you pick me up from  
where you laid me down,  
pausing just before you touch me; and  
I feel your mind surrendering  
with relief all other matters which  
weigh down the mind; as one  
who sheds his clothes and dives  
into cool, clear water on a sunny day

and when you begin to read me, I  
feel your hands, not gripping me but  
sensing the film of air between  
your hands and my cover; the lovely  
detachment of a shared love; you  
respect me for my outer self as  
you respect what I have to give

and when you put me down,  
you put me down so tenderly,  
first looking for the perfect place  
to leave me; with, I sense,  
an inward sigh of satisfaction, gratitude, but which  
meets the sigh of parting; like  
the parting pause of lovers

and, like lovers who have grown old together,  
we put out of mind the passing sigh of  
yet a different kind; that one of us one day  
will be – not the first, that's easy – but  
the second one to go... that's

the eternal test of love: loss to be measured  
against gratitude, the final laying down  
on the altar, of the book of life

all this I appreciate;  
did you too know this? are we not  
fortunate in each other, you and I?

said the book.

Michael Shepherd



## 0235 The Close

Sit with it like a nurse  
at the hour of dusk  
every few minutes  
glancing over  
and seeing its petals  
closing, slowly  
slowly,  
vegetable muscles  
we have no word  
such awe  
and when finally  
closed  
there's no knowing  
whether tomorrow  
they will  
open

I wish  
your death  
had been like that

Michael Shepherd

## 0237 The Mind

Sometimes we curse the restlessness of mind;  
forgetting it's God's gift, this restlessness:  
for this will never cease until it find  
that which it seeks: its still and perfect rest.

Without that restlessness, the angry man,  
once angered, then would never leave that state;  
an artist, end no better than began;  
and our delusions never would abate.

The instability of human mind  
more constant than its owner, ever roams  
like bee, for nectar of a finer kind:  
the rest, the peace, the love of God alone.

So love the constant mind's inconstancy;  
so faithful in its search for unity.

Michael Shepherd

## 0238 The Moment

It's mealtime. You knock  
on her door with just the right degree of respect  
that behoves a parent to their child;  
this she will always notice and require.

She looks up. Her eyes focus on you  
but behind her eyes  
her mind is still in  
that other place.

There is magic in this room.  
This room is the greatest place on earth  
at this moment full of magic  
which she will leave, but  
never leave.

This is the moment when  
your whole parental role  
is in question. As your eyes meet,  
acknowledge that magic. For  
eternity watches you and her  
in person. in person.

Michael Shepherd

## 0239 The Poem Said

The poem said

read me

then put aside the poem

and meet me between the words

Michael Shepherd

## 0240 The Poet And The Tree

Tenderly  
under the tree's shade  
the poet wrote;

wishing  
that his poems  
might have the grace  
of the tree.

the tree heard  
the poet's wish  
and gave itself,  
to share his book  
leaf for leaf  
for as long  
as his poems lived

and so it was

Michael Shepherd

## 0241 The Poet Tree

Tenderly  
with its soft leaves  
the tree shaded the poet  
as he wrote

and as its leaves fell  
and the year turned  
the tree wished  
that it might be reborn  
as a book of poems

and so it was

Michael Shepherd

## 0242 The Poet's Secret Love

even before

you write

the poem

you should love

the readers

Michael Shepherd

## 0243 The Second Coming

This first August week, the geraniums  
are flowering their second flush:  
they braved last winter, huddled like cabbage stalks  
so as to be inconspicuous  
to the meddlesome and sterile fingers of frost,

then burst into abundant life, as did the pelargoniums,  
with a blatant generosity or hymn of praise as if  
to prove some point we'd overlooked  
about Creation.

Last week, dead-headed like a battlefield,  
they fell back into themselves, exhausted,  
as if they wanted a long summer holiday,  
to last right through to autumn's fall;

only, this week, to bear a second coming:  
yet changed: their petals paler, exquisite,  
water-coloured like shells fresh from the waves,  
or the most delicate painted porcelain or  
Japanese flowers brushed on silk;

as if God had fallen in love with His own Creation,  
seeing it good; and then  
repainted it with second, subtler coat;  
and given to the geraniums  
a second chance to remind us of the love  
we missed the first time round.

Michael Shepherd



## 0243 The Sonnet

Why is this sonnet form so dear to me?  
this silent cloister of the singing heart  
where I may be myself in sanctity  
yet meet beloved strangers there in art;

a shape like some great arch across the world  
where every word has music in its sound;  
a place like prayer, inner maze uncurled  
to find a pattern in that measured ground;

a conversation with tomorrow's friends  
of all we know but seldom talk about;  
a haven in a time that never ends;  
a love that's now a whisper, now a shout;

- to final couplet, falling heaven-blest  
to stillness, in that space where all things rest.

Michael Shepherd

## 0244 Trying To Write A Sonnet

It's a bit like a trip in a hot air balloon -  
the hot air of thousands of years of  
poets poetizing; all trying to float a little higher than the everyday,  
just a little lower than the angels -  
whoops, there's four lines gone already...

so, the first four lines or so say  
where you're taking this trip from, hoping  
to arrive somewhere quite new and unexpected  
after fourteen lines, otherwise  
why take the trip at all?

so, fire up the burner of ambition, whatever,  
and we're into the second four lines now;  
floating in an easy, silent, gently breeze-blown world,  
a poet's paradise,  
where the mind is stilled, the beauty of the landscape  
almost beyond words (ha!) : all perspectives on the world  
altered; but do we know now where we're heading?  
It's a cool way of experiencing altered state  
without illegal substances. Take out the notebook,  
try to describe it, just in case  
someone reads it; at least it might  
encourage them to take the trip themselves.

And now we're into the last six lines  
which, the pundits say, should introduce  
some new insight, some viewpoint on the world;  
you've had your chance; has the trip been worthwhile?  
the balloon's gone higher, the landscape stretches out,  
greener than a politician's promise...  
Floating above the green fields, the concrete and the smog,  
the unexpected words from the ground heard crystal clear -  
have new thoughts, new visions, come, in this poet's paradise?

And now so soon, the final couplet - which the pundits of today  
condemn as the valueless whistling in the dark,  
the false claim to cultural certainties -  
so beware: take all your humility in hand like

a doffed Elizabethan cap: will that final couplet be  
the clunk-click of the safety belt's banality? The  
front-door clack of Alexander Pope's front door,  
before the scrape of sharpened pen, the mellow smell  
of candlelight on paper that will ring the world  
like thought-fired, savage Georgian hot-air balloon?  
Or the clang of oven door in Belsen, Dachau, Buchenwald?

For the poet, just fourteen lines: heaven and earth,  
truth and lies, life and death, Icarus 's fate,  
all these, for his few hours, depend upon it;  
but I digress; I should have writ a sonnet..

Michael Shepherd

## 0244the Soul's Mirror

Do you wish to know what is your 'soul',  
in all its glory, and its whole estate?  
To know if it knows but a part, or All?  
Its birth; its growth, its life - or lives; its fate?

Is it the watcher, even of itself?  
Is it its own revealer, beyond words?  
Can wise men tell us its true health and wealth?  
If not, can we be sure that it exists?

For lack of witness to the soul's true bounds,  
then, witness all the wonders of the world  
of nature, beauty, law: then, what responds  
in our self's mirror, is soul's map unfurled:

unbounded witness to its Maker; masked,  
until for glorious proof of this it's asked!

Michael Shepherd

## 0245 The Sound Of The Flute

Listen to the sound of this reed-flute –  
hear what it says. First, it laments  
its banishment; its tearing away  
from its home, its reed-bed. And  
this alone, tears at the yearning heart  
of all those whose heart feels far from home.  
Listen to it.

Then behind its breathy air  
is fire – the fire of love; that sound  
which tells every love-story in the world,  
of lovers, parted, yearning to be  
together once more. This flute first  
tells of separation; then of unity.  
Listen to it.

Do not listen to this dangerous  
flute, unless you wish to hear  
the innermost secrets of your heart –  
the parting and the separation,  
the yearning, yearning, for return –  
Dare you listen to this story of pain, of love?  
Listen to it.

(freely taken from the Prologue to Book I of the Masnavi I Ma'navi  
of Maulana Jalalu'din Muhammad Rumi, the founder Dervish)

Michael Shepherd

## 0245 The Vision

He read aloud, his dry and academic voice  
so quivering with conviction which we did not share,  
his offering for a footnote which did not require  
this amiable discursion such as only he could love;

and as I sighed in inward kind despair,  
and wondered when to break his scholar's drift -  
his body turned to crystal; sculptured silver-gold  
in detail; his familiar profile then became  
by heavenly realignment, ideal, heroic, sublime;  
his steady gaze, like some divine geometry,  
focussed on the paper which before  
had been a spiderweb of tedious, fond thought,  
was now an arrow shot at truth itself  
in love, and lifetime's care, and all humanity;  
a god who had replaced a colleague's frame.

It is enough just to recall that moment's view;  
no explanation; but the whole world made anew.

Michael Shepherd

## 0247 Tiptoeing Into Saywell Country

oh shitty kitty  
what a pity

kitty's bitter  
you're out of kitty litter

Michael Shepherd

## 0248 To A Poet I've Just Read

An ordinary life  
can bring you  
all the love  
in the world  
sooner or later

Michael Shepherd



## 0249 To Enjoy.

to enjoy the enjoyable. It seems a modest enough aim  
and what we're meant to do by human nature, surely? and yet  
that urge to set up the next scene, to move on - do you remember  
those old films where the heroes were always saying to their side-kicks  
'let's get outa here! ...' pioneers of the about-to-be - this moves us on;  
so 'here' doesn't stand much chance of being enjoyed;  
and nor does 'now'; and can we ever say  
whether we enjoy things more or less than others  
- or more or less than our parents or grandparents?

and here I remember my mother, who could recall  
in vivid detail with a humbling gratitude, every minute  
of some rare act of kindness done many years before -  
an unexpected car trip to the park, a fresh baked cake,  
those things which are small change to real neighbours  
but which she so often gave, so rarely received;  
(the old should never move, uproot, unless of gipsy nature;  
friends are not so easy made among their settled peers) .

So how precious the nap of an afternoon, if properly enjoyed:  
a few minutes, and the brain's wiped clean  
of all the morning's bruising, weighed concerns.

The eyes open on the sight, today, of an angel  
depicted by Piero della Francesca to console a duke  
whose only son died as a youngster in his bloom;  
and thus he has the likeness of that son, enjoying  
eternity  
in my back room. So instead of getting outa here,  
a book of poetry idly picked up, with the phrase  
'the world forgetting, by the world forgot'; and then,  
gently overwhelmed by the lovely yearning  
to visit that place where poetry enjoys itself  
in unrevealed mysteries - mine, his, hers, yours, read, written -  
and in being, simply to enjoy  
simply being.

Michael Shepherd

## 0250 To Indian Poets

'O Lord, I am Your goldsmith on this earth'  
sang Sonar, Maharashtra's poet of old,  
who hammered out the ingots of pure truth  
to poetry, that turns speech into gold;

who sought Yourself within himself to reach,  
from heart of gold, that golden mind might shine;  
to sing Your praise; and find Your All in each;  
reflect your Word; make human thought divine -

yet knew himself but shapeless gold You shaped;  
shaped in this life, by grace, as goldsmith born;  
graced with the richest substance You create,  
to live and speak some gleam of You reborn.

May we be worthy of this golden race  
of poets: praise in all things, Your one grace.

(Narahari Sonar - Sonar means goldsmith, which was the family profession -  
13th century goldsmith, poet and saint)

Michael Shepherd

## 0251 To Jerry Hughes At 75

Love is life. Life is love.  
Everything I understand,  
I understand only because  
I love.

Everything is,  
everything exists  
only because  
I love.

Everything is united by  
love alone.

Love is God  
and to die means  
that I, a particle of love,  
shall return to Love itself, whole and complete,  
the eternal source of Love itself.

\*

Did that fiery pacifist, that Pacific warrior,  
that defender of the loving heart,  
Jerry Hughes, write this? No,  
it was Tolstoy, the writer of 'War and Peace', but  
you two have much in common  
and I salute you for everything  
that you are and stand for.

Michael Shepherd

## 0252 To My Elder Brothers

I think of you more often nowadays, I don't know why;  
how is it now with you?  
And are you still somewhere – if you ever were -  
that I might talk to you?

Will I one day meet you, talk with you,  
and know just how it was?  
Or do you, I wonder, ever think of me?  
And if you do, do you regret  
the fun we never had, the games we never played?

How different, I really wonder, would I be now,  
if you were here - well, you'd be getting on now,  
but there would be so much to look back on...  
(and would our funerals maintain the order of our birth?)

What was it like? Did you have some choice,  
that made you turn back when so nearly born?  
You know that you were loved, with all the love  
that Mum and Dad had poured into their wedding vows,  
not so very long before; all the love  
poured into each other and their lives...  
was there some choice?

Did you hear something  
within that cosy cave of flesh – Dad's angry voice, perhaps,  
knowing that this was one event  
he wasn't able to control? So that you turned back  
halfway along the scary dark tunnel of love? That's not a thought  
I care to have. But I fought Dad, and just about survived..  
and loved him, too, when I was very young...

And Mum – do you, I wonder, think – or know - what it must have been  
for her? The biggest tiny present  
that she could have given to Dad  
taken from them, twice?  
Did you know, you second one,  
that the first had turned back too?

And so, as some wry joke, I say, when people ask  
as people do - meaning always something that's unsaid -  
'Are you an only child? ' - I say,  
all aggressive-defensive-like,  
'I'm the youngest of three miscarriages...'  
and remember - that I never knew you  
but I miss you so.

Michael Shepherd

## 0256 What Are Those Kids Up To?

It's in a quiet corner to itself  
away from the grandiose creations of the  
Italian Renaissance gallery, so  
you can stand undisturbed to wonder  
just what's going on?

A small painting: in a peaceful  
green and hilly summer countryside,  
not a soul in sight except  
these three – children? - their faces under  
their hoodies seem known to each other  
but shadowed, small, not asking to be  
known to us; absorbed, maybe learning, and  
they're enacting, in this remote spot,  
the Crucifixion

Jesus hanging patiently up there, a bit like  
a kid trying it out for himself to see  
what it feels like (and there was a case, a kid  
a few years back, on Hampstead Heath,  
it was hushed up; no accomplices let on) :  
Mary's quietly grieving, no big painterly  
gestures there; she's huddled up, a girl  
who's really learning about emotion as she  
acts it out; John, lost in thinking as he  
tries to meet in his boy's mind, the  
dimension, the immensity.

It would be easier, if this were  
a short story by some masterly  
South American writer:  
three kids who have been totally  
unexposed to scriptures, find this  
Bible book, read it as, like, science fiction,  
decide to act it out. The master  
of short stories would have to  
work out the denouement:  
did the kids, unobserved, pack up  
and return to normal life, but

secretly transformed in inner mind?  
Or did one die, as on Hampstead Heath,  
the others never let on, and yet  
never forget? And later, become...?

Or would a well-scripted film,  
like 'Whistle down the Wind', make  
a memorable, reasonable reality  
of this, subtly balancing  
fiction and emotion,  
that children and their parents  
would go to see together, even  
buy the video?

It's such a private scene, this rehearsal  
of the event so hard to imagine,  
even if you try; as if you were  
on a fast Italian train; saw it flash past  
your window; not quite believe your eyes; then already  
two kilometres on, wonder if you should have  
pulled the communication cord with  
that elegant Italian instruction  
next to it? Or try to tell the guard  
in your halting Italian, that you'd seen  
the Crucifixion back there...he's Catholic,  
you're crazy English...yet, it happens..  
'miraculo... miraculo...!' the train's  
many kilometres down the line by now;  
the kids have maybe had enough to  
last them a lifetime.. packed up, gone home..so  
some kinda joke, Protestant English  
taking the mickey out of  
Catholic superstitious visions? Best say nothing,  
it'll work itself out in God's good time  
so to speak

We're sensible, down to earth people –  
A prosaic answer, perhaps? Like,  
this is a record of the moment in art  
when rumours of the delicate  
realism of that strange but skilful, detailed Flemish art  
hit the idealist Italian scene, by

secondhand account? 'Yes,  
they paint very carefully, real  
young people in a real landscape,  
acting out the greatest dramas –  
you should try it...'

Or perhaps some quietly, intensely  
devout patron might have said,  
I'd like a small Crucifixion scene to take  
around with me, or have upon the table  
in front of me to inspire my poetry;  
no need for dramatics, nor for labouring the point;  
just paint the scene; take my own children  
as the models; that will touch me more...

In the still silent backwater of this public gallery  
the Crucifixion plays itself out in paint,  
privately; you're reluctant  
to leave it, to seek the tearoom; since,  
no answers; only  
questions

Michael Shepherd



## 0257 When The Heart Melts

sometimes,  
some wonder times,  
I read a poem here and  
instantly want, because  
of the love of poetry  
or goodness, or truth, or beauty, or  
whatever, to  
live the life  
of the poet who  
wrote it

though

on reflection  
that might not work out  
or, I might not know  
I'd exchanged lives!  
but

at the moment I thought it  
the thought was pure because  
thanks to poetry  
and the very human poet  
our hearts were indeed  
as one

(for Oscar Mireles)

Michael Shepherd

## 0258 While The Enamel Holds

I've just made a passable loaf:  
the mixing bowl could almost  
be called a Thanksgiving Bowl -  
maybe, could start a fashion:

it's made, not of catering-trade steel  
which spins nicely on the worktop  
nor of plastic, but  
of enamel, made about 1929 I guess,  
by Kockums of Sweden, size 28 cms  
it's clearly stamped -  
Kockum's whose proud claim is that  
'it lasts a lifetime' - if  
you're fortunate enough to be able  
to test it thus...

my mother used it to make cakes  
- I can hear the scratch of sugar, butter, flour, right now;  
sometimes the smell of lemon or vanilla too. And  
for her, too, gratitude, I guess,  
while she used it, hands and thoughts,  
although she could not put it to  
the Kockum's test...But the silvery marks  
of the fork, or whisk, or careful knife that  
left little for me to lick,  
disappeared from its strong enamel

and now I use it to make bread  
wondering how many of  
the current users could verify  
to Kockum's management  
their proud claim

for it was only late in life that  
my mother told me that this bowl  
this small 28 cm bowl  
was my first baby bath

so as I use it with these mixed emotions

mixed together in this mixing bowl  
receptacle of love on love  
and thanksgiving  
I note with some reflection  
that recently, one slight chip  
in its circular bowl has appeared  
due perhaps to carelessness, not in  
the preparing but the washing-up...

and think I'd rather think  
(you see - the baby turned out intellectual)  
my life were rounded by my failures in my care  
than the life of an enamel bowl  
however guaranteed

perhaps we'll go together...  
dust to dust, flour to flour,  
flowers falling to nourish  
the seeds of flowers to come

I must remember to ask  
my executors to write Kockum's  
and confirm their not so often  
substantiated claim

Michael Shepherd

## 0259 Who Am I Not?

I started to write about how  
I love you  
but then the mind couldn't distinguish  
which was I, or you, or love...

I started to write that our love was like  
diamonds falling like raindrops in the sunlight  
or raindrops falling like diamonds in the sunlight  
but then the mind couldn't distinguish  
which was rain, or diamonds, or sunlight, or love...

I started to write about  
a star as bright as love itself,  
watched as it appeared  
in a boundless universe  
but then the mind couldn't distinguish  
which was the brilliant star, or boundless universe,  
or I the watcher.

Michael Shepherd

## 0260 You Couldn'T Make It Up If You Tried..

Your box of brand-new football boots  
this European season, where the diktat from Brussels sprouts hurhur,  
will bear the helpful message  
'Average contents: two'...

but when you've picked yourself off the floor  
consider this: three boots in a box (great film title)  
would be a box with not much inside left geddit hurhur;

but if you tried to sue the makers who only packed one  
on that cautionary statement, you wouldn't  
have a leg to stand on.

Michael Shepherd

# 0262 With A Hey And A Ho And An Oh What The Hell

in the spring  
an old man's fancy  
lightly turns to  
thoughts of  
re-evaluating the concept of  
love

Michael Shepherd

## 0263 Voyeur

Had you known  
that an old man was watching  
would you have been  
more grateful  
for your youth?

Michael Shepherd

## 0264 Toothpaste Tubes And Toilet Seats

Why do I hate you? Let me count the ways...

Oh I could list them.... but no - not the trivialities  
that drive us into impotent blind rage  
committed daily by our partners, children, (parents?) , room-mates -  
I, you, we, all have that list...

but I sing the joyous list of so-called 'minor' poets  
who simply spell out, so uproariously  
our petty human weaknesses,  
domestic inadequacies, all the idiot joy  
of living together while apart...

poets who'll never be on someone else's list  
of 'ground-breaking' avant-garde great names  
who with new neighbourings of words and sounds  
expand humanity's poetic vision of the tears of things;  
map out the undiscovered mind of years that are yet to be -

no - poets who, living all our lives for us,  
confirm, with smiling banal truisms, this comedy,  
our shared humanity; humans being humans;  
wishing that we might change, but not too soon, not yet...

and as we smile and groan as poets with their skills  
list that familiar daily stress and strain -  
the still, mad music of humanity -  
love arises.

Michael Shepherd



## 0265 Tongue

strange name for a pet yeah?  
but that's what I call it  
and it knows its name  
so we get along OK  
I keep it in its cage now  
since it's a bit large and scary  
for those who haven't met it  
or know its owner  
but I've given it all I can think of  
to keep it amused in its cage  
papers old books photos to keep its teeth sharp  
we love each other to bits

but every now and again  
I can 't resist opening up the cage  
and letting it out to be itself  
wild untamed sometimes vicious irresponsible  
I used to say naughty Tongue  
who's a naughty boy then  
but I felt such a hypocrite  
I love to see it free  
it's like when you have a pet greyhound  
that's never seen a track, or raced  
faster faster  
with all the crowd shouting  
to please itself and its master  
oh we're both so proud of Tongue

I was given it when it and me we were very small  
and people would smile and say  
what a pretty Tongue then  
it'll grow up to be a fine Tongue  
you must be very fond of it and proud too  
to my parents who smiled weakly  
they encouraged me and Tongue little did they know then  
little did they think  
that small Tongues grow to be big Tongues  
well isn't that the same with all pets  
until you flush them down the john

to roam the sewers or sneak out at night  
to leave them scratching the tiles  
in some gas station restroom  
and giving someone's bladder  
one hell of a shock opening the door  
they hoped we'd grow apart Tongue and I  
and I'd go on to something quieter  
tattoos piercings stuff  
I wouldn't do that not ever to Tongue  
though we had to leave home Tongue and I

so I go to open up the cage  
and Tongue opens its big mouth  
in a sorta snarly smile  
gives me a quick glance like yes now  
and then it's off  
pleased as Punch, top speed,  
sniffing where all the other tongues  
have left their mark  
sniffing friendly at children  
scaring grown-ups all shouting at me  
picking a fight with every other tongue it meets  
so I can't help be proud of it  
lifting its leg on the neighbours who tell the other neighbours  
who don't speak to me now  
oh we have a fine time Tongue and I

then after we've had a great workout  
come back panting, flushed, victorious not a bit ashamed  
maybe later  
people who've stopped talking to me  
say to each other so I'm told never me  
he'll be sorry one day  
Michael has such a malicious Tongue

Michael Shepherd

## 0266 This One's Only For Those Who Like It

Did Jesus, as a baby, cry?  
For was there aught to cry for?  
Or were His tears from God's own holy font,  
knowing, what He was here for?

The story speaks of one  
who's seldom seen in Christmas cribs –  
one of the first of animals to make praise:  
the inn's pet tabby cat, who, woken strangely  
by the faintest sound – yet, not a mouse who stirred –  
yawned, stretched, strolled slowly down to check  
that in the stable, all was peace...

and it was peace, as peace was ever known.

What could a tabby do but purr?  
The Christ Child woke; his lips seemed almost  
to form some first and holy word;  
gazed at the tabby cat, strange creature  
of this strange new world; saw it was good;  
and smiled.. and Mary, seeing this, and  
hearing in that purr, Creation's praise,  
leant down and with her hands, till then  
pressed in her world-bearing humility -  
and on the tabby's forehead  
as some mark of christenings yet to come,  
fingered the initial 'M' – not as some believe,  
her name – though happy coincidence, but  
the nearest human beings may come  
to praising godly human, human God,  
with perfect purr of peace. And so and ever since  
the tabby bears upon its forehead that sacred  
M. You didn't know? Well, take a look...

And you may wonder why  
this god or goddess of the hearth  
is not so honoured in the Christmas crib?  
Not as some unimaginative people think,  
in case it smothered inadvertently

the Christ Child – well, is that likely?  
No – it was as peaceful messenger  
outside the stable, marshalling in its holy role  
the birds and animals who'd first picked up  
even perhaps before the shepherds, that  
cosmic sound: 'The stable's full right now – please form  
an orderly queue' – and I'm sure  
I needn't tell you that this orderly queue, of two by two,  
followed the same order as they embarked  
and later, disembarked, from – yes, you guessed it -  
The Ark.

So this Christmas, if you still have your loved  
but battered Noah's Ark  
with all (well, mostly, now) its precious cargo –  
line them up around the crib, in an orderly  
queue of praise.

How quiet and peaceful,  
now, they are!

Michael Shepherd

## 0268 The Happy Man

without a care

in the world

save for

care itself

Michael Shepherd

## 0269 The Age Of Iron - Kali Yuga

The Rajah's court, it's said, sat dumb with grief,  
their sorrow that of those who truly love,  
on February the eighteenth, and full moon,  
three thousand, one-O-two years ere Christ's birth;

for wise men had foretold that ruthless span:  
the golden age, the silver, and the bronze  
had passed. The age of iron now began:  
the last and worst of ages, where the gods  
were to be lost to mind: Virtue herself  
from four sound legs, reduced to merely one;  
and all the ordered grace of human wealth  
to be abused and squandered until gone...

The court sought mercy. Then this answer came:  
'Give, and give, in full. Repeat God's name.'

Michael Shepherd

## 0270 Strange Day (For Dw)

You're walking down the street  
in the usual way  
when you catch someone's passing gaze  
and just like that you suddenly hear  
all their inner thoughts – non-stop,  
all over the place: good ones, bad ones,  
a cacophony of stuff, you wonder why  
they don't go mad with it – you look at them,  
they look quite normal, unconcerned...

then you look at someone else – the same thing happens;  
what can you do for them? You can't start  
to talk to everyone about their thoughts  
all the time, you'd go mad yourself...  
what makes them like this? What  
are they all looking for that they have  
to do all this thinking?

Suddenly you feel tremendously sorry  
that they should be like this; you're  
overwhelmed with -- compassion - for  
the human race, that all this stuff  
should get in the way of – what?

and as you walk, slower now,  
trying to hide the flood of tears  
and feeling some sort of holy idiot,  
glorious and embarrassed at the same time,  
the terrible chaos of those thoughts goes quiet, peaceful, silent, still,  
and now you feel light and full of light,  
and loving what you see in them  
yes all of them,  
as if you'd never felt any other way  
and you're so sure of this, that you'll  
always know how to tell them, some way, too  
that this is how they really are

it's all so obvious





# 0271 Texting Poetry (Hamlet's Soliloquy)

2B /, not

? ? ?

take shit / effoff

YEAH! ! !

zzzzz

zzz nn?

? ! ? ! ? !

- - - - -

Michael Shepherd

## 0271 The Covering

It was not bright enough, not bright enough  
to show itself to them, to all; to tempt  
the world to bring it gifts; the coloured wool  
would say to them look here, look here

it was not strong enough, not strong enough  
to meet the heat, the cold; to venture  
in the world's bright gifts; the coloured wool  
would warm it in the cold, the cold

it was not safe enough, not safe enough  
to shield itself from hurt; to live its life  
amid the strong, the weak; the coloured wool  
would hide it from the hurt, the hurt

there was not care enough, not care enough;  
the wool was knotted; slipped and slid  
around its centre there; the coloured wool  
is knotted here and here and here

there is not time enough, not time enough  
to free the wool; the wool it would cast off  
from off its centre there; the coloured wool  
that never was the need, the need

there were not words enough, not words enough  
to free itself; itself which never had the need  
to bind itself in coloured wools; it did not trust  
the bright, the strong, the safe, the care, the time.

Michael Shepherd

## 0272 Somme Day

Looks like being a fine day; how red  
the poppies in the sunlight.  
The whistles blow.  
From the now almost home of the slit trench  
Over the Top, boys! This is it!

Soon back. The slit trench  
is blessedly quieter now  
in its six feet.

Michael Shepherd

## 0273 Something A Song Sing Cummings

if loveliness  
says sweetly Yes  
says who poets'  
poetness?

worthwords,  
spearshake,  
art forsaken art  
a now world,  
with here you,  
in our all,  
whose heart?

if loveliness  
says sweetly Yes  
says who poets'  
poetness?

Michael Shepherd

## 0274 Spam

Three to four more inches,  
greater powers  
to keep hard at it  
for hours and hours,

wake the neighbours  
with her moans,  
buy now or she could  
leave you for Mr Jones

think I'll wait,  
see if she goes,  
I much prefer  
a night's repose

Michael Shepherd

## 0275 Reflection Of An Aged Poet

As if  
e v e r y year  
hadn't been  
a bonus..

Michael Shepherd

## 0276 Savagery

When did you first meet savagery?  
Not merely, the wounded heart,  
the Christmas present that they never bought  
although they knew you wanted that  
and nothing, nothing else..  
not merely when you knew  
that for the first time, they'd lied to you..  
not merely when the world first let you down,

but that savagery that tears at the heart,  
when you realise for the first time  
that to others – or at best, some others –  
you're just nothing, nothing...

I guess the question is too painful for some; those  
born into it; who wake to it within the house;  
go to bed with it; are woken by it in the middle of the night;

some meet it at first school,  
are schooled in it;  
the first thing stolen from you  
by those you thought your friends;  
suddenly the world's not flat, and just  
keep away from the edge and you'll be safe, but  
spherical, with a horizon all around  
beyond which the dragon's smoky breath  
lurks, waiting to devour.

Only three generations or so since  
our forefathers met savagery, were savage, fought for land,  
musket in one hand, spade in the other;  
only four generations since  
their fathers were forced off some other land they thought their own;  
only two generations since the working class  
lived their whole life with savage poverty not far away;

when savagery's in short supply, there's always war;  
but that's forewarned; there are no counsellors of battle  
for then it's just too late. We're all to meet it; learn from it; but who

will dare to put it on the home, the school, agenda?  
'There are those to whom you're not even  
a victim or an enemy; you're just – nothing..'  
Pope called it  
the inhumanity of man to man.

Michael Shepherd



## 0277 Rumi The Sufi Puts You Straight

'It seems from time to time - if not always -  
that all that stands between my present self,  
and what I hope to be, is...just myself...'  
'But you are not the trouble - you're the cure! '

'Well, that's all very fine; but I feel locked -  
I just can't free myself from all my past;  
the mind can't see escape from habit's grasp...'  
'But you are not that lock; you are the key! '

'If only I were - but I won't name names -  
I'm sure it would be easier for me  
to be my self; at least, feel much more free...'  
'Well, that's too bad - that's just not how it works!

Just see and love your self; and know this true:  
there is no self more beautiful than you! '

Michael Shepherd

## 0278 Scenario

This disgusting August day  
so hot and sticky that the sweat can't sweat,  
your collar and cuffs a wet grey grime,  
the sunlight graceless through the concrete cliffs,  
the shade no shade but fetid oven,  
the street signs almost too tired to communicate  
and faces too tired to be human,

in a squalid room up there  
best left undescribed  
and a lifestyle defined by its trash can,  
some young guy  
is putting words together

which on a day like this but  
a few years the other side of despair  
and an uncaring world  
will make you loosen your tie  
with a jaunty Sinatra hand,  
tip your hat back on your head, execute  
a Gene Kelly sidestep on a dancing sidewalk,  
swivel your hips like Fred Astaire,  
turn and smile and grab her close,  
step out step in step,  
Broadway wrote it just for you.  
life couldn't be better, here and now,  
you're part of it, it's part of you,

it's all in the music.

Michael Shepherd

## 0279 Sc - Satanic Correctness

Satan's licence to condemn:

'There are more of US than THEM! '

Michael Shepherd

## 0281 A Mid-Atlantic Voice

It's said in Indian circles that the years of retirement are the time when men choose the occupation of their next life. So I'm sitting here on a fine Sunday in a quiet London suburb, the very day when the geraniums have decided that they and the sun are into a long-term relationship, sitting wondering whether I'd like to be an American poet next time around.

It seems on the surface very tempting: for economic survival, teaching creative writing in a medium-profile college where I guess they get on well with their students and discuss in a class of about twenty-one Pamela Anderson's implants and their removal in an urbane, witty, jokes-and-depth way; they live with a happy family in a happy house and rejoice - as poets, unacknowledged legislators of mankind - in the safety, the relaxed glory, of being typical Americans yet with full liberal license nay duty to criticise or reject or even fulminate against the American Way of Life.

They write as they live, a relaxed, underplayed (you should be reading this at that unhurried pace) free verse, (short lines if as Levine claims, his cat sits there and claws him if the line goes on too far, otherwise about four-five slight stresses to a line) as appropriate and becoming for a writer of sincerity and integrity; while under their urbane but sharp observation of natural detail and human fallibility and institutional absurdity and the life of the less fortunate, strong emotions are at play, expressed with a wry, broad-minded and life-affirming balance. They are at ease with themselves, and us.

They may run to rhyme for comic and children's verse but otherwise have surrendered the grand statement that clunk-clicks like a doorlock, with perfect rhyme and 'meter'; however that doesn't mean you can't easily tease from the occasional reference that they've read the greats. In depth. In fact they're radio-sharp on every event, every cultural reference, and their relaxed eye

and mind and decent heart mixes family, brand names, politics  
and the afore-inspected Pamela Anderson  
to make poems which aim at the very heart of America  
in a very independent American way; in fact you could say  
although of course I'm not the one to say this,  
that they are the real conscience of America,  
the heartland of the united state of mind, and with what -  
if they used the phrase, 'feelgood factor' -  
they would play with, using all the subtleties  
of a fly-fisherman in the river of thought.  
Even their reviews are enviable: 'a wildly refreshing,  
necessary poet'; 'writes with an honest man's happy discontent';  
'everything is touched by his hand'. They are appreciated.  
They are that blessed species of human being - useful. And loved.

Yes, it's tempting to put in an order to the drive-by  
at the cemetery gates  
for a new life as American poet. Were it not  
that we who have lived into a wariness of metaphysical speculation  
must balance in the world of the unproven  
the consideration that time-lapse between embodiments  
may make all this a fruitless dream in a hideous world  
of swords, not ploughshares; guns, not pens.

And that - Walt, Jack, Pablo, Hank -  
would be another ball-game.

Michael Shepherd

## 0282 A Necessary Art

There's art history, and there's the history of art.  
Art history, you can learn anywhere these days;  
the history of art's some other, thrilling thing, a life-blood  
pumping its heart intensely as if it were a matter  
which it is of course, of life and death..

and who will tell you, except those who lived it through,  
who will tell you - except perhaps old men;  
while the students yawn, stop taking notes,  
and wonder if the chick back there  
is up for it?

Who will tell you that the truth is savage,  
and the world hard earned,  
and art, painting, poetry,  
a matter of life and death?

Who will tell you, for instance, how after 1945,  
when war ended, and 'peace'  
was the threat of nuclear annihilation,  
the great French artists, who had made  
their various accommodations with the occupying power  
brought out near ten years' work the world had never seen?  
As if archaeologists, searching for the past,  
had found instead, the future?  
Picasso, Matisse, Leger, Braque - you know the names...

and how Picasso, who never allowed any other artist  
to see him at his work, opened his Paris studio  
to hordes of American servicemen? Interviewed  
in the great French magazine, Cahiers d'Art, in I think  
the late 1940s, he said his art was  
'une somme des destructions' - a sum of destructions;

and Wallace Stevens, in a lecture at the Met, in 1951,  
remembered the phrase, made it his text, and  
told the post-war world that painting, as with poetry,  
was man's great chance to seek his self - for each of us  
to find out who we really are - in ways, we listening

were to assume, which might not always be heard in churches  
or from philosophers' petty squabblings..

now today, this may seem a truism put out by slick PR  
from auction houses; who can tell you  
what it was like to hear that said?  
and by so great a poet man?

There's art history, and the history of art.  
Who will tell you that the truth is savage  
and the world hard earned,  
and art, painting, poetry,  
a matter of life and death?

Michael Shepherd

## 0283 A Poet Condescends

It has been brought to my notice  
that a review by you of  
my latest book of writings  
(the term 'poem' suggests  
false expectations and is not therefore  
used by me) claims that, I quote,  
'this poetry is so obscure that  
I reckon it's a hoax'...

Your comment is truer than  
you yourself would appreciate.  
My writing is indeed a hoax  
in terms of your level of  
understanding. I do not seek  
easy paths to meaning, nor  
the standard readymade language of the  
avant-garde. So what I have  
worked though, you have not,  
and therefore, your understanding  
however partial would be, in your  
terms, a hoax.

Indeed, were you to write  
an identical 'poem' to my writing,  
it would indeed be a hoax –  
it would not be the revisioning  
of the cosmos, the semantic discourse  
with language and communication itself,  
the thoughtful and reasoned displacement  
of prepositions and their too-long  
accepted usage, the deep rejection of  
all parameters of lazy thinking about  
the imagined 'purpose' of poetry,  
the study of Chinese orthography as preferred signifier,  
in short, the 'depth' and 'breadth' –  
although I of course reject the  
accepted implications of those  
out-dated metaphors for the  
neurological Cartesian – which, in short,



'I' as presented in my writing  
have voyaged.

However, in  
the spirit of charity, I wish you well  
in the deeper study of my writings,  
and your 'poetry' magazine  
should it continue its somewhat  
faltering publication.

Besides, I'm a widely published  
writer so yah boo sucks.

(Palinode to the above: everyone has the right to write obscure poetry...I'm  
unfairly attributing to the poet the attitude of those who put themselves on a  
pedestal and 'explain' why they're a genius...) (Though of course...)

Michael Shepherd

## 0284 A Poet To His Critic, Ok?

Look, everyone from birth to death, yeah? is  
tryin' to express somethin', right? , that  
goes beyond  
what they've expressed before, OK? so  
what we need isn't a ton of crit-shit, yeah? but  
a little help and advice would be appreciated... right?

an' we don't ask for praise, OK? although  
it's always nice, yeah? but  
a little encouragement would be appreciated... right?

Michael Shepherd

## 0285 A Pretty Kettle Of Wish

Meltdown. A new kettle urgently required for the gas stove. Men love an excuse to wander around the Aladdin's cave of an ironmongers the older the better.

Shock-horror. Rattly, thin as they can get away with, and outrageously, the same price as technology's masterpieces of electric jug... long gone, the solid kettle which sits so friendly on the hob of open fire...

So it's off to the Oxfam thriftshop. a short prayer to the goddess of the hearth (Hestia, in case you wonder, poetically) – and lo and behold, abracadabra, hey presto –

a Designer Kettle in all its glory – solid, shining, copper-flashed-bottom, two-note whistle in two-tone brass, chromium-bright finish, ingenious spout-opener, handle in clever cool plastic, the whole a vision, part Futurist image fit for a painting, part evoking a Mussolini-era steel helmet, and a theft at the price.

The two-tone whistle packed up the first week despite prodding and poking its gleaming brass; the spout-lifter burned the fingers – I had to grow a long thumbnail to survive; the gleaming surface scratched when cleaned; the copper bottom crumbled off; the short spout made filling a teapot dangerous on two counts: the steam, and the aim, endangering the hands.

Was it designed by a woman

or a man? You've guessed it. Who's  
the more practical?

The debatable poetic conclusion  
of this poet: men go for  
form; women go for content.

Michael Shepherd

## 0286 Aircrew Stopover

As you walk out of the palatial marble foyer  
of the refurbished four-star hotel  
where the 'front desk' is a healthy walk away  
from the discreetly supervised, invisibly recorded entrance,  
there they are lined up waiting for their transport –  
the airline crew

immaculate, fresh, custom-fit navy uniforms,  
neat to ad-sleek hair, those crisp, jaunty neck-scarves  
which are forever 1950s and band-box-fresh New World,  
they are lined up like some Sultan's Weekly Choice  
for your inspection. Air Caribbean, can they be?  
They line up in some informally formal  
(isn't that the ideal for a reassuring cabin crew?)  
hierarchy – at the front the quietly heroic captain,  
(do firm shaved aftered jaws and distant eyes come with the job?)  
then the other cockpit crew; and down the line  
the cuties. The last 'dusky beauty' is jail-bait young..

so as you pass this line-up, dressed for duty but just waiting,  
but so alert, fifteen pairs of bright eyes check you out professionally,  
and you them...  
you and these smart pleasers have shared the hotel overnight  
and you never knew... And the fantasies of lust are here paraded –  
do their eyes linger on you just that extra microsecond,  
as if – can it be – they're thinking just the same thought as you?

So for a second, secure in the luxury of the untouchable,  
you, they, look full-on, hungry, at each other... and as you walk away,  
the barest, barest of backward glances transform the line  
into the cast of a lustfilled airport inflight mile-high  
discardable paperback  
awaiting your wildest best-selling fantasies  
on the crowded grubby train-ride home

Michael Shepherd

## 0287 Ars Poetica

A poem should be -

stop right there, chum. You've hit  
the target in four words.

see it there? Like the  
Northern Lights, the Aurora Borealis,  
like a simile,  
flashing through the mind,  
reshaping the heavens,

soaring merrily above  
should-be-s and shouldn't-be-s

and - not even like I've said.  
like nothing else  
except itself

poetica my ars

a poet should be  
a poem should be.

Michael Shepherd

## 0289 Bacchus, God Of Poetry And Wine

The famous Poet Laureate  
of North Dakota State  
has been suspended on full pay  
just because one merry day  
attending a writers' conference  
at a restaurant, under the influence  
of the Bacchic nectar he'd imbibed  
there were incidents, yet undescribed.  
But his students have Larry Woiwode's promise  
to deal with their theses on Dylan Thomas  
and other poets. Ironic, it must seem  
to all those drunk with poetry, in Academe?

Michael Shepherd

## 0291 Before The Fall

All was quiet in the Garden of Eden;  
the apple hung there, ripe, uneaten;  
the serpent's voice remained unheard;  
and not a fig leaf stirred.

Michael Shepherd



## 0293 Black, White, Gray, Color

Black and white are the magic of the drama  
in the world of film;  
gray, the poetry –  
silver-gray of Paris; sunshine gray;  
dark tragic gray of lovers' partings  
on the symbolic bridge, while the Seine  
flows inexorably, darkly past like life and love;

who needs Casablanca in full color?

But there's another gray –  
the gray of exhaustion.  
In 1945, a trip to London was a trip  
to another race, of gray to unhealthy white  
exhausted survivors, of the bombs  
and doodlebugs and rockets,  
of dead husbands, wives, sons or daughters,  
broken marriages; bomb-shelter life drained of all emotion,  
and almost too tired to welcome peace;  
gray as the soot-encrusted buildings,  
of smoke and London fog;  
and Eliot's 'Waste Land' which we had read  
before 1939 as a vision of the new poetry  
was now in 1945 a vision in the mirror  
of what we were, of how it was; the truth of life.

Paper – so dangerously brought across the sea in war  
from Canada, in ships sharked by U-boats,  
bombs, torpedoes, was reserved for  
the War Effort – propaganda, booklets  
portraying the British countryside, the villages, we were fighting for;  
and the occasional Penguin book on brownish paper,  
of the dazzling white and crisp black contours  
of the Modern Architecture  
in which we all, we happy all would live – this earth,  
this realm, this England, this jewel set  
in a silver sea, this demi-paradise...  
Corbusier would house us in the sky,  
reclining in our Breuer chairs,

Gropius would cosset us,  
our outhouse would be Bauhaus.. in  
a paradise of black and white and gray  
as they and we should be

and then, as we continued to snip  
our ration books, 'restrictions were lifted' on some things,  
and from America, that magic land, where  
possibility had not died, one could order through the post  
the lavish world of the colour magazine; and such things as  
'American Home' came like a rainbow zapping  
through the letter-box –  
like some art film, black and white and poetic gray which  
suddenly printed in full Technicolor:  
California sunned itself by long, low walls,  
fierce cacti tamed in terracotta pots;  
New England sparkled, spick and span,  
white picket fences in the sunshine,  
The Flag on every trim front lawn,  
and at the door, She wall-to-walled her smile  
which matched her frilled red-white gingham apron  
and the 2.2 children looking up at her adoringly,  
young Dad with his pipe in the background;  
inside, the blue-white gingham table-cloth  
and blue-white crockery zinged against  
the buttercup yellow wall; the bright blue red green yellow  
painted (do it yourself) or stencilled  
Pennsylvania Dutch chairs and cupboards said,  
life is good, listen to the  
Hoagy Carmichael, Benny Goodman, Johnny Mercer  
in the background, life is buoyant, look at all the colours,  
optimism runs from every tap, it's in the air,  
we'll think of a new word for it all – upbeat...

and the blood began to flow in our gray, exhausted cheeks:  
there must be hope, for Over There, Over There,  
yes, the Yanks were showing us, there was a magic land,  
and it was here and now; Somewhere over The Rainbow  
had arrived; Deanna Durbin sang, Nat crooned; there was, after all,  
Something Worth Fighting For..

It's a moment in history some forget,

some will never know, some few remember,  
the moments of the heart which escape  
the compressions of the history books,  
the moral fables of a hopedry world; but  
live undaunted in the memory  
in full, glorious color,  
the moments of the heart.

Michael Shepherd

## 0294 Bless This Thy Child

Rose-pink, glowing, tiny hands and toes,  
the magic of perfection brought to life -  
if we can think beyond that self-same glow,  
how may we help your passage through this life?

For 'education' seems too long a word  
to speak too near your tiny ear just yet;  
yet mother's, father's, total hopes and love  
upon you - who are world itself - are set:

perhaps, like Hindu mothers, we should sing  
a cradle song: 'You are that very Self';  
and hope that we and you may lifelong bring  
that magic of your birth to all life's wealth.

For who can start to show you who you are,  
but those whose own self shines like guiding star?

Michael Shepherd

## 0296 Casting For A New Production

The second act went really well tonight,  
pity it's so near the end of the run,  
it's good enough for a West End transfer;  
they're a good bunch when we work together

no thanks, not tonight old man –  
got some TV ad lines to learn,  
well it's good money for old rope...  
seeyer chizmate

make-up off, stage door chat –  
after a good perf., who wants to pub it,  
hear yet again about how they triumphed together  
in Romeo and Juliet god how many years ago  
looking at them now – obscene..

\*

When people used to tell me  
how old people sat lost to the world  
in a golden haze of memory,  
I used to think  
borING..! not me, not on your life...

but it's not quite like that:  
a touch of unexpected thought  
may clothe loved actors in a new-stitched garb –  
before you took the stage and they  
were cast by you as your supporting roles –

they too were Romeo and Juliet,  
throwing the curtains open on their red-eyed dawn...  
and you, not even yet the twinkle  
in the future's eye...  
they'd played the serving-maid, the page,  
the jaunty clown, the flirt, the on-off, bright-eyed savagery -  
the toilers in the burning, dusty sun,  
the heroes in a life of war and peace,  
had hopes you never knew or asked,

and then, invited you to join their cast...

these were such unknown people, just  
as unimportant as you are seen as, now...  
but loved, by those you never knew or thought of...

now, in your lean and slippered age  
you can re-read their lines,  
these fellow actors whom you thought  
because they loved you, that you were their life...  
now, as you re-write the stories of their lives,  
cast them as beloved strangers

Michael Shepherd

## 0298 Cosmetic Surgery

She bought a new face  
with all her riches;  
then heard a good joke;  
it left her in stitches.

Michael Shepherd

## 0299 Customs And Excise

The postman who never looks me in the face  
(was it something the garlic said?)  
has just delivered a parcel  
heavy with history

and I'm left holding it and wondering  
what I'm holding

In 1972 Marina Vlady, the film actress  
who had found favour with the  
appropriate authorities  
was handed a suitcase at Moscow's  
Sheremetevo Airport by the poet  
Yeveny Yevtushenko; it contained  
in its 15 kilograms of manuscript,  
the lifeblood of 245 Russian poets

It took until 1993 for this to be published;  
my –(how can I dare to call it my) –  
Russian-red-covered,1078-page copy  
of this great event, this blood transfusion of poetry,  
entered Brooklyn Public Library  
on November 12,1993  
only to be removed from the shelf  
on February 12,1996  
scrawled 'mutilated' and stamped  
'withdrawn from free use in  
city cultural welfare institutions...'

all because some reader (some émigré  
rediscovering his own 'mutilated' culture  
'withdrawn from free use',  
in the winter warmth of  
Brooklyn Public Library?)  
has pencilled an implied question or two by underlining  
the translation of 'My Leafless Maple Tree'  
by the universally beloved Sergey Yesenin  
and offered an alternative word  
in shaky English which looks more like Cyrillic,



in the comment 'he diverted himself with heavy drinking',  
for the word 'diverted'...

now I notice also on this page 290  
headed 'Children of the Golden Age'  
a small dampness which could be a tear.

Michael Shepherd

## 0300 Dante On Mowing The Front Lawn

Let's not go into the matter of that  
dark wood in our back garden which  
shames us in the eyes of our  
prissy neighbours (we call it  
our 'poetic arbour', where  
camelopards roam) -

mowing the lawn - that's all I can manage  
between poetic stints:  
it's hell when you put it off -  
the wife, the pointed looks from  
those prissy neighbours, the  
pricks of social conscience, and  
the guilt...oh the guilt...  
sins of omission, all that stuff, I'm  
in and out of the confession box...

then when I get round to it at last  
it's purgatory - the grass is long,  
gets in the rollers at the hub, it's  
wet at the roots, tears when it should cut,  
bald brown patches revealed -  
the neighbours' children do their  
'watch and pretend to hide their suppressed  
laughter with a hand and a smirk' act... but

it's sheer (sheared?) paradise when  
it's done and I can look the neighbours  
in the eye and dare them to  
make some pointed remark in  
the guise of compliment - how I hate  
this pre-modern irony, Juvenal started it...

all this to get a whiff of paradise...  
and now it's just rained this morning and  
the bloody grass looks unshaven  
already... lawnmowing, it's just  
one eternal round - look,  
the neighbour's out already with his

swanky new machine; it's  
a real human comedy

(thanks to Adam and The Poetry Society for the initial inspiration)

Michael Shepherd

## 0302 Design For Living

I believe with William Morris  
that there should be nothing in the house  
which is not known to be useful  
or seen to be beautiful.

So I'm filing for divorce.

But which of us should go  
first?

Michael Shepherd

## 0303 Diary Of A Poem

The Indians have a word for it, of course -  
'sphota' - not too unlike our 'photo-flash' -  
meaning, an explosion in consciousness:  
as you recognise it in a flash, it's not yet words,  
barely an idea; just that curious urge, for it to be;

You try to get it down - the first verse is a mess,  
just like your bedroom as you try to pack  
a weekend case that covers everything -  
but you really need it, all the same, to get to second base.

You don't know where it's going, but  
your intentions are - the best;  
and if Dame Fortune smiles  
(a clichayed phrase, but who else can you blame?)  
there comes that moment when

some mechanism in the mind  
slips into auto-pilot: and you don't know  
whether the words which now are lining up  
are true or untrue; inspired poetry, or the mind's  
rubbish-bin; just like a radio that's not been tuned;  
but better something, as you think,  
than nothing... then, that joy-ride stops,  
as if you'd floated in some breeze-blown, fine hot-air balloon  
and the moment that your feet touched solid ground,  
the memory of the ride itself is gone...

Better sleep on it; you'll be  
a slightly different person in the morning:  
you may be grateful; groan; or get quite fond of it.

It's all in the lap-top of the gods.

Michael Shepherd

## 0304 Drawing Space

See this whitish sheet - now mellowing to a shade  
of precious ivory - gently revealing in the finest lines of silver-point  
two lovers whose whole air of innocence  
makes them angelic, as if their ardent gaze  
joined souls not bodies;  
though those bodies, beautiful, transparent,  
she all gauze, her dress  
moved by the lightest breath of air as if it would  
return her to the air; her breasts, to innocence itself;  
he, every muscle of proud chest under pleated jerkin  
joining his dancing legs to ardent eyes  
consumed in adoration for what he barely dares,  
her beauty and its innocence

this silver-point might be from Botticelli, or  
a well-trained student in the master's mind  
glancing over and across the studio  
at what the master, the magician,  
conjures out of space and out of mind;

the then white vacant sheet  
undifferentiated space as if  
it were Creation waiting the command  
to be itself;  
there's magic still to come, and space itself  
yet to be brought alive. See these lines;  
they are not bounding bodies, but the space itself;  
on one side of this line, the air alive with happening that's invisible,  
the other side, her space we call her body;  
all her life enclosed in what the artist sees -  
awakening of love; see in the space  
between her outstretched hand and his,  
about to join with lightest touch in dance,  
- electricity - before mankind knew such a thing or named;  
and in this space, there's love divine.

and see the space between their eyes: why,  
in that space, their lives, the present, past, the future;  
their minds, their hearts, their souls

hover all expressed and yet invisible;

from emptiness the artist has found space;  
from space, from line, drawn as the first time, love.

Michael Shepherd

## 0305 Dylan (1)

the motorcycle leans  
the motorcycle swerves  
...the motorcycle just don't  
give a damn  
about anything

(Robert Zimmerman,1960)

Michael Shepherd



## 0305 Dylan (2)

I search the depths of my soul for an answer  
but there is no answer  
because there is no question  
and there is no time

(Robert Zimmerman,1960)

Michael Shepherd

## 0307 Dylan (3)

I have to quit smoking  
but I can't quit smoking  
I love to smoke  
almost as much  
as I love to love

(Robert Zimmerman,1960)

Michael Shepherd

## 0308 Dylan (4)

sholam alechem all you mothers  
and don't think your son is so great  
if you could only see him tonite -  
like an animal  
an ugly, vibrating, menstrating dirty little animal  
for that is all he is anyway!  
he isn't as hip and cool as you think he is  
or as he is supposed to be  
'hee hee hee'  
'look at me, ma, I'm stoned'  
get the hell out of my life  
before I tell your mother on you

Dylanism

(Robert Zimmerman, 1960)

Michael Shepherd

## 0309 Eeyore's View Of The State Of The Nation

If you build a great nation  
on the statement  
'In God we trust'  
and then proceed  
to deny that in your actions,  
in your thinking,  
you start to believe in  
the primacy of materialism, physical substance  
like, say, drugs

and subtly  
minds adapt to the idea  
that drugs solve all –  
to aid backward children,  
to quieten teenagers,  
to make prisoners docile,  
to make mad people docile,  
to keep soldiers brave,  
to bomb your enemies,  
to stimulate sex life,  
to keep people 'happy'  
or if not happy, then outasite,  
and if they're down,  
get them up, and  
if they're up, get them down  
and if they're dying,  
make it peaceful

well it works,  
doesn't it?  
the only side-effects  
which we don't look into  
very carefully  
are to  
humanity and stuff

but no-one asks me  
said Eeyore



## 0311 Eternal Justice

I was just staggering in the gate  
with two heavy bags  
from an exhausting week's conference  
when the conman and his accomplice  
got me right at my own front door –  
I'm mortified by the memory –

they could replace my missing roof tiles  
in a moment, look, the ladder's  
already up there, the accomplice  
is halfway up, now he's already  
on the roof in his plimsolls, now he's  
shaking the chimney-stack, look, it's loose  
.... no cash? oh,  
they'd drive me to the nearest cash-point...  
well, you can guess the rest –  
anything for a quiet life...

as I dozed off that evening,  
flushed with anger, blushed with stupidity,  
too tired to crawl to bed,  
realizing that conmen have  
all the skills of hypnotists,  
enlightenment struck:

the next morning, I would wake up  
150 dollars the poorer but morning-fresh;  
'they' would wake up with the urgent need  
to seek another mug each day.

And I realised that sublime, ruthless,  
beautiful, tragic, comic, eternal justice  
is - to be – to live it through as -  
just as we are; right now...

heroes or victims of ourself

Michael Shepherd

## 0312 Even The Best May Stumble

Let's suppose  
you've bought or blagged  
an invite to a buzzy West End party  
after the football game, where  
you'll 'mingle with the stars'

and when you get there, all glammed up  
and wearing your Saturday best,  
you glimpse, beyond a velvet, guarded rope,  
the 'stars' you just won't mingle with –

those 'celebs' with not too much to do  
except to party and be photographed,  
'stars' who're hoping thus to burn the brighter  
in the starry glitter of their combined glow...

while the hungry media, mingling in symbiosis,  
poised to photograph,  
smooze and click to elevate  
these passing comets into myth

\* \* \*

But every now and then  
onto the stage of public wild acclaim  
strolls the myth itself, the archetypal  
Aristotelian hero –

not quite the Job or Oedipus whom  
the gods single out for test, with all their force;  
but the classic hero of the public stage  
with that one fatal flaw, and  
without the Stoic wisdom that  
all life's a lesson to be learned, who  
finally puts a magic foot wrong; and then  
fate gives the golden best the final boot...

Shakespeare missed out, so it seems, on sport,  
apart from the Royal tennis court,



otherwise he might have seen  
Othello, as a footballer,  
Desdemona his other half, his god-given, wonder-working skill;  
Iago the tempter whispering with sex and booze around  
the light and lustre of our hero's life he drove himself to kill  
so killed his very self

'To wilful men  
the injuries that they themselves procure  
must be their schoolmasters'...  
Shakespeare would have recognised him  
for what he was: earth-striding idol, feet of golden clay.

Yet those who knew him, as Cordelia did King Lear,  
loved him  
beyond all tragedy. Yes, he was more than that -  
we have the footage of that golden foot.

Michael Shepherd

## 0313 Every Poem's An Adventure

Reader, if it's the first time that you hit  
this site, stretching out like a landscape  
as far as the mind may reach – just, we ask,  
remember –  
every poem's an adventure;

- not, perhaps, for you, scrolling fast in case there's  
something better round the corner -  
but for these writers – Frost-sparkling, or first-born ...

tune in if you must, to those  
discerning poet-critics, poet-teachers, with  
their 'one of his least successful'...  
'in this early work, she has not as yet...'  
'marks the slow falling-away of the early promise...'  
those distant, serious, inconsequential voices like  
twirling a radio dial across the stations –  
but remember –  
every poem's an adventure;

all we here, know so well, that  
one day we set down what there was to say  
and then, we realise - without a shape to it...;  
another day, some passing angel touches it  
and like some shake of the kaleidoscope,  
there it is in perfect form,  
touched with immortality...

we – we're not fooled; they're failures in some degree, never  
quite what we hoped of them;  
but we don't delete them, for  
they're our children, and we love them;  
we've learned from bearing, rearing, shaping them;  
and when they leave home and roam around the world,  
someone may love a part or all of them...  
they're here because, even if they're  
'hackneyed, trite, unambitious, banal'  
to those that shit in judgement on your work...yet

every poem's an adventure.

Michael Shepherd

## 0314 Executive Decision

'Look! now briefly, mortal living head -  
As severed from thy now so lifeless limbs  
In brief and, who knows, truthful, godly view,  
So solemn, oncely, rare - that fleshly instrument  
That thou hath used, misused...  
And learn this last of life's live lessons, quick and dread  
In these few seconds of a living death...'

So Dean John Donne might have wrung out  
that detail, had he known it – tolled  
his solemn, tortured, feargod, ringing knell  
- had he but known this 'metaphysical' quaint fact:

that, when the executioner's sharp axblade  
slices through your neck with such finality,  
the head maintains its human faculties  
for eight brief seconds after body falls;

the executioner, it's said, with great formality, then  
takes hold that still-life head by its warm hair,  
and turns it round with all solemnity,  
to gaze its last repentance or regret  
upon its frail accomplice on life's way;  
the gathered audience awed to silent, ice-cold heart..  
last freeze-frame photo of an undeveloped film.

This solemn final courtesy of soul to soul  
I'll leave to metaphysicals, to speak life whole.

Michael Shepherd



## 0316 Faith - For You Who Asked

Yes, there is a stage  
and yes, there are actors;  
a script to engage;  
an experienced director..

Yes, indeed, I'll pray for you  
to the One they say best deems  
those matters which may bless our soul  
however strange they seem;

Oh yes, I will pray for you,  
as much as human can;  
but, add this wish from me for you,  
which is more personal:

In course of time – who knows how long? –  
may you look back and say,  
'Although it seemed ungodly cruel,  
it turned out well for me..'

Yes, there is a stage  
and yes, there are actors;  
a script to engage;  
an experienced director.

Michael Shepherd

## 0317 Fingertip To Fingertip, A Human Net

i think it's really wonderful  
that with all the million poems on this net  
people find their way to read what each of us has read  
or written.

it's like a shining human net around the world -  
fingertip to fingertip in space  
all connected by the love of poetry  
and the poetry of love.

so instead of moping and chewing our pencils,  
feeling pathetic and unread  
we can dedicate all our poems to all those real people who - yes! -  
actually read them  
and say  
It's you I wrote them for - and you - and you-  
and now I know you're there  
I'll write some better ones for you in time,  
that what it's all about...

and if I'm silent for a time  
working on something that's good enough for you,  
remember -

love, love, love

Michael Shepherd

## 0318 Five

Five fingers touching  
in the warmth of night;  
five toes walking you  
when your back feels tight;  
five senses yearning  
in the half-filled bed;  
five times memory  
both alive and dead.

Michael Shepherd



## 0319 For Jake - A Sloppigram

Some days I love crap sentiment  
'cause I know there's real sentiment under there

Some days I love silly pomes  
'cause I know it takes a happy man to be silly

Some days I love rude messages  
'cause they're a way of not saying loving, embarrassing things  
about special people

Hi Jake

Michael Shepherd

## 0320 Forget Me? Not!

To see the greatness of Creation  
- greater than science, greater than religion –  
and perhaps to see in mind, perhaps to praise,  
look to the smallest things.

Even before the mustard-seed of faith  
today I choose - the forget-me-not, and its thoughtful seeds. It  
has this habit of, each year, colonising  
a different area of the garden; and I wonder,

what is its essential character? Is it  
like that prim, fussy, difficult elder relative, for whom  
you've carefully arranged a day out somewhere  
then when you tell her as a nice surprise she says  
oh I've been there, as if you're just thoughtless and  
that puts the kybosh on it?

or like some energetic missionary – plant the seed  
of faith, then move on fast, don't wait  
to see whether it's taken root, move on, there's  
so much more to do, so many souls...

or like some far-eyed, romantic Wild West pioneer,  
who looks into the glory of the setting sun  
and pushes onward, ever onward,  
to unknown splendours under a Western sun  
until one day, there's blue beyond the furthest ridge?

or, like a child with sparkling eyes, mischievous, laughing,  
saying, let's play hide-and-peek, now close your eyes  
and count to ten, no I'm not there, or there, or there,  
I'm here, and here, and here...

or is it Creation's memory of itself, itself,  
reduced by some wise cosmic greatness  
of the miracle of miniaturisation  
to a still small voice, so small  
that only the eye can hear it,  
blue as an angel's clear blue mind,

saying, forget Me not

(for Scarlett, who added to the fun)

Michael Shepherd

## 0321 From A Drop, Of Gasolene

Did you notice  
as you put the nozzle back in place  
after filling your tank today,  
a drop, of oil, of gasoline, of petrol  
fell on the stained and stony ground?

did you hear – no, surely it couldn't be –  
the faintest sound then, almost  
as if it came from somewhere on that ground?

It was my voice.

Millions, billions of years ago  
I was a tree  
reaching upward from the blessing of the soil  
to the blessing of the sun  
in silent worship of our nature  
and the God who planned it thus

I grew, spread my branches wide in gratitude,  
sang my silent song of praise,  
grew old and died, with a sigh heard through the forest,  
not of regret but of a life well lived  
falling into God's peace;  
knowing that in His divine mercy  
I had laid down my life  
for future generations, in the perfection  
of the cycle of all Creation.

The years passed; and mankind  
in its desire to move further, faster, more often, cheaply, then  
with the help of God's mind in mankind's own mind, dreamed up  
the automobile; and needed then its combustible life-blood,  
this miracle liquid made before man named miracles

so as I lie, a dropp of gasoline catching the sun  
or the harsh lights of gas-station forecourt  
know this: my love for you



## 0322 Globetrotting Snails

a great title for a rock group but  
from this week, fact or at least  
truthish. species have been found  
to travel many thousands of miles  
across land and sea  
and don't you wonder how and  
aren't you that little bit envious?  
nature's aerial hitchhiker-backpacker-caravanner  
wow

seems they (they? how did the word  
get around? snail-mail?)  
learned (learned?) this trick  
of sneaking into the wing-feathers  
of migrating birds. and anyway the birds in this  
symbiotic relationship are thought  
to tuck them in there (which came first,  
the chicken or the snail?) as an  
inflight snack, though evidently  
missing one or two who

when they get to the dropping-zone  
(more questions – how do they know? a  
well-developed sense of smell?)  
paraglide, dismount, unload without a word  
of thanks – you know the type – and make  
themselves at home, though in an  
eliot-esque way, they arrive with what  
they have not left, and in a garden  
outside time, and in a place  
they've never left behind... and we'll just never know  
whether it was wanderlust or simply  
Intelligent Design

it's as simple, wise, and beautiful  
as any poet might imagine and  
beats surrealism at its own game  
or as the critics put it, extends  
the parameters of vision. though

perhaps globetrotting is  
a terminological inexactitude...

snailboarding?

Michael Shepherd

## 0323 God Removes In Mysteriousways

Knock at door.

Is this 34c Warren Hastings Court?

(Shout from upstairs)

Tell him we don't want no doorsteppers today, Ali.

I don't think you understand, Sir. My services are part of the removal package.

Well bless me. I didn't see that in the small print.

Good, just kneel here on this bubble-wrap, my son. Would you like me to pray for peace in your home, Sir?

Perhaps later when the baby stops screaming?

How about blessing your bed for a fruitful sex life?

We've got six kids, thanks, as you can hear.

The toilet then, for a healthy life?

It's pretty busy, the kids are rather upset at moving.

The kitchen then?

Aliya doesn't really like men in the kitchen.. God, is that the time already? We're not ready for the van..

Remember, God's peace is beyond time, my son. That's why I'm here. Perhaps it would be better if I visited you in your new home? May I take the address, or perhaps ride with you in the van?

It's 10 Allahabad Villas, Southall.. but I think it's better not – But thanks for coming. It's the first time we've met anyone from your religion, Inshallah...it could be a good omen for peace..



\*\*! ! ? ? ?

We're Moslems despite the English surname which got us in...didn't they tell you?

Oh I'm so sorry sir, it must be a computer error...

Oh no harm done, I guess. Allah be with you..

And with you, my son... first time for me, too..

Michael Shepherd

## 0325 Hip Hippie Hooray

All those 'Sixties hippies  
are in their sixties now (..man) -  
hope they ain't forgotten  
life is just a wow (..man) ...

Michael Shepherd

## 0328 Holy Shit

jeez I thought here's  
this lady I have the greatest  
respect for and she  
comes out with this holy crap  
and holy shit stuff

so yesterday I was  
walking through the  
winter-wet tufted grass  
of the field they keep  
the cows in this year  
avoiding the cowpatties  
the outside tap for  
gumboots is frozen

and stopped and looked at one  
fresh and steaming  
the way you do  
and the cow down the field  
looked at me with that  
not very enquiring look  
they have but today  
it came across as So?

and I remembered  
the milk that morning which  
had that layer of extra  
spring cream  
and the roast beef  
smell when the kitchen  
door's open on a  
spring day and it all  
linked up later

as I got home and sat  
contemplating  
the bathroom fittings  
as one does and  
thought

holy shit yeah  
the lady's right

(for Mary and PoHo)

Michael Shepherd

## 0329 Holy Shit (2)

everything in Creation  
is as holy as its Creator  
how could it be otherwise?

the cow  
has been the centre  
of the Vedic culture  
these last few thousand years  
fed with love  
and yielding milk and calves

and cowpatties  
which when dried  
provide the fuel which  
the saints say is the best  
for use as the domestic fire

of food it is said  
the first part supports the body  
and the second part the soul  
while the third part falls  
to support the earth

Wordsworth found immortality  
amid the daffodils  
but see here in the next field –  
the cows are grazing as peacefully  
as poets

poets who see the world  
in awe and wonder  
as the supreme machine  
whose every part  
is wholly of the whole

mind how you tread  
this ground is holy



## 0330 How Christianity Came To Britain

bright banquet-hall in darkest night -  
swallow flies in, through, out -  
from where, to where?

Michael Shepherd

## 0331 How To Wait Doggedly

I've never seen him just like this before.

Crouched at the entrance to the largest run,  
the burrowed-out soil in front of it  
ground to dust by many eager legs  
hopping, skipping out of the dark warren -  
he's totally silent, totally still. It's awesome.  
This isn't the puppy who goes wild at rabbits  
in a frenzy of excitement, wet nose intoxicated by  
a thousand trails of scent, scattering  
white tails into burrows, barking wildly  
(are they friends or enemies, in this joy?)  
at the sheer excitement of the chase,  
puppy paradise; but now..  
this is serious stuff.

at first sight, you could think he's resting, he's so still;  
his back legs haunched down under him, looking  
like the sphinx itself, immobile, waiting for the question  
it's waited for through thousands of wise years;  
may only answer in this sacred silence;  
his nose and head and throat almost flat upon the ground  
(this is no time for his 'Tailwaggers' League' identity disc to rattle)  
as if at the epicentre of  
some invisible geometry of scent and earth-echoed sound,  
his ears poised, half-lifted on instant muscles;

he's the image of relaxation, at first sight:  
but a stillness packed with potential energy  
wound as ready on electric nerves as in a spring;  
a silence so intense it's thrilling,  
full of alertness; a silence right inside his head  
that teaches silence, stillness: he's carrying  
no sense of future: he's living a continuous present,  
waiting for the senses to tell him something.  
There's nothing else in the world to do, right now.

A fox terrier flat on the ground at the entrance  
to a mere rabbit-hole; we've never found a foxhole,



we two; should I apologise to him? If we had,  
he'd be in there like a flash; sheer life-or-death ferocity;  
but here, nevertheless, it's serious stuff;  
this is what thousands of years of dog  
have made him for; that, and what he and man  
have learned together from each other; bred in him;  
while this present man gazes awestruck at the species  
in its perfection of action, action contained in stillness,  
stillness and silence containing all the senses,  
all contained in knowledge, awaiting, perfect, pure,  
what the cosmos will reveal in its good time.

Has my dog just shown me, taught me,  
how a poet should await a poem?

Michael Shepherd

## 0332 How Were They To Know?

Yes, how were they to know,  
searching in the heat of forenoon dunes,  
those high hills of sand  
where once the forests grew,  
now a rhythm of burnt sunned, cool shadowed, mock horizons,  
- they, searching for the camel which had strayed -

and finding there, a man sitting still, cross-legged  
in the sand upon a small strip  
of faded coloured carpet,  
palm of hand crossed in palm of hand,  
and in the palm of his upraised right hand,  
one grain of sand

and who, as they approached,  
did not shift his gaze from that one grain;  
and yet they sensed that he sensed them;  
better let him be, he knows what he's about,  
or if he's mad, at least he's quietly purposeful...

how were they to know  
that as he gazed, the universe he saw  
in that one grain of sand then  
grew inside of him? till it filled itself,  
like a sand-clock, as the last grain  
falls from the upper to  
the lower, and all is still again  
as measured time stops still  
amid the sands of time?

how were they to know  
as that small figure against the desert sand  
his cloak still burning to the touch,  
returned to the oasis, as the red-hot sun  
sank below the dramatic shadow of the furthest dune,

and later, sitting by the green palms and papyrus reeds,  
the camels head down, humped around the welcome pool,  
one child, then many children,

then grown men, asked him their questions;  
and the answers, as the night folded in  
below more stars than anyone could count,  
drew the circle of cross-legged silent listeners  
- occasionally, urgent voiced with a lifetime's pressing question -  
as if some grain of sand became in their mind too  
totality; the universe.

Michael Shepherd

## 0333 Hungry For Romance

Mills and Boon, Mills and Boon,  
ravish me - but not too soon...  
Boon and Mills, Boon and Mills,  
steam my specs with bedtime thrills...

(M&B - publishers of bodice-ripper romance, with strict rules for their writers)

Michael Shepherd

## 0334 In Vino Veritas, In Birra Bonitas: In Praise Of Grape And Hop

When heavy hangs the soul - if soul there be  
in such a state of abject loneliness -  
and all Creation's steeped in misery  
and all bad influences join life's mess,

and melancholy blackens; hope recedes;  
faith's gone; and love and charity lie hid;  
and nothing seems good for the mind to heed,  
no action springs to mind to lift the lid  
that sits, black monster, on the love of truth,  
of goodness, beauty - all this gone from hence;

then - wine, that warms the heart of man, must serve;  
and hops, that give of God's benevolence:  
and at the measured glass's end - God bless -  
the possibility of happiness...

Michael Shepherd

## 0335 Indian File

Like a set of graded kitchen pans  
the newsagent's children,  
back from school, file into the tiny corner shop,  
and all so small, this neat, obedient, clean set,  
that no-one needed lift the counter flap.

And in a moment's flash of truth, or sentiment,  
I saw the beauty of the human race.

Michael Shepherd

## 0336 Japanese Silk Print

The shy young girl  
can't hide her shining eyes  
this Spring.

Michael Shepherd

## 0337just A Moment

The usual disgusting scene:  
the sneezes coming one after the other  
so no fun enjoying the one;  
the coughs like an iron file along the lung,  
coughs that just weren't going anywhere;  
and as for the nose-blowing stuff -  
beats any horror film in Sensurround...

and in the midst of all this carefully selected  
personal misery.

a moment of perfection.

there it was, full on,  
looking one straight in the eye:  
perfection.  
and because it was perfect  
all you could do was look at it and register  
and because it was perfect,  
it was peaceful  
and because it was peaceful it was still  
and because it was still it wasn't going to go away

and all you could do was, to just be 'yes! '

and because perfection is - well, perfect -  
there has to be Mr Other  
saying in best TV style  
'So that's it, huh? Just that? And I'm supposed to get the message?  
Do me a favour...'

but it hadn't gone away.

Well that's how it was this afternoon.  
You get the evidence without the commentary.  
The back-up.  
The instruction book in five not-quite languages.  
The friend who's been there.  
Or some less extreme scenario.



But no. That's it.  
And you know you won't forget it.

Call you later.

Michael Shepherd

## 0338 Just Couldn'T Hack It

A hard writing I had of it;  
the words clumsy, the sense banal...

escaping from rhyme isn't easy;  
half a lifetime to work up to it  
then like skirt length, that's it,  
the line's short this season,  
and rhyme is, so, like, so last year...

(and must be insincere  
if you have to work at it  
or even want to)

so there I was in the  
midst of getting the  
hang of cutting the line at the  
best place for the  
sense, to avoid the  
artificial on the  
one hand and the  
banal on the  
other -the  
art that conceals the  
art -

and scenting euphony, when suddenly -  
a crash - and in there lumbered - 'woodenly'...

I twigged instantly that it wouldn't  
go without a struggle;  
and called in Suddenly for questioning -  
had they some sort of pact in the recesses of my mind -  
kissin' cousins, blood brothers, partners in rhyme?

Suddenly denied this vigorously -  
never been asked such a question before,  
wouldn't want to associate etc.;  
a word only used by theatre critics...

So I sighed and threw out my neatly chopped prose,  
spontaneity, jokes, and anything goes;  
and returned to meaningful old-fashioned verse  
so woodenly crafted - well, poets have done worse.

Michael Shepherd

## 0339: 21 Keywords To A Life

War under a summer sun  
and the soldier's life now a sleep, beautiful  
in, we may hope, the angel kiss  
of death, friend of heroic human nature.

We who live on may count the loss: girl,  
home and love, hope and music,  
sex; rain; all the school  
of life. He, not.

(This 'poem' contains the 21 most hit key words on this site - see poet page.)

Michael Shepherd

## 0340 Leaping From The Psychiatrist's Couch

They warned me that deafness  
would turn me in on myself,  
make me suspicious and sour...

but since my psycho called me  
'a bunch of new roses' today  
I feel just great. There's nothing like  
a compliment from an expert  
to cure depression. What a poetic mind!

Michael Shepherd

## 0342 Like Me, Like You

Landing airplanes form a high queue;  
Busy ants all form a low queue;  
Salespersons should pretend they like you;  
But only poets can form a haiku.

Michael Shepherd

## 0343 Love Poem

Because I love you so,

sometimes it's loving someone;  
sometimes it's loving anyone;  
sometimes it's loving everyone;  
sometimes it's loving no-one.

How can I know,  
when I love you so?

Michael Shepherd

## 0345 Lyric.1.

What in the lovely gaining, loves you?  
What does the bird that's flying, bring?  
What in the lovely gaining, fills you?  
What does the flying-bird sing?

What in the lovely losing, joys you?  
What flies as bird on wing?  
What lost in losing, frees you?  
What does the losing-bird bring?

Michael Shepherd



## 0348 Me, Royalty And Fame

I didn't wave anything at the Queen  
when I saw her leaving an official reception  
sitting bolt upright in the car,  
still, pale, exhausted,  
on her way to the next engagement  
of the five or so that day.

I didn't say much to the Queen Mum  
when presented to her -  
some people chat with royalty when introduced  
like old friends; others, even the most anti-monarchical  
turn to idiot jelly. But  
she sure was good in dealing with it.  
A pro to her fingertips.

I didn't say anything to Prince Charles  
when he opened an exhibition  
that he and I had an interest in;  
but I'm proud to say we pushed  
the greatest man in the room  
into the receiving line  
which otherwise he would not have sought.

I didn't say anything to Princess Diana  
when at a reception I saw she'd spotted  
the big red badge I'd been given and wore proudly -  
'One of the nice things about New York';  
I felt a fraud and slunk away.

I didn't say anything to the Prime Minister  
when he invited me for tea -  
the invitation got mislaid.

I didn't say anything to John and Yoko  
when I met them at her first art exhibition -  
since just looking is what art is for.

I didn't say anything to the Rolling Stones  
when there they were sitting in a line

in the sunlight on the wall outside the National Gallery  
before they were screaming-famous.

I didn't say much to Andy Warhol  
since my question seemed to knock him backwards -  
he leaned back, shrugged and said weakly  
'It seemed a good idea at the time...'  
then his minders hustled him on through the Andy Andy.

I didn't say much to Gloria Swanson  
when some upmarket con unexpectedly  
put me on the telephone to her  
about her sculpture.

I didn't say anything to Marianne Faithfull  
when she came in to the shop -  
I was downstairs typing invoices at the time.

I didn't say anything to William Burroughs  
when he was living in the flat above -  
he didn't seem to want to talk.

I didn't say much to the Canadian Prime Minister  
sitting next to him at that lavish banquet -  
they'd changed Prime Ministers from the swinging one  
between the invitation and the banquet.

And that's about it, really. The rest  
of the time you can't stop me talking.

Michael Shepherd

## 0354 Not Quite War

Too young to know the horrors of a war I've fought,  
too young to know war's fear, or yearn for heroism,  
but old enough to have lived through;  
boys but one year older than myself  
lived and fought and died; and younger, some,  
who fought in Malaya, Kenya, Korea, to the death...

Slit trenches in Hyde Park were the first photos in 1938,  
apart from the official ones to stir our patriotism;  
then cycling home from town as radios in every house  
spread Chamberlain's sad patrician voice  
telling us with regret that from Herr Hitler  
'no such reassurance has been received' -  
and consequently Britain was at war...

Leaving the house which Mother had designed and Father built  
a bare few yards from the barbed-wired beach and sea  
where unbeknownst to us, the Germans planned to land  
their first invasion of support troops and supplies...

Herded one day unwarned into the basement changing room at school;  
the first invasion scare; accompanied by - was it serious  
or not? - the story that our wicked enemy  
was to parachute its advance troops disguised as nuns,  
but you could spot them as they descended  
by their boots...

The Junior Training Corps turned out as firewatchers and Home Guard  
with the Lee Enfield rifles, the wind-round puttees,  
the smell of cordite and of rifle oil  
of equipment - oh supreme irony - kept from World War One,  
the 'war to end all wars', to be continued;  
our Sergeant Major's face  
a scary pattern like a camouflage, part white, part livid skin  
from mustard gas in that first bloody war...

Days of vapour trails in the sky, as we cheered  
the sky-high calligraphy of aerial dogfights;  
the nights spent in the thump of bombs;

the prickly uniforms for us raw cadets; the battle drill;  
the kick of grown-up rifle butt in shoulder,  
the assembly of the machine-gun; the naming of its parts;  
all this in far-off teenage memory;  
not quite war.

But war enough.

Michael Shepherd

## 0354 Ode To Powdered Coffee

Desperate to get it;  
usually regret it.

Michael Shepherd

## 0357 On Not Thinking About People You Thought You Loved

I'd been reading some poems with  
– for the first time in my life that I remember –  
'a lump in my throat'; and a pricking in my eyes,  
and a sense of the awesome power of that poet  
and of poetry itself; and self-criticism  
mixed up with envy, wishing I had  
that sort of poetic power myself;

and it seemed to call for some sort of  
formal acknowledgement of this,  
some ritual of gratitude – not necessarily  
the darkened room, the candle swaying gently,  
the kneeling – but something inner that  
was beyond selfishness, some worthy  
sacrifice, surrender.  
Perhaps, I thought, the thought  
of that would have to suffice.

Then quite out of the blue – or so it seemed, but maybe not –  
came this painful thought:  
that never for a single moment – a single moment! –  
in my life, had I ever given thought  
to what my mother was like, living her life  
before I was born

and I was overcome, stunned, appalled,  
at the hugeness of my selfishness,  
the smallness of my self-centred world  
that I, who pride myself on my imagination,  
lacked the imagination even to think of those I love and loved  
as existing without me in the picture...

of course, there are photographs –  
studio portraits, snaps,  
solemn-faced groups with hockey sticks;  
the pride of motherhood;  
and yet I'd looked at all those without

really thinking of her being her;

but, where to start? The young girl  
as her life slowly formed around her?  
the teenage dreams; the hopes of marriage;  
of giving a loving husband  
the greatest living present she could give, and then  
the two miscarriages before I arrived  
to strut about my centre-stage?

It didn't work.

and so I'm left with the stark, bare fact  
to ponder at my leisure:  
I never for a moment thought  
of my mother existing as herself  
without my being there.

And I thought I loved her, totally. So much  
for love's imagination.

Michael Shepherd

## 0358 One For Bill

Redheads, with their fiery hair  
oft have a temper that can scare.  
Can God and Nature so conspire  
to scarify with hair and fire?

Michael Shepherd



## 0359 One For The Inner Child

As the tapeworm  
said to the spaghetti -  
'Would you run that  
past me again? '

Michael Shepherd

## 0360 Ouch

There are times when  
opening the Hallmark card  
sent no doubt in good faith,  
the banal cliché of a worn truism  
expressed in groansome verse

opens one eye,  
yawns,  
stretches,  
gathers itself  
wearily  
like its alarm just went off  
and it's time for work

and lands you one  
hard, right on the nose  
ouch

I think it's called  
humility

Michael Shepherd

## 0361 Over My Dead Body..

The central aisle – more, an asphalted roadway –  
of Brompton Cemetery would be hard to beat.  
It's no Forest Lawns, Pere Lachaise, but great  
for passing trade, of all peculiar sorts – a  
constant stream of cyclists,  
rollerskaters, boardies, headphoned joggers, even  
snowboards briefly – tourists,  
lovers, quaintly; and all, as in  
John Donne's verse or Stanley Spencer's paintings,  
shoulderbone to shoulderbone  
desperately calling for our attention  
to that which we least wish to  
attend to right now, while there is  
a now.

And since the undergrowth  
between the aisles grows  
like the fireweed of desire,  
it's Dangerous Liaison Central  
fit to make some of these turn in their graves.

On that central Park Lane, Wienerstrasse,  
Broadway, of departed spirits,  
the black marble, gold-lettered plot  
of Richard Tauber, heart-throb tenor  
of years gone by (I do a great imitation,  
forgive me, Vienna mine...) is never  
without fresh flowers. He must have  
touched some hearts; or got around.

A last message to the world.  
Gold letters on black marble?  
appropriate perhaps for  
the theatrical; yet on  
the other hand, if deep engraved,  
if not so gravely,  
'Where was I when I needed me? '  
(the title of a Broadway memoir  
which cheers me mindless, frequently)  
might make some passers-by to pause; a

last laugh and a longest testament.

(Inspired by Spike Milligan's tombstone)

Michael Shepherd

## 0362 Party To Truth

'The British elections are not firing the voters,  
since they don't trust politicians any more...'

cor stone the crows!  
as we used to say in the days  
when we could distinguish a crow from a lyre-bird...  
blimey, knock me dahn wiv a fev-ver!

now if they called it  
The National Bribery Competition  
it might liven things up  
and reconnect politicians with  
truth

Michael Shepherd

## 0363 Poem For The Po-Faced

Marcel Duchamp's urinal  
is overflowing  
with the minds of critics  
and needs emptying  
upwards

(for AJS)

Michael Shepherd

## 0364 Poetry Reads; Poetry Speaks

It's like an adult version of a parlour game, isn't it?  
a sorta cross between a single-handed game of patience  
and a crossword puzzle where the guy who set the puzzle  
is always a step at least ahead of you dammit  
and knows there's a perfect solution  
only known to him, or Him

so here I am, shuffling these black-and-white  
(well, kinda brown-maroon on this site)  
soundless things which are supposed to be  
sounds in my ear and mind which  
by mad optimism forever proved somewhat  
or totally wrong in experience  
are supposed to come out the other end  
into your ear and mind in a vaguely  
similar manner – allowing for the fact  
that if you're of a critical cast then  
you'll have a superior ear and mind  
to mine anyway so that's a mess for a start  
and I suppose the same applies if  
you have an inferior - oh forget it

so forget for the moment  
this creeping disorder of rather dumb  
black and white caterpillars making their humpy  
busy-legged but corporately slow  
progress across the page in a  
disorderly snaky line, arguing among themselves  
trying to remember (ah yes, Plato,  
trying to remember) like  
a Spanish bus-queue, whom they're  
behind and whom they're in front of  
if and when the bus comes, while they  
chatter in little groups among themselves –

where was I, ah yes, forget  
the black-and-white on paper, and rhyme  
or not, and all that technical stuff  
which you're not suppose to notice anyway

and know that what  
I really want to do is

take your two hands gently in mine and  
smiling, look you straight in the eye  
and say  
when all's said and done  
and that may take a little time,  
and to coin a cliché which  
I'm not apologising for, but  
forget it's supposed to be poetry and  
listen to my sincere voice saying

isn't it a wonderful world?

Michael Shepherd



## 0365 Poets And One World

The poet's world and the philosopher's  
may seem to be in aim, and truth of act,  
so different; the poet offers us  
fine dreams of heart; philosophy, fine fact;

and yet, both spring from knowing nothing's known,  
and wishing knowledge for its own true sake:  
the poet seeks a truth in worlds his own;  
philosophers seek paths which causes take;

yet both, in knowing their own ignorance,  
are moved by wonder at the world they share -  
the beautiful laws of this world's governance;  
the universal heart and mind seen there:

poetic truth and love of wisdom spring  
from wonder at the one in everything.

Michael Shepherd

## 0366 Poem As Snake, Poem As Not-Snake

Walking the narrow, stepped path that bends  
through our local sub-tropical,  
magical landfall, full of strangeness,  
there it was  
across the path,  
brownish, yellow and green markings,  
waiting

adrenalin poured through the body,  
waking instinct, emotion, thoughts;  
possible next moves racing manifold through the mind,  
uncertainties, no previous experience  
of quite this situation to rely on  
in our relatively snake-free neighbourhood  
and it was big;  
the body froze,  
the eyes just looked

at the branch, covered in  
green moss, yellow lichen,  
brown and almost weightless with rot  
so that the storm had tossed it  
onto the path, into my path,  
indifferent, innocuous,  
so much so that as the body  
restored to equilibrium  
I was beyond kicking it aside -  
in some sort of embarrassed respect;

it, unaffected by all I brought to it;  
like a poem

Michael Shepherd

## 0367 Portrait Of The Poet As Sea-Monster

The poet -  
by whom I mean  
an ordinary human being like you or me  
who keeps a diary  
of the mind and heart  
and then publishes it  
with luck  
and maybe sells a few -

is a bit like one of those 'exotic' creatures  
filmed on the ocean floor,  
gracefully waving a hostess welcome  
as if used to welcoming photographers  
into its lovely home in this week's special issue  
and such a delicate shade of pink its designer decor! -  
but how to read it visually?

Are those waving fronds all the nerve ends  
of this sensitive creature of the depths  
of the human heart?  
Or are they stinging antennae,  
jealously defending its survival,  
guarding its creative core  
against all comers?  
Or simply, like the elephant's trunk,  
a means to acquire the food  
to digest  
with its prodigious memory longer than one man's alone,  
into the poetry of the deep?

Beached on the floor of a commuter train  
this delicate creature would be trodden under foot  
as two-dimensional yuck;  
but in its own environment  
it secretly upholds humanity,  
seeks the true in the unknown,  
says new things about old minds,  
teaches us to pause and think and see,  
sings silly rhymes to enchant children,

shouts boldly or murmurs quietly  
about goodness, truth and beauty,  
and their opposites,  
and deeply, deeply  
loves.

Michael Shepherd

## 0368 Post-Modern Irony

With all the excitement of a Florentine writer around 1480  
who's just heard about the new invention of printing  
and has plans to use it bigtime  
I'm sitting here at the PC, one of  
the first generation of mature writers  
who can bring to a lifetime's experience  
the web's recall of every great and relevant word  
recorded since the beginning of recorded time and thus  
pigmy on the shoulders of giants  
and what happens  
the excitement's gone to my

Michael Shepherd

## 0369 Prayer. To Mike, Who Asked.

Simplest prayer, soonest answered,  
so it's said; so let us be as little children  
(themselves an answered prayer..?)  
and ask the simplest questions -

how? whom to? for what? and will we get  
what we are asking for? promise?  
suppose He or She or It thinks, (if They think anyway..)  
that's it's a silly thing to ask for,  
or just a bit too 'me' and greedy,  
will they say no? will they let us know  
somehow, that's it's no?

or will our justice be  
to get what we think we want  
until the day we wish we hadn't asked for it?  
or is it like the tale of the three wishes,  
everything turned to gold – including us! ...  
another wish, please cancel; then  
the last and sensible small wish, which may even  
include the welfare of all others too?

Some say the commonest of prayers  
amounts to, please God, let two and two  
please equal five...that prayers may only ask  
what may be within the domain of the law  
of our Creation; some even say that, given this,  
we'll always get what we wish for – eventually;  
but that by some mighty, unalterable law,  
as with the fairies gathered around  
Sleeping Beauty's cradle, as the Fates,  
along with what we asked for, comes  
a something else for which we didn't ask...

others say that there's no difference  
between the meaning of a prayer, and praise;  
that in our praise, our prayer is surely shaped  
and those who do not think to praise  
may never know, to whom to pray,

or ever truly know, for what...

and others of a theologic mind  
pray to be taught, for what to pray...  
or instead of prayer, to learn to willingly accept  
all that befalls them, as the gift of all  
that they might pray for, for their good of soul...

\*

all this is for considering; but I suggest  
that in the depths of grief, or heights of joy, we know  
the place where prayer may arise:  
so deep within ourselves, that it's beyond  
the asking or the answering; a place so deep  
that there, our soul rests in peace,  
all questions meet all answers,  
and all desires are satisfied;  
there is no loss,  
and nothing lacks;  
we are – ourselves; ourself; at peace;  
and for that, we may surely pray.

Michael Shepherd

## 0371 Reading Behind The Lines

So if it makes you feel great,  
OK, go ahead -  
as long as you're making yourself more attractive  
for me, not your next husband...  
OK, look like Anne Robinson if you must;  
yes, she is great seen full-face, I grant  
but now she's got no profile  
to match those wit-sharp comments  
to a sideways glance...

and yes, it's blushingly well-known  
than a man can't even recognise his own wife in a crowd  
if she's had her hair done in the interim...  
so who am I - except the one who loves you  
like the supper we've had every week  
since we were courting? ...

but let me just say this:  
I who have loved you  
in my quiet way  
like a favourite book (now, where did I put it? ...)  
love those fine lines, that time and - we - have etched;  
we men, surprise, are something of a connoisseur of lines:

the lines that cross your forehead: there, because  
you're just so silly about not being seen by other men  
with spectacles on your nose -  
as if that told strange men  
a lie and not the truth...

if they were lines of worry, anxiety, failure -  
they'd be my responsibility, not yours...

and then the lines around the mouth:  
that's a national thing in part -  
it's well known that American women  
welcome you with open mouth;  
(and teeth! ...pearls? more like spotlights...) but  
Europeans greet you with a smile of eyes;



(and there are cruder analogies I'll leave unsaid) :  
so look carefully, man,  
those smile-lines - a little forced;  
or natural?  
accommodating show-biz whopping tooth-caps?  
upward and sweet-natured? or that downward turn  
that bespeaks a critical mind you might come home to every night?

then the lines under your eyes - none of my business, those:  
that's a matter of heredity or, OK, cosmetic surgery...  
please yourself, my darling;  
you've bags of skin, I've bags of money. That was a joke.

but the lines around the sides of your sweet eyes -  
ah, how I love those...  
the European smile that makes a man's heart melt;  
'crow's feet' indeed! there's written, years of happy life,  
and children, friends; the world itself  
in those sweet lines...

' In those dear lines, my love, your soul is caught;  
Your soul; my life; without them I am aught.'...

OK go ahead, spend my money if it makes you happy -  
you know I'll always go along with you...  
(I don't know yet, how I'll respond  
at parties now when carefree younger men  
give you that searching glance that chancers give...)

But please, I beg of you, don't ask your surgeon  
with his character-erasing tools  
to take away those lines around the corners of your eyes,  
that smile at me  
from a lifetime that's been shared.

Michael Shepherd

## 0372 Reflection On A Garden Pond

It's unexpectedly mild this early Spring evening  
and I take my glass of beer, cold in the hand,  
and slide the patio door open and step out for the first time this year,  
feeling like an intruder in my own garden, so strange in the twilight.

Then, melted by awe and gratitude  
to see an unplanned wild violet  
which has taken up residence between the cement slabs.

Between other slabs the miniature bamboo stubbornly returns,  
(that was my Japanese year) and in the tiny pond,  
soon to be turned into a living soup by amorous frogs  
to the total puzzlement of the white cat, watching for an hour or so  
and extending from time to time an ineffective paw,  
or nosing the water unable, either, to gulp a tadpole -  
in the tiny pond, something bright;

a dancing reflection in the water stirred by an evening breeze -  
the moon;  
the same moon that danced on the water for Li Po  
as he drank from his wine cup  
alone and at peace, so far, so long ago;

in a poet's solitude and contentment  
and the thought of distant friends,  
celebrated with wine  
under the moon, on a spring evening,  
in perfect happiness.

Michael Shepherd

## 0373 Regret

We have a 'past'...however, now, not true;  
since only in the present is true life;  
and yet, the heart may sometimes deeply rue  
some past event, or memory of strife;

and in those moments, we may humbly yearn  
for one to whom to offer up our tears;  
to beg forgiveness; to some greater turn  
that we may live beyond what failure fears;

and then we may seek transcendental One  
to beg of him, return of soul to health;  
or if we're so inclined, kneel to atone  
to that one Self which is our very self.

Sometimes detachment pleads duality  
to find our godly self in unity.

Michael Shepherd

## 0374 Seasonal Greetings To...

In the spirit of the season  
I'm working on a big-hearted,  
multi-faith, inter-faith, lack-of-faith  
religiously correct yet thinking outside the box (6 x 2)  
all-inclusive but not syrupy or anodyne  
seasonal greetings card  
(or will the mention of season  
offend non-seasonalists?)

here's the draft but no doubt  
it'll draw comment.. feel free..

Seasonal greetings to All whom  
I usually ignore:

Greetings to all our enemies -  
please don't abandon your principles, I'm not asking that, but  
can we draw a little nearer this year?

Greetings to all pagans -  
we all would like to pop round for a merry drink or two and a hug  
but can we do it indoors? Merry  
mistletoe, etc. - wrap up well!

Greetings to all atheists -  
enjoy your year all the more since  
there's no One to thank except possibly  
Intelligent Design?

Greetings to all agnostics -  
should I hope that this year is  
the year you make that big decision and  
leap that big leap off  
the fence of fierce, barbed intelligence - or  
will life be the duller for it, for you?

Greetings to all humanists -  
hope you feel really human all year and  
don't lose faith in humanity, and please

spread it around especially  
among those who have an over-developed  
sense of sin...you could put the fun back in  
fun-damentalist..

Greetings to all bah-humbugs -  
who have better reason each year  
to condemn the commercialisation  
of the season - take the phone off,  
disconnect the intercom at the door,  
and have a really good time to yourself which  
many of us pretend to envy you...

and

Greetings to all those who, while  
not really believing in anything too much  
or too little either,  
go through the motions, wreck their bank balance  
for the sake of others - may you  
emerge from the season - nay -  
live the whole year -  
with an unexpected greater warmth of heart - for  
you are the salt of the frozen earth

and I suppose finally

Greetings to those without a heart -  
may you enjoy all  
that you wish yourself  
and who knows

(for PJ whose idea I stole - seasonal greetings and please forgive..)

Michael Shepherd

## 0375 Season Of Mists And Merry Mythfulness

You...leave...the...  
Pennsylvania classroom at a  
quarter to four..  
leaving all your Bio. notes  
for checking, at the door...

With exquisite timing, a Pennsylvania judge  
has ruled that the wonders of biology, as  
revealed by the dissection of neatly-pinned frogs  
and suchlike squeamy miracles of internal packaging  
so cleverly evolved by, uh, 'Darwinian evolution',  
must not mention - no, not just God, as  
Creator - heaven forfend - but even  
'divine intervention' - like some 'hey, stop the show  
right there! ', as the alternative to  
'Darwinian evolution' - so called, by the way, because  
it's only a theory anyway, not yet  
a proven law - it's just a kinda myth..and  
with nasty Emperor's-clothes, whizz kid, questions  
sticking their hand up in the classroom -

'Please, if it all started from two whatsits getting together,  
who made the whatsits, and, who made the law that helped this  
evolution to evolve? '...

So, since we're in the world of myth, which  
is said to be the wishes of mankind  
formulated into glorious dreams  
of might-have-been - then can we give  
some thought to alternatives?

No 1 on the list is surely  
Santa Claus - that jolly, kindly man who one year  
maybe thought it would be fun  
to create, simultaneously,  
some really super presents, and of course,  
someone to give them to - it's called  
a symbiotic relationship - and Santa's grotto  
became - hey presto - the Garden of Eden!

and just to make the whole caboosh more fun, he  
added a special family-sized Christmas present –  
a Christ to go with Christmas – or  
as Shakespeare might have said,  
giving to these airy nothings of a dream  
a substance and a local habitation...and  
thus without much of a hitch, we could re-direct  
our prayers and praise to Holy Father Christmas –  
I mean, we're halfway there already...what  
are you praying for this Giftmas?

Or, since the other myth that everyone accepts  
is the world of science fiction,  
and historically, although  
Darwin didn't really follow this one up,  
random evolution by its very nature, throws up 'mutants'  
which many children believe in, even more and longer  
than Santa Claus..

So just suppose we do a little  
re-naming here, and following up the story  
that Mary was abducted as a child by culty Templars  
and brought up by them, say she gave birth to  
a rather highly evolved  
Holy Mutant? A sorta non-divine intervention, or  
Unintelligent Design? It's an  
elegant solution, as mathematicians say –  
balancing all the very apparent throwbacks among human kind  
with the odd throwforward?

And thus, there's a fair chance  
that in x years' time, the human race will all have caught up  
with the Holy Mutant...a kinda happy ending, in its way.

So how's that go down with you, Judge,  
on this your Judgment Day?  
And a very happy Mutantmas to you too.

Michael Shepherd

## 0376 Self-Search

Hey, Self - how do I know that you exist?  
Or are you just a word - a useful term  
for what we hope our real nature is,  
those things about us which we're proud to affirm?

So, can we know you? How to start the search?  
A dictionary hardly gives the clue;  
Or are you always far beyond our reach?  
A mirage always 'too good to be true'?

Or, are you so close known, that we can prove -  
by dropping off all that we know we're not -  
that what is left is what we are: true love:  
that, which we always are; cannot be got.

O Self, you must be all that's true and real:  
for without you, we'd never know unreal.

Michael Shepherd



## 0377 Should Be, But

I should be writing a poem  
about those small wisps of white cloud  
moving unusually fast across a blue blue sky  
on their way to somewhere else  
as if they're late for an appointment.

I should be writing a poem  
about the way the breeze is so gentle  
that it seems to have a secret plan with the sun  
and the new green leaves  
to do something quite extraordinary.

I should be writing a poem  
about the way that the trailing geranium leaves  
are giving out a scent more white than green  
more heavenly than any thought.

I should be writing a poem  
about the way that the purple and blue and yellow and white flowers  
seem to say nothing but beauty.

I should be writing a poem  
but all I can do is gaze in amazement  
at what I've seen before  
and never seen before.

Michael Shepherd

## 0378 Song Of Impatience And Experience

When two or three  
wire coathangers  
are gathered together  
anger arises.

By day, they hang out  
demurely, side by side.  
By night they couple closeted  
in passionate love  
and if disturbed,  
fall locked together  
in embrace  
to their clackhiss fate  
and wake the whole house.

Michael Shepherd

## 0379 Species: Sonnet 190

It's said that every species in the world  
displays one gift beyond the scope of Man;  
how dangerous the skies - to men and birds -  
how soiled the air, if wings were in Man's span!

Suppose that every species made extinct  
by Man - God's guardian of all things that live -  
deprived us - as indeed it may - by dint  
of mindlessness, of something God's mind gives?

I watch the spider, humble in my praise:  
self-spinning tightrope walker; engineer;  
the knower of all Nature's weathered ways  
and bold explorer on the winds that veer:

Nature spares the spider Man 's wild mind;  
should mind in Nature rest, God's there to find.

Michael Shepherd

## 0380 Sonnet: Katrina To Marc

Marc – remember splashing through the waves,  
and walking barefoot in the sand, so fine  
between the toes? And how the breeze, that day,  
caressed your face, in 1989?

How could we guess, so carefree way back then,  
that wind and water, in 2005,  
would turn so merciless and blow force ten,  
then kill so many; poison those alive?

How could those waves, that beach of love and fun,  
now signify tsunami, hurricane?  
or sparkling water turn so putrid, vile;  
man's carelessness, bring down all nature's bile?

Once proud to be Katrina – now but shame  
To think I share for you, a killer's name...

Michael Shepherd

## 0381 Spider On The Web

so here I am, sitting here, as I write to you,  
half of me thinking about poetry and everything,  
half of me thinking, time to shut down the PC,  
you're not married to the thing or are you

when a brown spider, all of a centimeter across  
is suddenly there in front of me on the PC's shelf,  
stopped sideways as if reflecting (?) as a poet should;  
and having gained my attention, and  
banished all this mindstuff with the tiniest of miracles,  
requires of me, I think, that I respond to it:  
it's brown on top, delineated by the neatest line of darker brown  
with white below, as if carries its own ghost underslung  
in some metaphysical memento mori like  
a poem by John Donne; memento mori too  
to the mind that automates those slightly crepey hands  
that busily misspell this communique from the ground  
of life.

and now, that required of me,  
it sets off along the edge of the shelf, and  
going left, the second back of its four left legs  
like some ballerina-explorer,  
extended over and down the edge with delicate, sensitive,  
confident grace; and having reached and turned the corner,  
goes down, then has a change of mind (?) :  
that tiny computer, provided by that enterprise called Nature  
has had what we might call a thought...

and now its pace has accelerated, as if  
some anxiety afflicts it; as if  
there's somewhere else now that it should be,  
and I am pathetically, uselessly  
disturbed, concerned...

for what am I to the world  
and world to me,  
if I know so so little  
about these little things;

so vague  
about the great?

Michael Shepherd

## 0382 Sportsman Lacks Ship

He's just won the tennis match;  
walks up to the net,  
shakes hands with his opponent  
but his eyes don't follow

now they're off to the umpire's chair;  
he reaches up, shakes hands  
as if he's tipping the doorman,  
eyes elsewhere

he may have won the match  
but he's lost my vote.  
At least politicians have the nerve  
to look you in the eye.

Michael Shepherd

## 0393 Veterans' Day

The veterans of the last time  
die off one by one  
with a smile  
and bitter memories  
and pride

but which those others had no chance  
to find within themselves

which would think the other  
more fortunate?

Michael Shepherd



## 0395 Sunset Boulevard

I loved your stories of the old times -  
the endless journeys of the band bus,  
Judy with her black-eyed girl,  
the first action at each hotel  
the drawer taken from the chest,  
you laid in it; the band singer filling in  
between the famous stars; knowing  
the bridges between the famous verses  
which singers seem to love so much  
as if they're nearer private lives  
of songwriters who have lives;  
the visits to Stan Laurel, modest,  
bright-eyed, pining for his Oliver..  
the glittering night-time life  
of wartime, almost-still-1930s  
of the Hollywood refugees;  
told by the not-quite-famous who  
performed in front of the famous;  
the time when thanks to you  
I spoke to Gloria Swanson on the phone..  
I hear the footsteps of the high-heeled life;  
I smell the perfumes now no longer made.

I thank you for all these and more.  
And if some of them  
were not quite true,  
then thank you for the care  
with which you told them;

true dreams - dreamed truth.

Michael Shepherd

## 0396 Thanks To A Poet

You  
wrote a poem

I read it

while I read it  
I was you

I feel good

thanks

Michael Shepherd

## 0396 The Almost Unknown Language

I like to think that  
there's a language  
which is unspoken, unwritten  
except  
on rare occasions when a poet  
puts two words together or  
sometimes even  
a whole line  
which haunts the reader  
beyond sense, even  
beyond understanding and  
beyond beauty as perceived and  
beyond truth as previously revealed  
but good beyond hope and yet  
not beyond a shiver of delight and  
the poet has heard it  
in the space between the thoughts  
in the space between the words  
in the silence between the thoughts  
in the silence between the words

and somewhere very wonderful  
two beings we've never seen  
look at each other  
and smile

Michael Shepherd

## 0397 That, It Is

unknown; formless;  
eternal; always present

who may think of it?  
who may speak of it?  
who may not think of it?  
who may not speak of it?

where is it?  
where is it not?  
when is it?  
when is it not?  
what is it?  
what is it not?  
who is it?  
who is it not?

when other is one  
and there is here  
and that is this  
and then is now

and poets are silent  
and silence holds their poetry  
and mind and heart  
are in love with rest

there in the stillness,  
unknown, formless,  
eternal,  
always present,  
here and now

Michael Shepherd

## 0398 The Blackbird's Song

Waking to the blackbird's song -  
insisting, so it seems, on something close to joy and praise...  
the sun's just breaking through the morning mist;  
the smell of coffee and hot bread rolls,  
the gentle stir of household come to life:  
it's a good day, the best of days, right now.

Showered, with the inner glow of a man who's  
just those few and precious minutes ahead of schedule  
and thus with goodwill there to share -  
and what?

Is goodwill quite enough, as you bounce into the office,  
or (o hero) into the morning classroom, or  
the matey pride of factory floor?

This is the tricky crux of this poem, and who am I...

now in this summer morning's glow of goodwill to all men  
- and to all womankind, rejoicing themselves and you  
in summer's clothes - is there a place  
within this glow, for, go on say it, joy?  
And if joy, is there, then, gratitude?  
And if there's gratitude, is there, then, praise?

Meanwhile  
the blackbird  
just sings.

Michael Shepherd

## 0399 The Day You Went

The day you went,  
the first primrose appeared  
as if it didn't know.

The day you went,  
the blackbird sang  
as if no-one had asked it to be silent.

The day you went  
the bees foraged  
as if it were a day like any other.

Michael Shepherd

## 0399 The Eye Of I

our deepest being is that which observes:  
which watches, far beyond all forms of thought,  
as hand and tool and all the senses serve  
to find and make new things; or shine at sport;

which watches its own stillness in deep peace  
and knows it knows, yet knows not what that is -  
except that in this being is release  
from all that's not; a peace akin to bliss.

There may be further being yet to be;  
but in this present observation shines  
a world that's fresh, and bright, and new, and free,  
which fills the heart with joy, and clears the mind.

If we should doubt that we know 'self' or 'soul' -  
that one, who's still, and knows 'I am', tells all.

Michael Shepherd

## 0399 The Father

Saturday afternoon,  
the air, now so hot, and streets  
busy with that slightly faster pace of personal intention,  
weekend plans:

I remember the face from years ago -  
dropout, errand boy, chancer, hanging around;  
carrying that resentful face that settles on some school-age kids:  
I'm just not bright...I'm told;

but here, now, today, at the pub' s front table  
with his two sons, shining with non-stop conversation -  
one an intelligent seven-and-a half, I'd guess,  
one a very bright five-year-old,  
-both of course a dab with mobile phones;  
yet far more lively interested in the moment's talk  
on this special boys' day out-  
and though Dad reads the menu with slow finger,  
you can almost see that magic circle in the air  
that spells the enchantment of the family;

and I'm transported by wonder far past words  
at that other magic circle  
of love, sperm, fatherhood  
and love...

Michael Shepherd



## 0400 The Family

Seen from the back as  
they walk along the dusty summer road, with  
the sheep straying onto the verges where  
a tuft of more succulent grass may linger  
in the earlier shadow of  
the noontime sun, under the low stone wall,  
it's difficult to see whether  
the couple walking with the  
gentle pace of conversation, are  
son and father, or his grandfather; the man  
seems older than the young fathers  
around here. But from the front, when  
you see their eyes, there's no mistake –  
they're father (or stepfather?) and son all right, talking  
with such attention, such respect  
for one another.

They walk into the village, silently greeted, greeting,  
with the gentle nodded glance of villagers  
about their various tasks; and open up  
the wooden door of the cool and tidy carpenters'  
workshop open to the sunny air, where  
a young mother gazes at the boy with  
all the love in the world. It's  
in His eyes too.

Michael Shepherd

## 0402 The Footballers' Bible

It's a book of two halves

First half, a lot of whistle-blowing, rule-breaking, penalties, and the ref keeping strictly to the rules

Second half, all about creating chances and a satisfactory result.

Michael Shepherd

## 0403 The Medium Is The Message

'I wish you could see it - it's an incredible sight -  
there's this unbelievable river of people -  
like a Ganges or a Mississippi -  
all moving at their various speeds  
according to age and infirmity and determination,  
all races and colours too,  
yes, a bit of strain and pain on some faces,  
but such a feeling of goodwill  
as I've never experienced before-  
cheerier than a Hallmark card -  
all facing forward, carried by the others  
and superbly marshalled - the angels -  
so there's every support you could imagine,  
I don't know why I ever had cold feet about it,  
I feel that the future is rosy...  
but the present's even better....  
see you soon. Oh by the way,  
forget sentiment and keepsakes, all that -  
slung the marathon medal in the casket. It reminds me  
of that last day. Funnily enough, it's rather  
similar in a way, as we approach the finishing line -  
' the pearly gates' ha ha;  
yes, see you soon. Time flies, doesn't it? '

'And that' said the medium, turning up the lights,  
'is all we've time for this session. I hope  
it makes you feel better, dear. Most of my clients  
say so, they go out happier...Yes,  
I'll take an Amex card...'

Michael Shepherd

## 0404 The Middle East In Two Lines

We are the innocent party

so we shall take revenge

Michael Shepherd

## 0405 The Mountain Of Truth

This bloody poetry writing - it's like rock-climbing -  
who asked you to, anyway?  
who needs it?  
why can't you be just like everyone else -  
admire the mountain from afar,  
Olympus, Parnassus, whatever, what's in a name?  
its cap of snow, the way you often can't see the top  
for mist; like romance around truth.  
Homer at the top saw gods - shall you?

But no -  
it's a fine summer morning  
and you get the urge to see the view from the top;  
well fine, but that's not enough for you,  
no going up the standard route for you, oh no,  
you want to be the first to get to the top by  
a new route never attempted before...

so there you are an hour or two later, at the grassy foot  
safe in your skin and about to risk your life  
(and your reputation, you conceited little man)  
and off we go...

the rockface, truth itself (and did you give a single thought  
to how that was built, or who might have built it?)  
and you with this tiny, hot ambition;  
but take it calmly now, word by word, or you're in trouble  
and it's a banal climbdown for anyone to see and read.

and it's not as if anyone is going to appreciate  
the difficulty of your climb  
without doing it themselves; and taste the exhilaration,  
the selfish, lonely, glorious exhilaration  
as you gain the top, and gaze at the heart-stirring, breeze-blessed view  
as if you are for those few minutes before other thoughts creep in,  
the master of your universe...

but beware, even the climb down you now face  
back to the plains of everyday

may be a sterner test - humility may even  
cross your mind, as you recall each step  
that that same rockface of the truth  
that challenged all your skills to master,  
saved your life every step, by its every ancient crack and crevice  
so conveniently provided by nature and those millions upon millions  
of seashells that built this truthful mountain...

and now, you're back on the level plain of everyday -  
are you going to keep it quiet, or tell the world?  
'Look, there's the mountain I climbed! ' 'Yes, I saw it  
in the paper - how's the wife? ' And though  
it'll be recorded in the books, the later editions will point out  
that yes it was the first, but that was before the first  
girl did it by that route, the first child,  
the first man did it barefoot,  
the first blind man did it from memory...

yes you'll feel good, yes you'll feel a bigger man,  
yes you'll be a better climber for it,  
yes your fellow climbers  
will treat your name with respect,  
yes they'll read it in the books,  
but they'll never know, unless they try it,  
how it felt at every risky step,  
the holds you didn't take for caution's sake  
on that rockface of truth,  
what went through your mind or got blotted out.

But you'll know. And that's enough for you.  
Personal satisfaction. And the hope  
that your book about it will touch others,  
even sell well. Your heart's in it -  
what more can you ask?

This bloody poetry-writing.

Michael Shepherd

## 0406 The Summer Evening Music That Never Ended

It was such a warm summer evening  
that the music that was promised us  
after the evening meal, called to meet  
the open air. I wondered, would it work,  
would the delicacy of the music's fine woven tapestry,  
the shaped fine wood of instruments,  
fine sounds from strings, flute, clarinet,  
find themselves, or lose themselves,  
on the mown front lawn before the house,  
under the heavens' curve?

Chairs, music stands, cello's spike  
were settled in the grassy earth; skirts arranged;  
stillness as the group began to hear  
each other's silence and the music  
not yet played; not far away; but almost here.  
Something complete, it seemed,  
was in the air.

Music began; acquired attitudes of listening  
settled on the audience; and then, unannounced,  
magic descended. Someone  
who knew life so intimately, so completely,  
who had passed through it even while  
they lived it, was telling me in my inner ear  
what life was, is, all about; in detail –  
it's like this; and this; this sweetness,  
that sweetness; this sadness, that sadness;  
sweetness that's sad, sadness that is sweet;  
all held like a gentle fountain - bubbling continuous,  
yet gloriously and joyously, ever fresh;  
to be welcomed, not to be judged or resisted,  
(the hearing of it was way beyond such things)  
for it held - listening to it now afresh, it holds -  
all that may be known, that may be lived; this is life itself;  
this, this is simply, how it is...

The sound is with me now; music told me;  
this is how it is.

Michael Shepherd



## 0407 The Past Was A Present Once

A string of perfect pearls  
threaded on grey silk  
in a silver jewel-case  
I'm keeping for somebody else  
so don't open it

A room of carefully-folded  
happineses  
but I scrawled 'nostalgia' on the door  
so don't go in there

I know what's in the box, the room,  
so I haven't looked for a long time

maybe I should

Michael Shepherd

## 0408 The Phoenix Museum

A sightseeing phoenix a sign espied:  
'This way to the Phoenix Museum';  
A little homesick, went inside;  
Looked for friends; but couldn't see 'em.

In hindsight, the title's  
Just a little rash;  
The Phoenix Museum  
Is now a pile of ash...

Michael Shepherd

## 0409 The Postman And The Dog, Or Plato's Fido

There has to be a reason:  
dogs bite postmen.

It's not just that they jump up the sofa to the window  
and bark excitedly even when the postman's invisible down the street;  
that's smart; but they don't stop at that. For those of us  
who still have letterboxes in our front doors,  
every one's a tasty finger-trap...and open the front door  
to take the parcel - and all hell breaks loose.

You'd think that they'd catch on, that their owners  
mostly like to have a dropp each day - even though  
its largely bumf (and you can't even use it for that) :  
it's not bills every day; no, postie's not our enemy  
that dogs defend us from; or do they pick up thrilling smells  
even before he's at noselength, of rival canines  
all along his round? Can't the perfume industry dream up  
a body-spray for postmen to please the canine race?  
A kinda Mini Factor Inc., 'Make-Up To the Curs'...

I wonder if the answer's in the Hindu mould:  
that this life is the sweet-sour fruit  
of last lives' actions; even our living form:

Was the postman with the hang-dog expression  
who won't look me in the eye - as if  
we both remember some shared former life -  
is he on the up: his last life, noble, faithful, obedient dog  
with just one fatal flaw: he couldn't resist a juicy mouthful  
of postman's ankle?  
So now he's born - eternal justice so decreed -  
a postman... tooth for a tooth...but carrying in consciousness  
a hang-dog memory of that guilt?

Or (since it's said the number of created animal souls  
stays constant) is he on transmigration's down escalator -  
a human failure as a postman, who, out of public gaze,  
aims a shrewd and secret kick at Fido... and  
with that hang-dog expression....

yes, you guessed it.

I wonder if I should mention this to him?

Michael Shepherd

## 0410 The Runner

you're still running  
in the dark between the  
dangerous lights.  
you don't hear their footsteps  
any more. they may have  
given up. but chasing you  
with noiseless footsteps, is still  
fear. when to stop running?

one day, perhaps, no longer  
the faint chill sound of fear  
chasing silently.

just, quieter still,  
the fear of fear.

Michael Shepherd

## 0412 The Wind And The Tree

The soft spring wind  
is whispering words of love  
to the slender branches  
whose leaves flutter  
like young girls  
talking of love

(for Brian Tinsley with best wishes)

Michael Shepherd

## 0412 Their World

It's a sepia photograph, taken, I'm guessing,  
1900,1910? The whole of it is taken up by  
a crowd on the move, passing the photographer,  
who could be, say, clinging to a lamp-post, or on a balcony.  
Going to? Leaving? Impossible to tell.  
Who's rich? Who's poor? No clue.  
What's it got to tell you about - life?  
Why go on looking at it? No reason

except that you're human; they were human; and  
today, you wish, with increasing intensity,  
to connect. In some way. Somewhere at the back of  
uncomfortable mind, maybe, lurks the thought that one fine day,  
you'll be that anonymous one in that anonymous crowd,  
forever recorded - dead on the page;  
by the irony of history, photographed  
when you were sure that you were alive forever...

There's one chap in the crowd looking at the camera;  
as the artist, in some Renaissance adoration, and  
slightly aloof from the crowd's concern,  
looks out of history at you the spectator - as if to say  
I'm there; I'm here; and what of you?

But he's no artist; he's looking boldly at the camera,  
a cigarette between his lips at 45 degrees from the vertical -  
a cheeky angle you never see today; the equivalent, I guess,  
of the V-sign at the camera, as some meaningless, cocky, lively,  
spontaneous act of defiance -at what?

Now you can 't put the photo down.  
It's like picking at a scab or  
a joyless masturbation. It threatens - you threaten -  
your sense of security; whatever that might be.  
Every one of that crowd lived a valid life.  
You'd like to be one of them - or would you?  
Why aren't you filled with a joyous sense  
of identity and compassion?  
A selfish greed, perhaps, to know more than you ever can?

Maybe, one day, you'll pick up that photo once again  
and greet them like old friends.

Michael Shepherd



## 0413 There Not Back Kerouac

Jack Kerouac  
thought to track  
the real America  
on the road  
but forgot to pack  
his full stop  
so lost the point  
and thus didn't stop  
'til plop!  
into the Pacific  
with a smack  
but found it terrific  
so never went back  
for that full stop  
and lost the point  
but found himself  
did Jack  
Kerouac.

Michael Shepherd

## 0414 This Other Eden, Demi-Paradise..Yeah?

Eden lives.. in the misty  
mountains, jungle-thick,  
of Papua New Guinea..

with its community of living things  
living in what, hunger apart, seems  
to be harmonious balance

awaiting, unperturbed,  
Man:

adorable, begging to be cloned,  
kangaroos that climb trees  
(it almost ranks as  
showing off at Nature's  
Olympic Games) : mammals  
that lay eggs as easily as  
a chicken crosses the road  
to take a drink of milk;

and just the merest touch  
of more obvious Darwinian competition by  
the lyre-bird which builds  
an ostentatious house fit for a honeymoon  
to tempt a girl who knows what's what;

or is this  
the last place on earth  
where the survivors of  
Nature's ruthlessness might be safe  
amid the thick, tall tress,  
from crunching jaws  
of dinosaurs,  
the stabbing dives and crack-bills  
of pterodactyls?

would it surprise you if they found  
upon the highest peak, Noah's Ark  
with a list writ by some heavenly hand

full of crossings-off?

but why am I so moved  
by smiles and tears - then  
joy and fears -  
to read that all these creatures  
have not learnt  
to fear Man?

Michael Shepherd

## 0415 Thunk

sometimes i type thunk for think  
it's not that i've been at the drink  
but then i look at it, and -hell -  
it does describe my thoughts so well

Michael Shepherd

## 0416 To A Prolix Poet

why do you hate Poetry so much  
that you slap her face in public

yet assume she'll stay with you?

Michael Shepherd

# 0417 To A Small-Part Actress In The Drama Of My Life

Shall I compare thee to...a winter's night? ...I wish  
I knew what so provokes...  
is it me, is it you, is it us?  
I try from time to time, to start afresh,  
make overtures; but it's just like  
a brick wall in the mind; as if forever you're defending  
some unspoken matter from attack,  
and so we all unwillingly take on the role  
of chosen enemies.

What, behind this unexplained brick wall,  
are you defending? So that every conversation  
feels as if there's someone out there marking, like a boxing ring,  
points scored? Even when you walk in through  
the office door, it's like a challenge to a world  
who handicapped you long before the start - so now  
even your beautiful and natural blonde hair,  
always so perfectly groomed and shaped and held,  
seems to growl a challenge...but to whom?

I wish I knew - just for the sake, at first, of knowing;  
and then, who knows, I might even sorrow for  
that which so corsets all that yearns to yield...maybe;  
and even love you for yourself...

but I think what really riles my man-mean mind  
is that you behave as if, despite all this,  
you've not a single enemy in the world...  
that I find difficult to forgive...

Michael Shepherd

## 0419 Tribute To A Listening Man (George Steiner)

The TV studio set for a prestige production  
of the sort that wins renewed network contracts  
if not viewers, late on Sunday night:  
the subject, a weekly series on  
The History of Christianity -  
worthy discussion leader, impressive panel  
mingling ecclesiastical robes of  
a glowing spectrum of faiths with the  
open-necked, for open-minded,  
dress-down of young freethinkers, but  
respectful of their elders, with it;  
subtle lighting on the semi-circular panel  
and the background, tastefully designed  
with hints of the history of otherworldliness

and among the assembled voices  
of faith and reason in their polite battle,  
the great intellectual guru of the Western world  
himself – would his searing intellect, his daunting  
global dimensions of mind, dominate  
this gathering?

Life can have its glorious surprises even  
on a dozy, precious-last-weekend-hours  
of a Sunday night – George said his piece,  
then, challenged by the other speakers,  
sat there listening: as if, without a resistant, reacting,  
or self-regarding thought in his head –  
listened rapt in full attention, as if expecting  
to listen to a further, deeper truth from  
those who argued against him – his face  
benign, almost smiling

I have never seen such intellectual humility –  
as if, way, way beyond the personal, a mind  
was listening constantly, for truth, to truth itself..  
listening to that listening,  
I felt proud to be  
a human being.

Michael Shepherd



## 0420 Trust Nature

It's said that every species in the world  
displays one gift beyond the scope of Man.  
How dangerous the skies - for men, and birds -  
how soiled the air, if wings were in Man's span!

Suppose that every species made extinct  
by Man, the guardian of all things that live,  
deprived us (as indeed it may..) by dint  
of mindlessness, of something God's mind gives?

I watch the spider, humble in my praise:  
self-spinning tightrope walker; engineer;  
the knower of all Nature's weathered ways  
and bold explorer on the winds that veer:

Nature spares the spider Man's wild mind;  
should mind in Nature rest, there's more to find.

Michael Shepherd

# 0421 Truth In Politics

I read a rare truth  
in the news today

no evidence has been found  
of any misdeed on the part  
of the politician

well that's all right then

some may ask  
how hard did they look

Michael Shepherd

## 0424 Walking Together

When you arrive, ring then knock,  
we talk a little and I can feel  
you think perhaps you ought to say  
how's the poetry going then

but the silent note's just a little  
out of tune so I say  
let's go for a walk  
the park's quite near

so we walk out, the street is quiet  
except for the house  
where only last Saturday  
the two sons were stabbed many times  
hauled out of a white Mercedes van  
in a gang related crime unquote

the house guarded by expressionless men on cellphones  
born into a cycle of poverty, easy money and revenge, then  
on to the park, the walkers, the cyclists,  
the football players, the tennis players,  
the lake, the dogs, the ducks, the rowers,  
the flowers, those who sit and watch

this is in place of my poem  
this is my poem this walk  
a way of saying I hope  
you share all the world with me

and all the emotions, all the thoughts  
that arise from it, all we see  
every moment whoops careful now as the boy  
on the unsteady bicycle nearly hits us both

and back past the house of death  
where the men stare at us as if  
we are some yet unidentified enemy  
in a war they won't admit to

this is in place of my poem  
this is my poem this walk  
a way of saying I hope

Michael Shepherd

## 0426 Was It A Smile Or A Cry? For Salma

You reminded me, and I dug it out -  
the snap I've always hated but didn't know why;  
now you've reminded me and thank you -

they know they have to stand with their back to the sun  
so, without thinking of you, but  
thinking of their future thinking about the past  
they make you stand facing the sun  
so you squint and screw your eyes up which is bad enough  
while they take random advice from the other adults  
and then as if that wasn't bad enough  
they say 'smile! ' as if they're saying  
you can win this race (for us) .

Is it a smile or a cry?  
it's the record of the first time you lied on camera  
for your parents who should be ashamed.

It would be more honest  
if instead of smile or watch the birdie or say cheese  
they said 'Now lie for the camera! ! '...  
and somewhere  
truth would smile.

Michael Shepherd

## 0427 We'D Never Have Gessed..

There's so much  
we never know,  
would never have guessed,  
never asked,  
and now regret that  
we never asked,  
about what it was like for 'them'  
before we were born...

I can't remember exactly  
how old I was – eight? - when I knew  
that Mum couldn't possibly  
have been my mother.

She was so innocent, so simple, yet  
so quietly organised,  
so sensible, so unlike me  
- who was unlike Dad anyway, didn't he remind me -  
that she could never  
have had.. sex? .. with Dad..

It must have been my 'naughty' aunt, who had me,  
'father unknown' but conveniently  
adopted by my 'parents' -  
the one who had an eye for the boys  
and boy did the boys have eyes for her,  
who asked every evening if she could  
go out and play with them, while  
Dorothy did her homework,  
learned double-entry book-keeping by post,  
did part-time secretarial work,  
became the first female bank-clerk in the town, and still  
made the cakes and scones to sell  
in the terrace front-window shop  
before she went to morning school or work,  
while Grandad wheezed in the armchair, sick from the cotton mill..

It was only when my mother, in her sixties, took me  
on her annual holiday once to see my

aunt (?) Mary, and the two played one-up  
all the time, that I realised the truth of this  
familiar family play of life:

Two daughters, fighting for their father's love,  
picking each their role: the one,  
doing all the right things to win his love;  
the other, forever testing his love  
with naughtiness; (she never married, just  
played the Magdalene) :  
he died, and yet  
they carried on their fight; Grandma was  
some bystander, I guess. And of course,  
Grandad loved his 'scamp' so much –  
she, the same twinkle in his eye  
that he had when he courted Grandma..  
Who won, in the end? Neither? Both?

After I saw that, it didn't seem to matter so much  
which of them was really my mother. It would  
have been fair if they could, somehow,  
have shared me; and maybe, I them.

Michael Shepherd

## 0428 What Is A Poem?

A wise grandfather, skilled designer,  
approached with serious concern -  
to ask 'What is a poem? '...  
no ready answer - but the question  
spoken so touchingly  
as if indeed it mattered...

A poem?

Some sounds  
from heart to heart  
to melt the heart?

To join our inmost thoughts?

To keep in mind, recall  
what human kind most values,  
needs to value?

To share a laugh  
at this extraordinary human comedy  
and blow away its illusions?

To reassert our human greatness  
and the humanity of humanity?

To preserve the finest sounds  
of our beloved language  
which hold  
all that we love?

To tell a new, entrancing story  
which we'll never forget?

Blowing a soap-bubble world  
with all the colours of the rainbow  
sliding around on its roundness  
while we clap our hands  
and pop it goes..



Just - serious fun?

In Pooh-Bear language,  
simply  
People Reading It And Nodding?

Really,  
a poem is like  
an angel, a dragon, a favourite food, or a Special Friend -  
you'll know it when it comes along...

My wise friend  
said thank you,  
he'd always wondered.

Michael Shepherd

## 0429 Who Doesn'T Love Greatness?

It's one of the world's  
greatest secrets  
that shouldn't be:

if you recognise  
an artist's greatness -  
in any art -  
it's because you have  
greatness in yourself

otherwise  
you'd never recognise it

OK?

Michael Shepherd

## 0430 Why War?

when peace is forever,  
why war?  
It doesn't last  
like peace.

(for Jerry Hughes, poet)

Michael Shepherd

## 0431 You Couldn'T Make It Up... I Hope...

Off the coast of California  
where else  
hornyhead turbot  
and there's a name for a start  
were found to be bisexual with  
ovary tissues in their testes

the males were found congregated  
around a sewage outlet

before graffiti writers  
and fundamentalist preachers  
develop the implications of  
this newsflash  
I think I'll stop  
right there

Michael Shepherd

## 0432 Zen In The Art Of...

I thought my tire was flat.

But it was my heart.

I thought my headlights were off.

But it was my mind.

Michael Shepherd

## 0433 Zen And Travel

In the road, a car.

In the car, a poet.

In the poet, many poems.

What moves?

(for Joseph)

Michael Shepherd

## A (P) Lea To (P) Oemhunter

O ppoemhunter - hear my pplea:  
please dropp that ppleonastic p!

Suppose your spelling, dropp by dropp  
ran PCs short, all crashing, \*lo\*,  
and \*oets had to write their \*oetry  
without the strength to hold their \*!

It could reduce dear England's language  
and cause considerable \*oetic anguish  
(and by 'England's language', AJS,  
I do not mean... well, you can guess...)

Would Doctor Nerd-like surgery  
help remove that extrusive \*?  
'twould be a cut to \*lease any Aryan  
but all things considered, humanitarian...

As old men (meta\*horically)  
suffer so unsociably,  
from all too frequent need to wee,  
restrain your \*C's excess \*!

Overuse could be averse  
to \*oets' \*oems, or verse - or worse;  
and \*arekh's generous realm of dreams  
would be reduced by reams and reams...

\*oemhunter's world-wide error  
could set the \*undits cold with terror -  
like \*ublic toilets when overused,  
\*lease to mind your \*'s and queues!

so \*oemhunter, I dropp this \*lea:  
\*lease take care just where you \*?

Michael Shepherd

# A Born Crook

Fact: a bright British lad, by name  
has today been extradited to San Diego  
under a 'one-way' treaty with the US (yah boo unfair)  
to face fraud charges relating to  
a software company

which could make it difficult  
for prosecution and defence lawyers  
addressing him formally  
in their different ways

how close are tragedy and comedy sometimes

Michael Shepherd



# A Comment On The Ethics Of Millionaire Footballers

' I wuz innocent' he cries,  
his hands upraised in righteousness,

the gun still smoking in his right hand,  
a handful of his opponent's shirt in his left,

his arm smeared with mud from the ball's illicit touch,  
his boot toecapped in the sunlight,

gleaming wet with his rival's blood

Michael Shepherd

# A Defense Of Bad Poetry

'Naff' comes back as 'cutting-edge'...  
though dogs may have their day,  
doggerel may have nine lives...  
I guess it's here to stay...

Michael Shepherd

# A Flowery Smile, A Smiley Flower

And we need the wisdom of others  
for instance, this week  
I'm eating sunflower seed bread

and suppose that no-one had told me  
that just like those cutesy baby tapeworms  
sunflower seeds made themselves at home  
and grew like men having babies

until one day, someone would say good morning  
and you'd open your mouth and just like  
one of those happy film cartoons  
out would pop a big yellow sun flower as  
an answer

worse still if you were strolling round  
a Van Gogh show and someone asked you  
what you thought of them  
and thought you were taking the mickey  
like some Disney moment

yes we need other people's wisdom  
to live safely I mean  
why don't they grow like tapeworms,  
do you know, smartypants?

Michael Shepherd

# A Mireille

Mireille, merveille de poesie,  
Laborie, qui sans labeur  
mele notre deux langues  
d'exploration exquise  
en extase mutuelle  
avec une ardeur telle que celle-ci  
delicieusement  
en poesie...

(courtesy Longman's French Dictionary, 1905 + MB, berger des bergers...)

Michael Shepherd

# A Philosopher's Love Poem

putting on one side  
the inconvenient paradox  
that I always seem to be  
boring old me and yet  
never quite myself  
I'd like to offer you  
my eternal love and  
perhaps we might explore together  
the implications of that concept?

Michael Shepherd

# A Piece Of White Flannel About Cricket

Sport is popular. Fine.

Sport attracts sponsorship. Fine.

Sport becomes showbusiness. mmm.

'Pietersen embraced Collingwood on his century like a footballer'..

I say, old chap, that's just...not cricket...

Michael Shepherd

# A Pig Of A Cliché Day

One of those days.  
Do I need to tell you?  
Like some invisible burden  
to do with humanity or something  
personal, imagined, no clue,  
pressing down, tensing the back,  
can barely walk a straight line,  
face full of repressed anger  
about what I don't know,  
then yawning with the weariness  
of doing nothing  
so how to deal with it  
if you don't know  
who laid it on you  
or why

opened the paper  
almost too bored to do that,  
read the story of how  
he won the VC, top honour,  
very rare  
and what it's been like since

reckoned if I can cry like this  
something must be alright  
somewhere

I'm OK now. You?

Michael Shepherd

# A Poem For November 28,2007

At rest, in peace, and happily,  
in silence, in stillness, and joyfully,  
honour yourself. Be yourself.

When you honour yourself  
you honour the whole created world.

Live just this day in your glorious self.

Remember it for the rest of your life  
as the day the world rested in itself,  
the day we were all at rest in peace,  
the day the world was a happy place  
and you were glad to be that peace;

the day we were all ourself.

Michael Shepherd



# A Poem, A Thankyou, A Surrender, A Gathering Tear

You know how it is, too?  
you write a poem, it means  
more than anything to you  
while you're writing it, and when you've  
just finished it; then  
you tremble for it, for yourself;  
and it's a bit like – I imagine –  
the shadow of having to give up your child  
for adoption... you look away,  
close your eyes, walk fast out of the door,  
looking back without your eyes...

then just one person, that's  
all it needs, says they like it...  
and you read your poem with  
a new warmth, as if  
someone adopted it,  
had it christened;  
and it smiled.

Michael Shepherd

# A Public Apology

Public apologies are the new confessional.

So here goes.

I apologize for not knowing where to start with my apologies.

I apologize for being tainted with the sins of Adam.

I apologize for blaming Eve for the sins of Adam.

I apologize to the Serpent, who was just following orders.

I apologize for the seductiveness of ripe apples on the Tree of Knowledge. I just didn't know at the time.

I apologize for not taking Genesis 1 literally.

I apologize for not appreciating the allegorical significance of Genesis 1.

I apologize for blaming the Jews for crucifying Christ.

I apologize for not being quicker to blame the relevant parties for the crucifixion of Christ.

I apologize for not giving independence to America sooner.

I apologize to the Native Americans for invading their great God's-own country.

I apologize to the Native Americans for not stopping them sooner from killing each other's tribes.

I apologize for entering into business agreements with the chiefs of certain coastal African tribes to bring their captives from their tribal wars to resolve America's manpower shortage.

I apologize for dwelling on the sufferings of my family in the Holocaust, without considering the mental and emotional agony of those obliged to follow orders to massacre them.

I apologize for messing with Iraq.

I apologize for not doing a better job of messing with Iraq.

I apologize for not being Politically Correct.

I apologize for being Politically Correct.

I apologize for throwing all these things in your face and encouraging you to feel complicit in my guilt.

I apologize for not apologizing sooner.

I apologize for all the things I haven't the imagination and humanity to apologize for.

Oh to hell with it.

Michael Shepherd

# A Quiet Rap For Poetry Teachers

Words, they 'mean' – just, what they do;  
and a poem means – just what it does;  
if it doesn't do a single thing for you –  
that's it, for now; let's cut the fuzz...

it may be called 'the greatest' poem;  
it may be utterly true;  
but if it doesn't do one little thing for you -  
just put it aside for another time;

and let's all rap'n'clap this memorable rhyme:  
'poems 'mean' – simply – what they DO...  
(1,2,3, and...) ...for ME..(5,6..) .....for YOU! '....

and that's the end of my poetic beef –  
I hope you find that some relief..  
so rap it with me, all of you:  
" POEMS MEAN – JUST WHAT THEY DO! ! "

Michael Shepherd

# A Rose Is Only Until

hold the camera  
as the rose's petals  
fall  
one by  
one  
until.

backwards  
film  
the  
run  
Now

a minor miracle  
of memory  
in two dimensions  
once three.

you.  
I.

who  
holds  
the camera  
now?

Michael Shepherd

# A Senseless Poem For Senseless Entrepreneurs

The Honourable 'Stinky' Fartbutton  
all his life felt put on  
being burdened with such a name  
until one dread night,  
surfing a website,  
he found he'd achieved a tasteless fame  
blinking to the left of hallowed poetic text  
on Poemhunter... 'Whatever next..? !'  
exclaimed The Honourable Asafoetida Fartbutton, B. Litt., and then  
reached for his pen

(sorry, people, but really...)

Michael Shepherd

# A Tribute To William Bronk, Poet.

There you have him, and you have him not..  
his life, his poetry;  
humility, yet  
the glimpse of glory;  
the glimpse of glory, yet  
humility..

There's how it is; and how  
it seems. And poetry.  
So poets say, of how it seems, that  
'it's as if...'  
and of how it is, they say that  
'it's as if..'

for thus we are to know  
the slender, swinging, fearful  
in its impertinent height over  
awful depths, rope bridge  
of words across the chasm,  
life, below, fast flowing,  
the poet carrying a thin scribbled sheet  
with undescribably great love

about how it is, and  
how it seems,  
about how it seems, and  
how it is  
and on the sheet,  
'As if..'  
We'll understand.

Michael Shepherd

# A Whispered Rant In Disguise

If the definition of poetry is  
that it touches the heart  
then the Olympic Games,  
all the arts  
and other more intimate matters  
are poetry

which I believe the Greeks  
would nod assent to

and Baron Coubertin's declaration  
relaunching the Olympic Games  
(though this time with clothes on, ah well) and  
somewhat forgotten by the media  
that it's not the winning  
but the taking part  
would apply to all  
the above activities

which is OK by me  
and her.

Michael Shepherd



# Am I A Poet?

Dunno about you (that's why  
I'm writing this poem) but  
it's the noun thing, 'poet': as if  
you're simultaneously committing yourself  
for life to something – although  
you would love to do it for life,  
it's somehow got  
public connotations.

A good place to test the word  
is a party – if you make some pleasantry  
and the lady's eyes brighten and she says  
'That's very poetic..' you'd be mad  
not to continue the conversation...

So 'poetic' is OK, . It's  
non-threatening,  
environmentally friendly,  
warm-hearted;

however 'I write poetry' –  
is risky. Men feel challenged;  
they know they wouldn't read your book  
even if you gave it to them, signed; so  
they respond in career-advice mode  
with 'and do you make any money  
by it? ' or even a straight  
'are you any good? ' or  
simply assume you're out of work  
and unemployable; whatever,  
they'll do that English thing  
of looking carefully at your clothes..  
and go into their practiced  
about-to-move-away mode

Women however are different: especially  
if you risk the full-on 'I'm a poet...'  
they'll do an instant calculation –  
he's discreetly promiscuous, that means

safe, so do I fancy him? Probably out of work, but hey  
that's always useful in an afternoon lover...

However for them, at a party  
it promises a more interesting conversation  
than 'I'm a merchant banker, not  
very interesting I'm afraid ha ha'  
so at least they ask questions  
and you may well bring them around

though ladies in rather look-at-me attire  
who instantly respond 'Yes,  
so am I! ! ' with enthusiasm are to be very carefully  
summed up before you risk this claim  
of poet; it can be like  
being smothered by  
an emotional jellyfish;  
better just say 'I write poetry',  
it's less committing; you can always  
retreat from the claim as if  
it was a passing phase when younger

but if the lady, or the gentleman,  
replies with a twinkle in their eye,  
Yes, so do I, but  
I don't tell anyone ...! ' a merry  
conversation should ensue...

I'm currently using 'I write poetry  
on the internet...' which is  
non-threatening, almost interesting,  
and doesn't involve  
any commitment on their part  
to buy your book or anything

My recommendation is,  
try these phrases out at home,  
with a mirror, preferably full-length  
(body-language can be so revealing)  
and see which makes you cringe  
or even fills you with inspiring confident pride

However all this may be

a generation thing; 'lyric-writers' for popnrock  
must have all this sussed,  
beating off the offers  
of one sort or another.  
He said.

Michael Shepherd

# Amen, Hot Hep Heptameter

vandals in their silent sandals sift the sands of time;  
with fire and sword, hide hideous hoard of past poetic crime; and  
better far, with metaphor they banish vanish'd rhyme;  
and curse all verse banal or worse: their aim, the same -sublime.

Michael Shepherd

# America's Pumpkin Shortage-For Ted

Tough on Cinderella,  
tough on Hallowe'en..

Think of them like politics -  
hollowed out  
with a face imposed;

only the poor  
live the value.

Michael Shepherd

# An Ecological Thought Eked Out

God  
doesn't get much sympathy  
from believers  
or unbelievers  
(though for different reasons)  
but just imagine  
how He must feel  
when, having created  
all the glorious,  
ludicrous  
(He has a sense of humour surely)  
multitude of species,

mankind just knocks them off one by one,  
I mean, just imagine having all those extinct species  
in your Mind,  
sketches, working models, problems resolved,  
fine tuning, (er, evolution in later versions?)

but no longer there for all to see  
and sometimes laugh  
despite the fact that  
they themselves don't see the joke, and live OK thanks very much...

it would try the patience of a saint  
as they say

Michael Shepherd

# And Hike You Too Mate

There's nothing that makes  
the prissy just so pissy  
as 'rules for haiku'.

Michael Shepherd

# And This For Dr With Thanks

moleskin britches

need luminous stitches

Michael Shepherd



## Another \*\*\*\*\* Rant...

Emotion recollected in  
Tranquillity? Not.

British Telecom has this time  
added to my modest bill  
£4.50 (\$ 9, right?) for  
'processing' my payment.  
That's 10% of my modest bill..  
the bloody nerve.

So what about the cost to me  
of 'processing' my bill?  
The costly stamp I'm lucky  
if I've got; the mental effort  
of having to spell out the figures  
on the cheque, in case someone  
alters them; the walking to the postbox..  
what makes them think I'm not doing this  
in my expensive working hours, for which  
I charge a consultation fee?

I see they've even set up  
a separate company to 'process'...  
bet that was cheap... Though of course  
I could follow their 'complaints procedure'  
and phone them... 'we are sorry but  
our lines are Very Busy...your phone call  
is important to us...please hold the line...'

So tell me, why shouldn't I... charge them? ...

Michael Shepherd

# Another Rant And Why Not

The plan, we're told,  
is, let Israel bombard Lebanon  
for a week, then  
send in Condoleeza with condolences  
to suggest  
a buffer zone.

What a great  
TV game  
for those  
still alive

Michael Shepherd

# Ants In The Pants

The colony of ants who (which?)  
were happy up until recently  
eating away at the gatepost  
have braved it up the path to  
the doorstep where  
the four a.m. milkman deposits  
the milk and bottled juice; it must have been  
an exciting discovery, the bottles all dewy, cool,  
in the early mist of dawn and  
a promising ring of sweet liquid  
just below the aluminium caps of some

so as I pick up the bottles, bleary-eyed,  
some bold mountaineers  
hitch a hike to foreign lands  
which they regret. The first one such  
finished up on the steel sink-top –  
a pathetic sight out of Kafka or Orwell,  
the worker out of work scurrying  
more and more hysterically,  
up and down in search of company, of work,  
disorientated, frantic; I brushed him,  
her, or it, onto the floor in the vague belief  
that ants and floors had more in common and  
could sort it out between them.

The second put a cap on schoolboy jokes,  
making its presence known just as  
I lowered my pants upon the toilet seat...  
black trousers at that – I was as frantic  
in my antics, as that first ant on the draining-board.  
Perhaps some kind of retribution.

The third turned up on my arm, as I sat like this  
at the computer..this time I was in care-for-all-things mood  
and hoped to tray it on a piece of paper  
back to its team – it wasn't having any,  
skedaddled, almost jumped I'll swear,  
off to this foreign floor that is not ever antland..

Maybe it was the same one which just now  
turned up on my arm again here, three times  
resisting brushing off until I, ungraciously, succeeded. And then  
I felt guilty, repentant,

An old man on creaky knees,  
searching in the poorest light  
on a dark gray carpet  
for a small, reddish-brown ant.

Michael Shepherd

# Apollo Is Alive And Well And Living In Suburbia...

Last night, a great lute-player  
as full of enthusiasm for the power of music  
and its history of the human heart  
as far as history recedes, as I remember him  
forty years ago before his fame had spread,

handed his lute around the dinner-table  
as if we were at some christening party  
for the eternal birth of eternal music  
in the eternal present moment...

the lute shining like a promise  
of things greater and unknown..  
yet... not unknown to the eager heart...  
made of several woods, matured

for around eight years; like pearwood,  
the driest wood known; all nature  
had conspired (as poets put it) ,  
the trees had conferred together

in praise of the music which they hear  
hints of through their winter branches,  
in their rustling young spring leaves,  
in the wind's dry whisper in red and brown late curling leaves...

and a man had put all this together  
with its invisible fierce tensions held  
by cunning of design, to permit  
the gentlest sounds of laughter, tears...

a man who after years of skill  
built into priceless treasures such as this  
now works in La Jolla as a restorer  
of heritage houses from the nineteen-hundreds...

and the lute itself! when holding it, it seemed  
to have a 'negative weight' – as if  
its very balance, laws of immaterial sound

made material in our human world

had made a thing of spirit, which begged  
return to its very elements of ether,  
sound, air, touch, and music's fire,  
the flow of love in laughter and in tears,

so that I swear, it had no weight  
but rather, was its opposite...  
he played an ancient song  
composed before songs were written down,

recorded for us – its sole record, this –  
by the first inventor, from the Italian courts,  
of moveable musical type; a song  
which transcended its Christian story

of sin and sorrow and repenting grief;  
its music, roaming in its memory,  
over Africa, Asia, all the length  
and breadth of the human heart

recorded in the sound of music...  
this the magic that rose in the air  
around a dinner-table in a suburban house  
touched by a boundless, weightless eternity of grace.

Michael Shepherd

# Are You Sure You'Re Wrong?

'UK schools may no longer be obliged  
to teach right and wrong'...

well, OK, but how do we know  
whether that decision's right  
or wrong?

...er...

Michael Shepherd

# Arjji

Every birth is a miracle;  
more of a miracle; not less;

but his two hands and his two feet  
are tiny miracles in themselves;

the four first toys he's yet to discover and enjoy;  
we can't take our eyes off them -  
their perfection.

but his face..still crinkled, his lips  
almost disdainful; as if he's not yet ready  
to face the world, put on a face for the world;  
it's not even a world to have a view about as yet.  
Lucky him.

So he doesn't know as yet  
that he's to be named Arjuna;

that he's yet to discover  
whether it's a burden or a blessing  
to be given that name

which he'll hear crooned so many times:  
'Arj...Arjji...Arjunaji... Arjuna...'

and gradually it'll sink in, that  
there's someone else... and me myself...

they'd prayed, as is the ancient custom,  
to bring a great and noble soul into the world;

his father Krish, that's Krishnaji  
has taken on a new role too;

there's more to birth, and name, and life...  
it takes a lifetime to find out.





# Ascending Mount Fuji - A Hike-You

View from the top -

a snowy blista

Michael Shepherd

# Autobiography In The Hanquerian Style

We got a new class teacher this fall.  
Head says we should be grateful

on account of he's highly 'qualified'. Guess that means  
he gets paid more. So he's the one

should be grateful. In my experience  
which don't hold for much  
but which ain't nothing neitherways:

life out here don't pay much heed  
to paper 'qualifications'.

Now, 'qualified' is something  
of another colour altogether. That's earned  
with a different sort of paper.  
We'll see.

Michael Shepherd

# Automne

I wrote, attempting French for a beautiful image which seemed halfway to French already:

Quand les oiseaux migrateurs  
rouillent sur leurs branches,  
peut-etre les arbres croient  
ses feuilles s'en retournent...

but...here is real French from Michel Galiana's voice:

“Quand les oiseaux migrateurs  
Se perchent sur leurs branchages,  
Ils croient peut-être, les arbres,  
Que leurs feuilles sont de retour. »

and a further 'more classical' rendering:

'Lorsque les oiseaux migrateurs  
Se posent sur eux, est-ce pour  
Faire croire aux arbres que leurs  
Feuilles enfin sont de retour? '

with apologies and thanks. MS

Michael Shepherd

# BLUES

no, it's beyond words.

say a word your word  
if you need,

death loss tears grief gone ever  
it's beyond all these

take them hold them  
press them tear them

squeeze from them  
the tears of things  
tears at the heart of things

squeeze this pure pure liquid  
from these from life itself

so pure it's nameless  
so pure it's the being  
of your being,  
the truth of truth,  
the beauty, of all the sadness  
that ever,

so pure, so true  
that never again;  
so pure, it could be  
joy or love or grace  
wash in its purity  
this is life

Michael Shepherd

# Be My Space-Time Einstein Valentine

Yesterday...

Valentine's, you missed it, too bad, he left no forwarding address-  
I watched from the pub window  
as a van from a high-class Consultant on  
spatial and temporal problems  
it implied  
in one of those pretentious titles  
of enterprising thirtyish freelance entrepreneurs  
gunning for a profitable big corporation buy-out I guess  
pulled up and parked in the very place  
and for the very time  
guaranteed to cause most disruption  
to the desperate gotta-buy-her-sump'n traffic on the busy road  
while I in my righteous citizen mode  
frowned and awaited developments

until many minutes later  
he returned  
looking very pleased with himself  
carrying a bunch  
of not many red roses  
in a cut-glass vase (clever florist) ,  
i'm not sure about the water - the vase was tilted  
in his hasty, laddish, anticipatory hand

and drove off.

Michael Shepherd

# Beach After Storm

The largest stones are piled against the sea-wall  
since that huge storm, a hundred years ago.

For the sea will never leave the beach alone –  
might you think it would fling  
the smallest stones the furthest?

No – to re-assert its power,  
it challenges the heftiest resistance,  
with inexhaustible, ruthless determination  
rolling, thrusting, flinging in impatient storm  
the largest, furthest; then grading with such patient delicacy  
over the years, the smooth but fine-scratched stones  
of so many colours – how can it have found,  
how long for it to find, so many lucent colours of wet stone?

These sometime finds – searching with a child's fine eye –  
of purest pebbled marble - how many thousand miles  
has the sea rolled these from southern shores?  
And these smooth stones of reddest brick,  
or rubbed, etched glass? Or ancient serpentine,  
bright green?

Then after a night of wildest storm,  
the air intoxicating with its ozone,  
new treasures thrown up on the beach:  
green glass globes from fishing nets,  
cork mats, boat wood, torn seaweed  
in thick chunks like beached, exhausted octopods;  
the beach re-shaped; even some parabolas of sand

while the seethe... keesh... of the dying storm  
draws incessantly, then spews the finest shingle  
in its maw like a hungry concrete-mixer.

The beach spreads out its shining, wet  
new treasure for the child-bright eye.  
This afternoon, the rock pools will be full;  
all will be new; sea-god a child again.

Michael Shepherd



# Buy Yours Now While Civilisation Lasts

Just as we prepare to celebrate  
the season of sparkling white and winter fuel,  
piss on earth and extended drinking hours  
there steals a hooded headline  
whose threatening menace  
turns your stomach over with  
the sickness of mankind to man:

Builders at a research facility  
at Oxford University  
now wear ski-masks although  
in the absence of some seasonal snow but  
in order to hide their identities from  
animal rights activists.

Michael Shepherd

# Carefree

You don't hear the word  
much these days.

It floated into the mind  
this morning in the middle  
of a fit of glooms

call it grace if  
you believe in grace

carefree  
it comes without strings  
like an escaping balloon  
a blue balloon or  
a thinks balloon

no documents to sign  
no commitment  
no promises, no-one to  
forgive, not even  
myself, not  
even a solemn declaration  
about giving up all other

all a bit easy, no wonder  
it's out of fashion

well you know what they  
say, yesterday's naff is  
tomorrow's edgy retro

so what  
today I'm carefree

my blue balloon, you can  
hardly see it against the  
blue sky, looks as if  
it wants to join it up there

wanna hold my balloon  
before we let it go?

Michael Shepherd

# Christmas - A Despatch From The Battlefield Of The Heart

Christmas is a-comin' – but  
this goose is gettin' thin...

why do I feel I'm in the dock  
of some unauthorised court of moral judgment  
with the prospect of spending New Year  
in some condemned cell of  
personal opinion remarkably similar to  
a Dickensian prison now electrified in just one wing...?

Forget the whole giving-presents thing – that's  
relatively simple – it's those bloody  
Christmas cards. Sent yours yet?

I'm with the angels on this one –  
peace on earth and goodwill to all, uh,  
persons... I'm fully paid up on  
this one – so – can we stick with that?  
or do we have to prove it with  
a ready-printed message once a year?

It's Christmas, dammit – maybe my year-round goodwill  
is equalled by the whole other lot of you out there?  
in which case, can we just take that as read,  
a universal love-in on a level playing field?

It's the subtext – 'I've forgotten your personal existence  
all the year, but look – Goody Two-Shoes is sending this  
to show you up – and I'm posting it  
so late that short of posting in the press  
one of those announcements that say  
'This year Mr and Mrs Smith are sending  
a donation to charity in place of the many Christmas cards  
they would have sent to their many friends...' – or  
a postcard,  
'Now we're back from our Antarctic trip,  
Happy New Year! ' you're too late to reply...'

which means?

Or there's the subtext  
'We're sending you a very  
religious card with just the faintest hint that  
although you may not have noticed it  
when we had that blazing row  
across the fence which has  
simmered on all year, nevertheless  
we're really more - well, everything -  
than you bastards - however  
this puts us, spiritually,  
one up...'

'Darling, Christmas cards - who sent us one  
last year? ' - say no more...

Would  
'No, we hadn't quite forgotten you  
in case you thought we had, and  
I bet it's mutual? ' cards, tastefully  
designed, be more fun? or

'Why should we even know your  
name and address if we  
hadn't once thought you worth loving and  
if so, why should that change? '

I reckon one acid test for those you love  
is, only think of sending cards to  
those you'd think of phoning on  
Christmas Eve or Christmas Day - and then,  
do just that - no need to send a card as well?

Oh well, any excuse to say, I love you.. especially  
if we mean it...

so, anyone who reads this (apart from those  
who only read to check whether they'd  
sent us one too) -

If an individual can claim to share

that universal love which, do we need reminding,  
should live our lives for us all the year round,  
please feel my universal love  
blazing, blazing, towards you...

...'what's that, darling? Oh yes, I suppose  
we'd better send them one, in case  
they think we'd forgotten them... which evidently  
we had, hadn't we...? '

Have a happy holiday and  
a loving New Year full of peace

No really I mean it

Michael Shepherd

# Clamour In The Forum

The defence of free speech -  
glorious battle without end.

We even must defend  
the right to offend...

Michael Shepherd

# Clerihew

Mick Jagger a-  
pparently doesn't need Viagra

and might view as malice  
an Xmas gift of Cialis...

Michael Shepherd



# Clubwich: An Art Experience

lay the lettuce on the plate first  
that damps down the sound  
of the iceberg lettuce which can  
disturb hearing aids

if you're into fartsy additional veg  
chop them up small and sprinkle  
it saves the whole edifice deconstructing  
when you take the pin out

then a slice say an inch thick  
of wholemeal bread which  
you've soaked in olive oil and lemon juice  
and rubbed garlic across as if  
you were ironing the curtains  
of a dolls' house

then throw the half-tin of tuna  
or the salmon you've just caught  
on the top since after all  
that's what you want to taste  
so put it out front stage  
and cover it with mayonnaise  
bet you're drooling at this point  
maybe looking at your watch

then eat while looking at  
a reproduction of a reproduction  
of Andy Warhol's priceless screenprint  
of a Campbell's soup tin  
gratitude may arise

sheer poetry  
simple sensual immediate  
self-expression clearly communicated  
practical copy it in your faves  
slip it in your Pulitzer Christmas Cracker  
in place of the joke did I say joke since it  
touches the heart touches all our lives

and for once you've read  
right to the end of a poem haven't you and  
I bet you'll remember it longer than  
the thirteenth verse of the Ancient Mariner

similes metaphors you want  
similes and metaphors supply your own then  
they'll be fresher than mine and  
more spontaneous more relevant

yes that's what I call a real poem

Michael Shepherd

# Cn U Rd Ths? Its Nt Gd Nws...

The National Literacy Trust in Britain  
did a survey and  
- yes, you guessed -  
57% read 'only a bit' or not at all  
and 25% of the older ones said  
they had no intention to  
read any more than this

So what do they read when  
they read?  
Well, mags,  
and websites  
and txt msgs of course  
and jokes,  
and TV books and mags  
and e-mails

and eighth on the list comes fiction  
that's made-up stories, right?  
right  
then comix ninth  
then newspapers well  
they're just for people  
who don't have TV and  
don't mind waiting 12 hours  
to read the news put that tenth

what's that? poetry?  
sorry would you spell that  
oh poetry nah

girls said, they read  
to find out how other people live  
and feel and  
to help them understand  
more about themselves

boys said, they read  
because they have to and

because it helps them  
get a job so

some old farts might say  
put up a sign  
civilisation's postponed until further notice  
but it may all work out  
well it'll have to

Michael Shepherd

# Coleridge On Poets

'A great Poet must have  
... the ear of a wild Arab  
listening in the silent Desert;

the eye of a North American Indian  
tracing the footsteps of an Enemy  
upon the leaves that strew the forest;

the Touch of a Blind Man  
feeling the face  
of a darling Child. '

(set out as verse from Coleridge's prose)

Michael Shepherd

# Condy, Hold This Back. George.

My Fellow Americans:  
as loyal Americans,  
we are committed to the spread of the freedoms  
of democracy throughout the world  
regardless of the cost,  
to fight  
so that peace may prevail  
like oil on troubled waters. However  
the forces of evil are insidious and  
in order to resist them we must  
be vigilant to root out the pernicious  
forces of evil that are attacking  
the very roots of  
our own democracy. In 2005  
I gave consent to wire-tap all  
internal communications for  
our own safety and the preservation of  
our Am'r'c'nw'yl'fe and to limit  
the right of free speech in order to  
preserve the right to free speech  
throughout the world.

But M'f'l''w'm'r'c'ns - the  
forc'v'l are unrelenting in their  
campaign. I must therefore  
ask you as true M'r'c'ns  
to be vigilant to preserve our  
w'life - watch those who claim  
to be your neighbours - do not  
hesitate to inform the r'l'v't authorities  
of any suspicions you may have. Even hearsay  
will be recorded for future reference. Do not  
fear for any loss of community spirit,  
our Investigation Units only operate  
in unmarked thought-conditioned vans  
during hours of darkness. And to aid  
your work for democracy I have  
inaugurated, as your Commander In Chief  
a Young Vigilantes Brigade of our

War for Peace Volunteers compulsorily enrolled  
in each district.

My F'l'w'm'r'c'ns,  
the price of peace is eternal vigilance  
in order to bring peacenfreedom  
to the world we must move forward and  
abandon outmoded woolly liberal  
concepts such as 'peace'  
and 'freedom' I am sure that  
with your help, we shall win this  
War for Peace G'dni'f'l'w'm'r'c'ns  
and God bless America Who  
Stands Alone for  
Peace'nfr'd'm'nd'm'cr'cy

Michael Shepherd

## Dactylo-Epitrite... Got It?

'Dactylo-Epitrite', Andrew,  
sounded like lyric to Greeks;  
Pindar, who used it, is seldom  
read by our Poemhunter geeks...

(for A.K. and of course the Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry...)

Michael Shepherd



## Dear Amy

Dear Amy - we all know how you feel -  
but honestly, to help you we're just not able -  
'cus we're all still - well - much the same;  
just hiding behind a designer label.

Michael Shepherd

# Dear John - Haiku

one haiku a day

peace of mind

Michael Shepherd

# Diamonds Are From Forever

Silent, they speak  
of the elemental:  
clear as water, clear as air,  
bright as fire, sparkling as sunlight,  
hot from the Sun, cold as ice,  
yet created out of blackest earth  
by forces beyond our imagination

and I wouldn't be surprised  
if one day they'll be found  
to emit a sound so far beyond heard sound  
that only dolphins and eagles may  
hear it a thousand miles away and smile;  
elemental, the most beautiful paradox  
of the so practical, created world

and sparkling at the throat, on ears,  
the haloed tiara on the up-piled hair,  
but most of all, upon the outstretched finger - look -  
silent, they speak: he loves me; or,  
I am loved; or, this is the love  
I draw to me; or, this is the love  
I have in me to give

silent, they speak  
of the spark of a severed sun,  
spinning a solar system of such  
solemn, sparkling paradox - a burning Sun,  
a fertile planet Earth, revolving  
around each other like forever lovers  
who need each other to be one -  
an incandescent mass of already  
cooling planet beyond all  
measured heat; of something

even beyond paradox, that could create  
by laws of nature which we can only now begin to imitate,  
something so ordinary a pebble yet  
so beautiful when polished, treasured,

that it's a metaphor for love;  
silent, sparkling with  
the laughing, bright-eyed question -

who created love?

Michael Shepherd

# Do Pterodactyls Write In Dactyls?

Dactyls – according to encyclopaedic wise men –  
though the staple of classical Grecian and Latinate tread,  
are now comical – ‘only used humorously’... And yet, read  
at a funeral pace, in solemnity, toll out the dead...

(with acknowledgements to M.G. and the Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry...)

Michael Shepherd

# Do You Feel The Same Way Too?

I've just written to a friend and said

'I've just written a poem  
which I would have given my life  
to have written.'...

and then sat and looked at  
what I'd written –  
wondering whether  
that was what I really meant..

(and, faintly, contemplating  
whether a thunderbolt  
straight from Justice central  
might strike me there and then...)

or whether I'd retreated into  
some private world of self-delusion..

or whether I had reached the height  
of mortal bliss.. as perhaps some 'real' poet might...  
when on the scales of life-for-life  
or perhaps, eternity,  
I was offering humbly, in exchange  
for all I have received, all  
that my soul could offer...

discarding all the burdens of the past,  
disregarding any thoughts of future life,  
living in the present, like a child does,  
as, glorious, the present presently moves on  
from freedom into freedom... tell me,

do you feel the same way too?

Michael Shepherd

# Doris Lessing

I've just been looking at the photo  
for longer than I've looked at, into,  
a photo for a long time, as if  
hoping that in some way  
it would add to my humanity,

of Doris Lessing, Nobel prize-winner  
at the age of 88;

looking like a benevolent  
lady ape looking at you and me and  
considering the nature of the human species  
she's hoping to evolve into

which may or may not include you and me as we are  
but she still looks benevolently at us,  
as apes, disconcertingly, do; briefly;  
leaving a question in the air  
which perhaps words will evolve towards.

Michael Shepherd

# Eco-Logical

'Trees need their alone time too' I read it just now  
in a poem by Bob Hicok and just like that  
the world expanded thoughtfully and gloriously  
and I imagined the whole of nature  
giving a great sigh of relief  
like a dog does when it lies down for the night  
and a great sigh goes from the tips of its paws  
to its ears or of course it might be the other way around  
and trees with that sigh get on with their nightly cleansing routine  
and expel all the stuff that mankind has made them put up with  
in the world that we 'share' ha ha  
and then think about the poor trees in the park and the streets  
who've been passive smokers all day not to mention  
gas-guzzlers without the accompanying four wheels  
to enable them to getoutahere into the countryside for the weekend  
to \*\*\*\* that up too yes I'm sorry trees although I must say  
you do a good job of it and with silent patience  
and don't write complaining to the newspapers in a mass protest  
which is just as well as those papers need more trees  
so I was just almost feeling complacent that Nature  
seems to be well just about keeping the whole thing  
on the rails until I looked up at the tops of the tallest trees  
and saw the tops dying off  
and wanted right then to know if prayer would help  
because what else will

and thank you Bob and I guess poetry too  
for half a line that brought me to the world  
and a laugh then tears.

Michael Shepherd



# Elegy On A Marriage

the gentle plath  
of bitter tears  
on the cold grey slate  
of crowpecked years

Michael Shepherd

# Emily Considers Herself

Blissful – myself – by nature –  
soul's own nature – not by action –  
nor by thought – myself –  
alone – yet limitless – I –  
one without other –  
universal, individual –  
beyond love,  
His – Our – My -  
Love – limitless -  
to write – this...

Michael Shepherd

# Ennui

sometimes  
when I feel like reading  
nothing much  
but not nothing  
just something  
I pick up your  
gentle fantasies  
and start to read  
like when the two of you  
are sitting in the  
dentist's waiting room  
making occasional remarks  
which you've forgotten  
before you said them

Michael Shepherd

# Enter Not, Love - For Eh

Plato would have favoured  
That internet dating site -  
All ideal and Platonic  
( 'til that risky meeting night...)

Socrates I'm not so sure about -  
He asked too many questions -  
I don't think he would fall for  
Those rather sly suggestions

Michael Shepherd

# Evolving Thoughts

Maybe it's because we're so obsessed with property,  
real estate, that we assume  
this 375-million-year-old fossil yearned  
to make it from the sea to golden sands  
and further earthly joys? That's assuming  
that it thought like Darwin anyway?

Maybe a refugee from  
the Garden of Eden  
who thought seaside holidays  
were more fun?

Maybe it just tired of pursuing fast food  
which it could never catch on land  
with those pathetic flippers, and  
reckoned there was more food out there  
that might swim into Mr B!gmouth!

Remember, even you got tired  
of watching Baywatch on a hot  
summer's day, when the  
surf's up? And did you notice  
that fossil's built  
like a surfboard?

No contest.

Michael Shepherd

## Excuses, Excuses...

It's a situation  
all too familiar:  
sitting at this keyboard  
getting sillier and sillier,  
descending from Olympus  
to a hell of trivia,  
fingers wildly itching  
for some inspiration,  
tapping out some pointless words  
in conceited desperation

so I hope you'll weakly smile  
and charitably say  
'oh it's just a poet who won't shut up  
having a bad day'...

Michael Shepherd



# Fare Well - And Yet Goodbye To All Farewells.

All is in the mind and in the heart:  
there are no empires and no entities,  
nought can be owned and nought possessed,  
in mind nor heart; our parents, partners, kith and kin  
are but changing shadow puppets in  
the self-constructed drama of our life -

and this the humbling truth, which in our mind we know  
yet in our heart, wish that it were not so;  
loving the flight of free and graceful birds  
yet wishing all within the golden net  
of our own love - that love which can so quickly seem to go...

and so, since we can never own those things  
which bring us all our joys and all our life  
we can no more say hello nor goodbye  
when all is all within, yet all without...

this freedom should bring joy - were we so bold  
that in ourselves, we knew it to be so;  
so, meeting some new face, know it to be - ourself;  
and saying goodbye - be it to dust and ashes said -  
know, what we never owned, can never lose;

for 'hello' was an ancient wish - 'be whole and well',  
and 'goodbye' meant 'God be with ye' in a distant age;  
'fare well' a blessing too, a wish beyond  
our view of self, and loss - or death - or gain;  
and thus beyond all pleasure lost, or pain;

what cannot be acquired can not be lost;  
'goodbye, my love' a frail, transparent ghost;  
love weeps beside the grave's heart-rending sorrow,  
yet lives to love, heart beat again, the morrow.

Michael Shepherd



## February 21 - Whose Birthday Today?

If you saw the film 'Four Weddings and a Funeral'  
you'd have been moved maybe to tears  
by his 'Funeral Blues';

If you were a college poetry student  
the day after 9/11  
you might have had your poet in residence  
read his 'September 1,1939'  
and had your breath taken away  
by its accidental appropriateness  
and the last line, which he wanted to amend,  
'We must love each other, or die'

Two poems he himself didn't think quite good enough..  
this is posthumous fame beyond the control  
of poets;  
this is what poetry can leave to the world;  
this is what poetry is.

Wystan Hugh Auden would have been 100 today.

Rest In Poetry.

Michael Shepherd

# Filmscript For A Lonely Afternoon

walks into deserted playground  
indifferently, pushes memory-go-round

squeak creak  
pauses. moves on

Michael Shepherd

# First American Haiku

dam  
beavers!

(attributed to Gray Owl)

Michael Shepherd

# Footnote To A Famous Poem

You all know it from the classroom.  
It's in all the anthologies.  
Many say it's his best; 'a young man's poem'  
full of life and love and promise;  
and short too. His long poems,  
they're great but few have the patience now  
and who cares about Poet Laureates  
when they're out of fashion?

It never appeared, did you know,  
in his lifetime. Sat in his desk drawer,  
a single poem in a fine Italian leather folder.  
His wife left it there after he died;  
remembering when he'd sent it to her  
the night before their marriage; she caught him  
once, sitting there, an old man reading  
a young man's poem; closed the door quietly,  
said nothing.

They cleared the house after she died.  
It would never have come to light  
if years later his mistress hadn't left  
a copy – it transpired - to the museum  
in her will; he'd written it just for her, she said;  
but made her promise not to publish it.  
She felt she owed it to his memory though.

Some people prefer not to have  
footnotes to poems; they say  
they spoil the poem,  
and cheapen a great man;  
some people like them; they say  
it makes poets seem more human.

Michael Shepherd

## For Advent: A Business Trip

Their wives were not too keen about it all:  
beyond the call of duty, so it seemed;  
for, if they read the heavens' portents so well,  
what need of proof, of presence at the scene?

and then, to go without due retinue  
through unforgiving deserts; foreign towns;  
and forests hiding thieves and wild beasts too?  
and carrying rich gifts? and worse, their crowns?

and so to risk three kingdoms, not just one?  
and for the sake of some religious creed  
not even ours? 'Nay, love - it must be done;  
we crown our lives and kingdoms with this deed;

these crowns are symbols of our rule on earth,  
to yield the King of Heaven at His birth.'

Michael Shepherd

# For An Unnamed Teacher

You know that shot, in films and musicals  
glamorising La Révolution Française:  
a hundred metres away, just fitting into  
the camera's breadth of range,  
a crowd which signifies rights withheld  
advances on you (safe in bourgeois seat...) ,  
led by a token handsome, flushed, tall  
kerchiefed man or woman, centre-stage?

Today, that's me – in upraised hand,  
a Bill of Poets' Rights... You said,  
I'm told, that 'if you were a poet,  
you would just write praise...'

Do I detect a note  
of implied criticism there? ...

Did you not know, that every word that poets write  
is praise? First, praise of the language that we use –  
its glorious flexibility; praise of the chance to use it  
at its height and breadth and depth,  
freshly - as if it had never put before  
this word with that, and made of it new thought  
to lodge within your mind, and warm your heart,  
to call from soul to soul, of what souls share...

Advancing on the camera, we shout,  
if you don't know this - that all that, is praise...  
then you're not ready for reading poetry, just yet...  
'For this we stand; for this we live; for this we'll die'...

The photo-opportunity has come and gone;  
the cameramen push back, drive to their editors;  
the crowd disperses, glowing with its righteousness;  
and leaves the world to darkness, and TV...

Michael Shepherd

# For Joan Crammond

You told me last year - in between  
doing all you could for others  
in your state and at your age -  
(and that meant working dawn to dusk, at least -  
as you had done most of your life)  
that you were 'tidying up'  
so that your family would have least work  
to do themselves when you'd passed on

And so, as just reward, death came to you  
tidily,  
neatly, smoothly, in your own tidy room

Just a few weeks ago,  
when you had done a kindness  
spreading word of my poetry,  
I sent you a poem on  
'A Reminiscence of a Great Lady'  
and to my surprise, not just, from you,  
a kind and tidy, just response,  
but you were deeply stirred

Did you read in it, the great lady  
whom we both had known and loved?  
Was it what you'd always hoped to be?  
Or did you recognise yourself in it - in full?

No need now to question.  
No need, anyway; the difference  
is not important in eternity.

Not so important as  
a tidy, outward life. So,  
that poem and now this  
to you, for you

Michael Shepherd

# For Rilke

What is the subject of your poem?

'I was there.'

Why is it so important to you?

'I was there.'

How can you describe it?

'I was there.'

What did you know of it?

'I was there.'

And what did it teach you?

'Of itself, nothing;  
only that I was there.'

And what will that bring to you?

'Now, all may be known.'

Then what can your poem share with others?

'Be there too.'

What can you say now  
to those who thirst after knowledge?

'Be here.'

What can you say now  
to those who thirst after God?

'Be here.'

And what of poetry and praise?

'Always now.'

And what of your soul?

'Always here, and always now.'

What then, the Creator's message?

'Be here; be now; be always.'



And what the Creator's smile of love?  
'The here; the now; the always.'

Michael Shepherd

# Found Poem 1: Julie Joins Poemhunter

hey babe, it's your girl julie ;)

Want to tell you that so far  
i'm having a great summer,  
how about you?

I went to the beach yesterday with my friend Sara,  
and many people hugging and kissing there,  
which made me feel bad

since I don't have that special person,  
you ever feel like that?

My college is over for now, but

I'm working a little as a waitress, and

I must say there are many rude guys out there

who give me bad compliments,

but I'm getting used to that;

the weather is awesome here, can't complain there :)

Anyways, my cam is on

and I'll be home whole week,

I just didn't know how to put it

so what I did is connected it

to some network which all it needs

is age verification..here's my site....

let's meet each other finally...

bye, jules :)

Michael Shepherd

## Found Poem 2

The only function of economic forecasting  
is to make astrology look respectable.

The key to immortality is first  
to live a life worth remembering.

Michael Shepherd

## Found Poem 3

I enquired into the nature of Evil,  
and found no substance there.

(St Augustine, around 400 CE/AD)

Michael Shepherd

## Found Poem 4

'There has been death in the morning,  
death in the noon-time,  
on the highways and skyways,  
death by faceless people  
who said they are warriors.  
They are not warriors.

Whose cause is being served?  
Certainly not the cause of God,  
not the cause of Allah,  
because it is God Almighty  
who gives life  
and is full of mercy.

How much blood must be spilled?  
How many tears shall we cry?  
How many mothers' hearts must be maimed? '

Michael Shepherd

## Found Poem 5

He's still the world's most powerful  
wine critic; however  
his palate  
doesn't command quite the authority  
it once did.

Michael Shepherd

## Found Poem 6

Brace up for a bellyful time today,  
February 5—it's Super Sunday!

Did you know that after Thanksgiving  
it's on this day that  
maximum food is consumed  
in America?

Hey, so what are your  
plans for the day?

Michael Shepherd

## Found Poem 7

What does happen occasionally  
is that Kenny gets an idea for a dish  
and writes on the specials board  
- yes, there is a specials board -  
something like Indomalekian Sunrise Stew.

(Kenny and his oldest son, Charlie,  
invented the country of Indomalekia  
along with its culinary traditions.)

A couple of weeks later, someone  
finally orders Indomalekian Sunrise Stew  
and Kenny can't remember what he had in mind  
when he thought it up.

Fortunately, the customer doesn't know, either,  
so Kenny just invents it again on the spot.

Michael Shepherd



## Found Poem 8

'The asymmetry  
in the conflict's  
death tolls  
have led to  
the accusation  
of disproportionate use of arms  
by Israel'

'asymmetry'...

Michael Shepherd

## Fourteen Lines

Old poets, torturing their thoughts to rhyme,  
their lovely English verse to end-words tied,  
oft found just cause to moan of 'envious Time',  
and seek immortal fame in 'Time defied';

for rhymesters, it is ever June, when moon  
shines on their corn; for moralists, base love  
may find in Plato reason to attune  
and lift their Muse to world on world above -

and then, there's Shakespeare: from whose boundless art  
flows liquid gold; whose words bring heaven to earth,  
to sing love's beauty; melt the frozen heart,  
make men to cry with joy; gods, weep with mirth:

a sonnet's span can bring one to oneself;  
in fourteen lines, bequeath us heaven's wealth.

Michael Shepherd

# Fr Ee Cummings And Goings

<pre>

if                    those  
                  only                    random

thoughts

would  
          come  
                  together

into a

P O E M

Michael Shepherd

# Freedom's In The Air

'Let Justice be done,  
though the heavens may fall'...

Now the overnight, merciful dew  
has fallen on the hottest July day  
on record, (why does it give us  
some sorta touch of personal pride?)  
and on my rant of yesterday  
about a Britain of whose recent past  
I'm more than a little ashamed  
in my rather downplayed English way... then  
the wickedly and useful perverse mind  
turns to what's good; and  
in Saint Augustine's succinct words,  
I exist; I know that I exist; and  
I am happy to know that I exist..

It's hot again today; in London here  
a good place to be is high above London  
on Hampstead Heath with its fresher,  
cooler air, its natural bathing ponds  
and view of City and St Paul's down there;  
presided over by Kenwood House;  
filled with the shade of William Murray,  
1st Lord Mansfield, Lord Chief Justice,  
who in 1772, presided over the case  
where James Somerset, slave, shackled  
in a slave ship moored off Bristol  
on his way to America,  
sued his 'master', Mr. Stewart of Virginia  
(the English colony, you'll note) :

'Let the slave go free' His Lordship finally declared –  
adding the comment with which I began...  
and eventually, the heavens fell..  
Or perhaps, the earth rose up to meet them...  
and generations of proud British and other students of the law  
have learned those words about our common law  
which His Lordship would perhaps have said,

but didn't actually: 'The air of England  
is too pure for a slave to breathe, and so,  
everyone who breathes it, becomes free...'

Yes, this sweltering hot day, the air of Hampstead Heath  
feels fresher, cooler; in the nostrils, filling the chest,  
smells so good.

Michael Shepherd

# Freshen Up Your Love Poems

Honey,  
i wanted to write you a real blaster  
so i looked in 'Writers' Weekly'  
and sent off for 'Freshen Up Your Love Poems'  
by, it said, 'a well-known successful writer'

it suggested  
'take a famous line and give it your own personal new twist'  
so

I could not love thee, hon, so much  
were we not both fans of 'Friends'.

Michael Shepherd

# From Goethe On Boldness (For Poets And Others)

How many noble schemes from goodwill's heart,  
how many splendid plans and fine ideas  
have foundered, lost their glorious craft and art  
through hesitancy born of baseless fears?

We do not see the moment as divine,  
thinking that those plans are somehow 'ours';  
forgetting, too, that Providence sublime  
yields timeless good through time in human hours:

the task begun, this heavenly Providence  
begins to move; bestows her love's support  
with means, events, beyond coincidence;  
assistance past all dreams of human thought -

be bold! and trust in Providence above:  
she brings to earth God's magic; power; and love.

Michael Shepherd

# From Sengtzan (Died 606 Ad/Ce) , The Third Patriarch Of Zen

How may we walk all free and undisturbed  
through life, as if there were no other way?  
So that our human nature finds no break  
between our nature, and all nature's play?  
The answer lies in thought: for if our mind  
holds any thought that some restriction makes  
on truth itself, then Truth is thus constrained  
in every part; can never show itself.  
For hence comes false requirement, then to judge  
between all these embordered things in mind -  
Which wearies angered mind, like some old grudge;  
No freedom then, nor peace, nor truth, to find.

So curb that game divisive mind will play  
with anything at all; that is the Way.

Michael Shepherd



# Fundamental Reggae

'fun-da-mental-ism' miss God's fun, man -  
who want a God wittout a smile? ...  
'fun-da-mental' send this chile mental...  
me thinkin', God too He run a mile...

Michael Shepherd

# Geoff Chaucer Reads Tom Eliot

A clerke there was, one Tomas Elyot hight;  
'Stearns' wasse hys middel name; I think him so;  
His gowne a cutte severe, sterne, clericale.  
Hie werkéd in a banke; but lyked it not;  
Preferring farre to be a publysshere.  
Hie telleth of another clerke hys love  
(thow sadnesse more thanne love, methinks it were..)  
J. Alfred Prufrock wasse thys clerkés name;  
Hie lyved in melancholie fasshyion,  
Of chepesyde inns and wasteland wyndowes fogged;  
Hie wasse so timide and soe fulle of feare,  
Hie lyved a narrowe lyfe of caushyonne,  
Hie knewe no joye, methinks; hym thoghte hymselfe  
But born to serve some lorde in defferrense..

This Elyot's tale wasse shorte; I hoped itte so;  
Methogte hysse lyfe but wasted wayle and woe.

Michael Shepherd

# Gertrude Stein Chews The Fat

We asked ourself a question  
since no-one else asked it  
it was are poems about the poet  
or about poetry  
or about neither  
or about both  
and now we had asked this question  
we had to answer it and we said  
if poetry raises all these questions  
the answer must be simply  
yes

Michael Shepherd

# God Friday

Today

the heavens opened

first thing

later the sun came out

and everything perked up

Good Friday

Michael Shepherd

# Golden Links In Golden Chains

Imagine – well, try to imagine -  
what it must have been like  
to a poet of, say, 1480  
in, say, Florence, that sounds civilised,  
the day he (probably he) heard for the first time  
while scratching away with goose-quill, copying  
what used to be a favourite poem  
which he's now beginning to dislike  
as he copies it for the nth time  
in hope of getting it known –  
imagine when he first heard  
about this new invention called printing  
which of course he couldn't afford  
but which held a golden possibility  
of a brave new world of mind so easy shared;  
imagine

surfing the internet which has been around  
longer than – some of our children – so that  
they might assume that Adam and Eve shared a laptop  
with a faint scent of figleaves -  
surfing the internet hungrily for intimate, telling details  
of some, let's say, poet-hero,  
there's now a chance, that like a heavenly shaft  
of sunlight through the dark clouds concealing history,  
you – I – hit upon some link; some interview; some audio,  
that takes us deeper into that hero's life  
than ever we could have hoped for –

might we hope that such a heavenly insight,  
such a golden link in myriad golden chains  
might be, oh, a mere shadow of some truly heavenly  
facility, truly heavenly experience,  
that we may one (day) share?

Michael Shepherd

# Good Friday

A recipe for thought:

Take a pair of scales  
as large as the boundless human mind,  
and into one scale  
pour all the goodness in the world that you can see  
carefully  
and into the other,  
all the evil in the world that you can see;  
into the first scale now add  
all the joy that you have known  
(the joy of others you can never measure)  
and into the other, all the misery,  
(the misery of others you can never measure) :  
into the first, add all the laughter you can remember,  
and into the second, all the tears;

and now, from the cupboards of your heart,  
add what you will  
to either scale:  
the hopes and fears  
of all the years.

now give one day each year  
to the watching of these scales  
and see if slowly, gently, as we watch  
with all our love  
the scales  
move

Michael Shepherd

# Green Thoughts From A Kyoto Garden In Spring After Closing Time

what would earth be

without rain?

where would rain go

without earth?

Michael Shepherd

## Grown-Ups Are Daft - A Limerick For Rh

I went round the keyboard-type shops  
But they only stocked qwertyuiop s...  
Well, I ask you - if we  
Can't read straight, ABC  
Our schooling is fooling. Full stop.

Michael Shepherd



# Guantanamo

Allah the Just, the Merciful.

That must be so  
otherwise human beings  
would have no conception  
of justice or mercy  
which is a solemn thought.

Suppose,  
and there is no reason that this should not be true,  
Allah  
watches the unfolding Guantanamo saga  
and considers thus:

'That the ignorant of all nations  
cry for revenge,  
I weep over.  
But that those who know the Law  
and blazon it as their nation's badge of pride  
and then make exception  
without remedy,  
for years,  
that is a crime a hundred times greater.

So I, Allah, the Just, the Merciful,  
will allow this injustice to capture the mind  
of a hundred Muslim youths  
for every detainee;  
of these, some may understand the Law;  
and weep with Me;  
some may ignorantly, cry for revenge  
and act it out.

Is this not just and merciful?  
It is the Law of ignorance.

Just suppose  
He thinks that way.

Michael Shepherd

# Hacker Hero

How would a healthy,  
confident nation,

a nation that loves sport..  
how would it react,

hearing that some young hacker  
had penetrated 34 was it,  
of its most secret websites?

It would say, thanks pal  
for showing us our weaknesses..

and by the way, there's a job  
just waiting for you in the counter services..

of course, it would have helped  
if he'd been American – he'd have hired PR,  
positioned himself as hero; spun the story,  
said, I did it for our great nation..

but if he'd been let's say Russian  
or Al Quaida... perhaps we'd never hear  
from those red faces at the Pentagon..

So let's praise the hero hacker  
(who by the way, didn't sell  
the info on, to let's guess who...)

and by the way, you can bet  
they have their own guys, highly paid  
to test defences by that self-same method..

doesn't every sport hone its talents  
by competition? Oh, c'mon on guys...

Michael Shepherd

# Haemorrhoid Ode - For Herbert

vets help lame dogs  
over stiles, while  
others doctor  
dogged piles

Michael Shepherd

## Haiku For Mf

What a lovely present!

I threw last year's away...

Michael Shepherd

# Haiku For Poets

A poem read.

A reader changed.

How?

Michael Shepherd

# Haiku-Ish For Cm

You took my breath away.  
What did you do with it?  
Ah yes, I remember.

Michael Shepherd

# Hair Raising

The fun thing about being dead  
is the haunting. Revenge. It's Payback Time Whoo Hoo.  
I'm updating my Visiting Book,  
adding some, crossing off a few  
in case my memory's not immortal.

It's quite a long list, though I try to be  
as fair as one can inhumanly be:  
I've always been the target of con-men  
of all ages and oh yes con-dames too.  
It took me a while to get wise:  
they all think they're smarter than they are...  
though by then it's usually too late.

Moving on to those who've bullied me;  
who assumed (and alas, oh so did I)  
that I was cut out to be a victim;  
and all those who I let push me around  
for their own promotion, empire, glory, satisfaction...

well now I don't want to bore you but  
you get my drift. However, perhaps you didn't know  
that the old-fashioned loose white robe  
or ectoplasm, cold air, that stuff - out;  
like pandemics and computer viruses,  
we keep up with the times - it's easy  
when there's no time to keep up with.

Photography was a giant step  
for ghostkind; when it was still blacknwhite  
we were those outafocus blurs that walked  
along where the wall wasn 't any more,  
through the doors that were not there,  
in the life you did not lead,  
a bit like Eliot's garden...

but when colour came into your holiday snaps -  
there you are, Caribbean-hormoned,  
honeymooning with your third young wife,



Viagra-ed, Cialis-ed, sunkissed, gin-blissed,  
and hello! we never snapped that family group...with  
those two blurry familiar faces in the background...  
out in Concorde, back in discord...

Then came computers...you really do make  
our task more fun for us; we're the cyber-virus  
or ghost in the machine that affects, ha, only yours; and who  
picked up your digi-cam that night and photographed your dreams?  
or slipped that sexy message under the office address?

the bit I haven't yet worked out  
in all this (well-deserved) fun  
is that most of the worst offenders in my visiting-book have -  
you know - passed on - and  
will be there to (greet?) me. That thought rather  
haunts me.

Michael Shepherd

# Have A Good Gruntle

'You're the most ept, ert, choate and dolent person I know -  
how do you manage it? '

'Excuse me...? ? '

Words are fun.

If your child's school report  
declared him or her  
'inept, inert, inchoate, and indolent'  
you'd have a fairly clear picture  
of how things are;  
the negatives survive,  
as more useful  
(ah, sad reflection...)

and then there are the words  
that have reversed their meanings  
by some really interesting  
but alas never yet charted  
human failing:  
'nice' once meant stupid and ignorant;  
'silly' once meant blissful...

But today I'm savouring 'disgruntled':

that is, dissatisfied, and angry with it;  
a state not unknown  
to a consumer society;  
so are you gruntled today -  
satisfied and happy?

but it's not quite as easy as that:  
if you're gruntled, then officially you're  
'uttering little grunts'...

would that be while DIYing  
somewhere back of the sink,  
or pigging out so fast you can hardly  
make time to breathe,

or perhaps being, uh,  
sexually favoured?

Words are fun  
especially for poets -  
Shakespeare made up more than anyone  
just like that  
without some egghead like Bacon (aha!) or Jonson  
looking over his shoulder and saying  
you can't say that  
they won't know what you mean  
in the low-price seats...

Words are fun;  
give them a good shake of the kaleidoscope  
and they just might play nose-to-tail  
and make a poem

though not today it seems

Michael Shepherd

# Heavenly Fathers' Day Forever

Assuming and that's one hell of an assume  
that we retain our individuality  
you know.. up there..  
you can't but wonder what  
they talk about, if of course

for instance, those millions  
on millions of fathers..  
do they gather round and talk  
about.. well, forget that club talk  
about their wives and  
that kinda dissing that's  
a sorta boast...

and their daughters? no  
they'd all go quiet and remember  
when they were Daddy's girl  
hurrumph

no, their sons? ..

'reckon he came from  
his mother's side  
of the family – couldn't never  
understand him...'

'wanted to give him the benefit  
of all my experience –  
would he listen? '

'everything I approved of..  
he wanted the opposite, took  
the opposite view.. couldn't  
talk to him about anything that  
I'd learned to value..'

'he just couldn't understand  
how fortunate he was.. I  
grew up we had nothing nothing...'

'he had a place waiting for him  
in the family firm, great  
future – but no, all  
he wanted was to...'

'I kept telling him, yes,  
great as a hobby but  
there's no money in it son  
for a decent life, take my word..'

'paid a fortune for his education,  
like I never had, and  
what does he do with it but  
go off and...'

do they go on and on like this? it  
must be hell..

or are they allowed the benefit  
of hindsight, a sorta  
purgatory before oh god  
another chance? or

or are they allowed a solemn vow  
to never be like that again  
and swear to make their son's life  
heaven? (poor wimp..)

or simply on the Indian lines of heavenly justice  
swop roles next time ho ho?

Dad, all this  
is just a joke

now

love you

Michael Shepherd

# Here's A Pop-Up Thought In A Pop-Up World

'Make Your Writing Pay'

'Work From Home'

'Find Love Fast'

Career guidance  
isn't always easy  
to come by and  
too many of us  
take what comes

here's a thought  
that just popped up:  
a little discreet prostitution  
carried out from home  
and faithfully recorded  
blow by blow  
so to speak  
for eventual  
publication,  
screen rights and  
celeb status  
might well bring a  
triple reward  
a metaphorical  
fortune cookie

Michael Shepherd

# Hermaphrodite

I'd seen her in the pub from time to time -  
shortish height, slightly awkward jerky movements  
not quite to be called boyish  
like her haircut,  
indeterminate of age -  
a worn sixteen; an undeveloped twenty-six?  
but in a year or two, she seemed the latter  
though her vulnerable, aggressive stance  
made age irrelevant.

had she been more confident, more inyerface  
she'd have been lesbait, no doubt of that; I felt  
uncomfortable around her, as you do, however kind,  
around those who have not yet resolved their life.  
but she didn't pose her boyishness; wore  
her trousers without pride; didn't  
give off that lesbian vibe.  
she might almost have been  
the girl in the girls' school play who was as tomboy  
told to play the boy and  
who wore the clothes  
and hated it.

then she started coming in with her quiet,  
steady boyfriend; sometimes with their dog; she seemed more relaxed.  
I gave her no more thought;  
was faintly happy for her, I found.

so there I was one day, pissing off twice the amount  
of beer I'd drunk - strange, isn't it? - in the Gents;  
the door opens, in she walks, stands two urinals away  
and does her thing - I guessed... well, no,  
I didn't take a closer look - for she was  
challenging me to respond.  
And I didn't have a response.  
I'd never seen her  
doing that before; maybe my age suited her for a role  
in some sad psychodrama of her unhappy life,  
I, cast, perhaps, as proxy father, uncle, teacher, godknowswhat..

I didn't respond; nor did sex  
raise its tumescent head; in fact I'd say, rather the reverse.

Of course she couldn't have known  
that English boarding school,  
ages seven to twenty-one (for the really thick and desperate) ,  
equips you with a knowledge of acquired hermaphroditism  
of an innocent yet knowing kind - beyond, I'd guess,  
the experience of many a born hermaphrodite...  
to please your hero man  
at any price  
in any vice;  
we called them 'fags'; it's the official term, and  
snigger-free;  
then later, play the macho game  
of picking the most beautiful new boy  
to be your 'fag'; flirt publicly,  
...to show that it's not serious or queer...  
and if you take it further, well, that's your concern,  
just don't get found out;  
or if you want to really win repute,  
date the housemaid simultaneously...

I let her leave that restless restroom first,  
it seemed fitting, in my determined, neutral state;  
yet it left a sense of many serious matters of the human heart  
unexplored; unresolved.

Michael Shepherd



# Hesiod Reads Homer On Poemhunter

Wow!

Gr8 poem!

Loved it!

Keep writing!

Michael Shepherd

# Higher Waffle Of The Trochee Tribe

'And the smoke rose slowly, slowly,  
through the tranquil air of morning...'  
'trochee' in the Greek, means dancing;  
'Hiawatha' leaves some yawning...

Michael Shepherd

## History Teaches Us...

A stone's throw, just, from Chelsea's football ground,  
-skinhead territory long before any silverware -  
there's a barber whose window decorations indicate  
they're stylists in that tricky, ingrowing black hair;  
I dropped in there one day; and as the one white face  
in that busy, proud salon (I took the last spare seat with some relief)  
spent half an hour or so as a 'minority',  
as images of identity played out some tennis game of mind  
across the net of what - division or harmony?  
was I the face of hated white supremacy, now  
the hated white minority? Covert glances on both sides...

Eventually I settled down, to then enjoy the novel ritual to me:  
when you're finished, dusted down - rise from the chair,  
and pause a second or two upon the barber's dais there  
and face the audience; to be admired for sharp new style  
which is by implication, tribute to the barber's skill;  
there's palpably the sound of silent, proud applause  
(I even dared, now shorn and bolder, to acquiesce, with respect,  
in just a hint of this attractive ritual...) .  
And here's the crowning glory of this escapade:  
they charged me less than for that difficult black hair...

'History teaches us...'

...not to trust too much the lessons of history;  
but rather, learn from how it's working out:  
emigrate to seek a better life somewhere  
where faiths and customs are so different  
and you're the proud, hardworking, strange minority.

But then, beware - your children will not want  
the birthmark of 'minority'; and maybe seek  
some other pride than that of family,  
a new identity, some wilder faith  
than football's common touch, or cricket green;

the hosts and guests of history must learn  
to seek to learn the lessons both must earn.

The Romans, empire-builders, had a phrase for this:  
'lacrymae rerum' - which so gladly, sadly, means  
the tears of things...

Michael Shepherd

# Homage To Dorothy Parker

To laugh at life  
wittily  
among friends

Michael Shepherd

# I Read Psalm 30

Say, it's the first day  
of your holiday in the country or the wild:

you've slept so well, you go out  
just as dawn is about to break,  
to take in your surrounding:  
fields, woods, forests, mountains;

there's dew on the ground, moist air  
gently rolling off the mountains;

everything seems, at this precious moment,  
to know all about two great events:  
sleeping and resting, and waking and being alive;

you take it all in for a moment;  
then maybe, light a cigarette,  
think of your first cup of coffee,  
congratulate yourself for living the good life..

or maybe something in you would like,  
as the first slow sunlight makes rainbows  
in each dropp of dew in front of you,  
to say thank you to someone or something;

maybe you believe a bit in God  
while freely admitting, you don't understand  
anything about His – or Her, or Its – nature;

and maybe that sense of wonder  
that crept up on you  
slips into a sort of thankful praise; and that  
expands the wonder wonderfully, until

you're living surrounded by wonder;

and if someone said to you standing there,  
don't you feel that all around us,  
we are looking, smelling, tasting, hearing,

in the silence and the stillness, something of  
the nature of God? you might  
say, something like that...

maybe the psalmist is right,  
God `needs', too, in a way;  
needs human beings to wonder at him,  
thank him, praise him, celebrate him...

maybe the mind loves innocence,  
the heart, to sing and dance...

Michael Shepherd

# I Wonder If I Have Ever Passed Graham Leese On The Street

You're not  
going out  
wearing  
that  
are you?

Oh

Michael Shepherd



# Ignore The Ad Above This Poem

I deeply resent  
the ad above this poem  
(well it was there  
last time I looked)  
for Carcanet Press  
as if we were chums  
them and I  
far from it  
not only am I  
not published by them  
in case you thought I was

but

they don't even answer my emails  
offering them my poetry  
at 100% off

and their  
selecting editor  
is quoted as saying that  
'amateur' poets should  
be wiped out  
so much for  
love of poetry

I guess courtesy  
isn't award-winning  
these days

(dammit, it's a different ad this time...)

Michael Shepherd

# Illusion And Laughter

Are illusions made to be  
laughed with, laughed at,  
laughed away?

Is the human comedy also  
a divine comedy? Should we  
not wail, but share the joke?

The children's party conjuror  
and the handkerchief, the rabbit,  
the flock of doves – they're here, then  
they're not... we laugh  
at our own disbelief.

This illusion that the world is real,  
and that God does not look us in the face  
at every turn, in every detail –

should we laugh, acknowledging  
a good joke, and ourselves the butt;  
remove our own false nose, and eyes and ears,  
take out the incarnation from our buttonhole  
which squirts squid-ink at unsuspecting friends..

applaud the conjuror?

Michael Shepherd

# I'M Reading Psalm 31...

Sin...

what is it? Is there such a thing?

Is it, would it be, a good thing to have?  
do I want it? or do I have it,  
so deep, it's more trouble than illumination...?

All that sadness, all that sense of failure,  
all that sense of impending doom,  
all that guilt in respect of  
person or persons unknown...  
or that always trying to please persons  
known or unknown...  
yes, that makes sense...

So, who am I supposed to have sinned against?  
Since I'm a bit hazy about God, then  
have I sinned against myself?

Memories now of schooldays – Michael,  
you've let yourself down...and then  
of course they have to add, and you've let down  
your parents, and you've let me down  
as your teacher....seems I'm some sorta  
team player... who picked this team anyway?

OK, let's just suppose that there's  
some vast, perfect self-balancing system  
running the whole caboosh (with maybe,  
wholly good intentions) so that  
if you steer badly, then there's  
first the hard shoulder, then the grass verge,  
then maybe if you're on the race track,  
piled-up tires, some sort of resistant and yet yielding wall..

and after the hospital period, your steering  
is rather more careful, rather more attentive...

so maybe, a sense of ... let's call it

good roadsmanship –  
'Paradise Garden Welcomes Careful Drivers'...  
would be a good thing ... say 'sin'  
but smile as you say it ...

just a warning sign - 'Black Spot'; 'Dangerous Bend';  
where the other guys came to grief...

and life – the highs and oh those deepdown downlows –  
is more about being your very agreeable self,  
and somebody else's idea of sin  
very much a thing of the past;  
the neighbours wave at you,  
and the postman seems glad to see you.

Michael Shepherd

## In Answer To Your E-Mail...

If she wants  
that extra two inches,  
that six more hours of ecstatic sleep-deprivation,  
that concrete-and-steel erection to win architecture awards,  
then send your e-mails to her,  
she can pay for the bloody things.  
I'm not proud.

Michael Shepherd

# In Praise Of Euphony

The music of the poet's mind

sings silent songs to all mankind

Michael Shepherd

## In Praise Of Poetry...

Apologies, folks  
for slipping this one in  
under the guise of a poem  
but isn't it great  
to open this site's window  
and find 20 poems  
by 20 poets  
several for the first time  
making a fantastically rich hour or two  
just reading them  
such as never could have happened  
a few years ago  
(three cheers for webmaster)

I know that some of us  
write umpteen poems a day  
but could you please  
space them out, just one or two each day  
so I can read them without hurrying?

Apologies again, and  
consider this as really  
a poem  
in praise of poetry?

which it is.

Michael Shepherd

## In Reply To Your Irate Comment...

...well, yes, I agree the 'Comment' box is for comments - but hold on -  
I'm sorry, but I'm not sorry...

yes, growing up in the Bible Belt  
must be purgatory with only heaven and hell  
I mean who reads Dante?  
just don't unload it all on me, OK?

I guess I should try to explain myself  
(this could be a long one,  
like the others I pass over on this site,  
who's got time for Byron or Browning or Milton?) :

Trying to make sense of this world  
in the allotted time, ho ho,  
I've found it helpful in the mind  
- though I'm not 'religious',  
but not aggressively irreligious I hope;  
but still rather pressingly interested  
in life and death, that sort of thing -  
the concept of some possible unity  
through love, Providence, order, law  
(the Sun doesn't take a day off)  
call it what you will  
(or not - the Indians have spent  
thousands of years on this sort of language)  
and the possibility of finding  
things related in some way through  
something more than Chaos Theory  
(as in a teenager's room)  
or Evolution from two atoms  
(by Whose law, huh?) -

(are you still with me?)

so that as in the most beautiful  
metaphors and analogies  
that poets delight in,  
you and I and butterflies  
and blue jays



and the smell of Spring  
and yes, love -  
are in some way related...

I think I'll stop there.

Michael Shepherd

# In The Clown's Dressing-Room

out there  
I showed you sadness, happiness,  
tears, and joy,  
now sit here  
while I take my make-up off  
and let us speak  
of life and death, of  
death and life

Michael Shepherd

# In The Spirit Of Rumi

I said to My Beloved  
I love You  
May I know You?  
My Beloved said  
I am unknown

I said to My Beloved  
Still, I love You  
May I see You?  
My Beloved said  
I am formless

I said to My Beloved  
Still, I love You  
Might I lose You?  
My Beloved said  
I am eternal

I said to My Beloved  
Still, I love You  
Might You leave me?  
My Beloved said  
I am always present

I said to My Beloved  
I love You  
My Beloved said  
I am love itself

I said, O My Beloved

Michael Shepherd

# In The Spirit Of Rumi - 15

To My Beloved I said

O My Beloved,  
tell me of Yourself;  
I yearn to know

My Beloved said

O my dearest one,  
tell me, rather, of yourself;  
for only in knowing yourself  
and knowing what you do not know  
may you know Myself

to My Beloved I said

I breathe; and yet  
I was never taught to breathe.  
I breathe perfectly;  
who taught me then, to breathe?

In the light of the Sun,  
I see all that may be seen;  
who taught my eyes to see?  
who taught the Sun to shine?

With my breath,  
with my eyes,  
I see love, breathe love in my heart;  
who put it there?

Every day, I eat,  
every day I need to eat;  
every day there is some food;  
who makes earth into bread?

Every day I make mistakes,  
yet every day I live again;  
my children I forgive their mistakes;

who will teach me my mistakes,  
who will forgive me my mistakes?

Every day I find my world the greater,  
every day my powers are greater;  
every day the world's glory is greater;  
who made these boundaries to be boundless?

Every day, I think of death;  
every day, I am alive;  
every day, I seek the truth;  
who joins these three, and who divides?

my Beloved said to me

In your questions, love.  
In the answer, love.

Michael Shepherd

## In The Spirit Of Rumi 32-The Garden

O pilgrim on the path of life,  
you have travelled far;  
now you have come to rest  
and make yourself a home;  
and plant a garden there.

You measured out the plot of land,  
designed it with your love,  
laid precious stones along its paths,  
planted trees for shade,  
beneath them, marbled seats; and  
roses red as heart's red blood, or  
white as purity; scented as all beauty veiled;  
among the roses, jasmine, iris, lily, honeysuckle;  
and in the evening, night's pale flowers that yield  
all the scented charms of cooling dusk;  
and in the centre, a fountain plashing,  
ever different, ever the same,  
to be the token of your resting soul..

now you build a wall around it,  
stone by stone. Two things  
I ask of you, O faithful one:

make an arched gate within the wall  
that you may not make your neighbour envious;  
where you may invite him to join you,  
that neighbour who is yourself disguised..

and as you lay each stone  
to guard your peace from fox and wolf,  
remember - that a paradise with walls  
is but a parable, a paradigm,  
for that true paradise which knows no walls;  
rest there, traveller.

Michael Shepherd

## In The Spirit Of Rumi 34-Chickpeas

Today I'm cooking chickpeas,  
having, as the Argentinians say,  
'earned my chickpeas' – since  
they cannot always run to  
bread-and-butter but I digress

As the heat rises, the chickpeas bounce  
up to the surface as if they'll  
do all they can in that – what? –  
half-living, half-dead state? -  
to jump out of the pan and  
go – where?

Sometimes they bounce up so vigorously  
that I almost feel guilty about being so ignorant and  
so insensitive about Creation's arrangements  
for chickpeas and men.. isn't being boiled thus,  
becoming soft and nutritious,  
being eaten with (barely) gratitude,  
releasing the generous earth's minerals  
to feed this great creation, man, in person,  
their destiny, their self-realisation?

Come to think about it, they are in  
some several ways more virtuous than I:  
they've done their level best to be  
good chickpeas (have I in my way, equalled them?) :  
they've not tried to be anything  
other than themselves (alas, oh have I not...) :  
they've rested content to be as they are,  
not as far as I know desiring  
mutation, or whatever (I'm full of desires every second..) :  
they've improved continuously through  
their life (alas, what can I claim...?) :  
and they don't waste their precious energies  
fearing that they'll die before they're quite, quite ready  
(here I won't even start to comment...) :

In the world of metaphor, it seems,

chickpeas and I are equals;  
perhaps, dear Rumi, that's  
just how it ought to be.

Michael Shepherd



## In The Spirit Of Rumi 44 -Between, Lies Beyond

Some men argue all their life  
against predestination  
Some men argue all their life  
against free will

You argue with yourself all your life  
about predestination and about free will  
Wise men say that God is to be found  
where opposites meet and are resolved

Between predestination and free will  
is to be found belief.

Michael Shepherd

## In The Spirit Of Rumi,31-The Swan

How beautiful the white swan,  
gliding effortlessly, it seems,  
the sunlight shining on those feathers  
protecting its skin and body better  
than do clothes protect a man!

White as if to proclaim God's beauty moving  
on the waters, like the first day of Creation,  
it dips its carefully constructed neck so elegantly  
to find its invisible food...

while invisibly too, under the surface,  
its legs paddle hard and fast...  
Who would dare to call the swan  
a hypocrite because of this!

In India they call the saints  
who seem to glide so effortlessly  
through life, glide across our gaze  
so that for a moment, we would be them...  
call them Paramahansa, great swan..

who knows how hard a swan  
finds its life, moving against a fierce current,  
lifting its huge body into the air,  
knowing direction more clearly than any man...

who knows how hard a saint  
works invisibly all the time, has worked,  
will work, eternally... for us,  
watching on the river-bank of life  
the river, itself yearning for the sea,  
to lose itself in the vast harbour of the waters...

Michael Shepherd

# In The Spirit Of Rumi-1

My Beloved said

As a lover watches secretly  
his beloved admiring in the mirror  
herself, glowing with his love,

so I watch you secretly;

polish that mirror, so that  
we may see each other in it

and laughing,  
wonder whom we see.

Michael Shepherd

# In The Spirit Of Rumi-13

I said to My Beloved

O my dearest One,  
tell me of angels

My Beloved said

When you are awake,  
you hear of angels and  
wonder about angels

When you dream,  
the heaven is full of angels

When you are deep asleep  
you are that angel

of this your dreams  
remind you

When you awaken,  
remember this

Then you will have wings  
and fly over these three worlds  
as one

said My Beloved

Michael Shepherd

# In The Spirit Of Rumi-16

I said to My Beloved

How, my dearest one,  
do you know those who truly love You?

My Beloved said

Not by their smiling face,  
nor by their eagerness;  
nor by the quickness of their response,  
nor by the force and wealth of their response  
pleasing though these are –

but by their stillness: as  
a rose is still; or as a fine-proportioned vase is still;  
or as a sunlit golden dome is still;  
or as the bluest vault of heaven is still;

they have a stillness all about them; for  
their hearts are ever at rest; there is no need  
for their still heart to move; they are  
always the same; they rest in love;  
they meet you with all love,  
they greet you with all love;  
you cannot add to their true love,  
you cannot take away from their true love;

and if you wish to test their love,  
the test is constancy; there is no change in them;  
they speak, they feel, they act, from constancy;  
what is their substance? It is constancy;  
I stand with them in constancy,  
they stand with Me in constancy..

if that is not what you would ask of them in love,  
then they are not for you; but they,  
they are My true lovers, lovers of the truth in Me

-said My Beloved.

Michael Shepherd

# In The Spirit Of Rumi-17

I said to My Beloved

Who is dearest to You, O My Beloved –  
those who seek to know You  
or those who seek to love You?

My Beloved said

Those who seek to know Me  
must first know themselves;  
look deep into themselves  
to know that which is not themselves,  
to discard that which is not themselves;  
then when they have found themselves  
so deep within themselves  
they shall find Me there

Those who seek to love Me  
must first love themselves;  
look deep with love into themselves  
and discard that which they love but  
which is not themselves;  
then when they have found themselves  
so deep within themselves  
they shall find Me there

and those who truly know themselves  
shall love themselves and Me,  
shall love Me in themselves;

and those who truly love themselves  
shall know themselves and Me,  
shall know Me in themselves;

two paths lead all to Me:  
some love knowledge,  
some know love,  
the treasure lies  
where these paths meet

in Me

Michael Shepherd



# In The Spirit Of Rumi-18

I said to My Beloved

O My Beloved

I fear I have forgotten You!

I have fallen in love with the world –  
when I walk out of the door  
I swoon with the scent of the Spring air;  
I hear each flower singing in the garden;  
I sink into the heart of every rose;  
I am dazzled by the sunlight;  
I see the sky reflected in the lake  
and lose myself in its shining stillness;  
I see the sky and lose myself in the sky's immensity;

when I walk, my feet want to dance;  
when I speak, my heart wants to sing;  
in every person who passes  
old or young,  
smiling or frowning,  
I see myself in them;  
wherever I look, I see only love...

I have fallen in love with the world –  
O My Beloved, have I forgotten You?

My Beloved said

I am the one in you who sees all this.

Michael Shepherd

## In The Spirit Of Rumi-19

When the desert breeze blew  
in the direction of Majnun's tribal camp  
Layla stood there hoping that  
the wind rippling through her silken robe  
would carry the scent of her love to Majnun

while Majnun stood there hoping  
that the breeze would carry  
from her forbidden encampment  
the scent of Layla's love  
to meet his own and merge

When the north wind blows cold  
with snow to blanket the shivering earth,  
when the biting eastern wind  
comes with the rising sun  
that sparkles on the morning frost,  
when the warm, scented southern breeze  
comes with the sunlight bringing the earth to life,  
when the gentle breeze from the west  
blows briefly as the evening sun departs,

may I know you, My Beloved,  
to be that fierce wind, that gentle breeze,  
standing where they arise,  
blessing me with silent air,  
blowing my spirit towards that place  
where there is no 'to'; no 'from'; and no 'away'.

Michael Shepherd

## In The Spirit Of Rumi-39-The Desert

As the cool dawn brings the light  
to the desert where the blue-white sky  
meets the sand that time and man have brought,  
and you wake the camel boy  
to lead the camels from the waterside –

before you mount the lurching beast  
and sway off into the desert on your path,  
the camel-bells tinkling on the harness,

look into the camel's eyes.  
There you will see mingled,  
pride in its being; patience in its duty.

The wise men say that God is found  
where opposites meet and are resolved.  
Proud in its being, patient in its duty –  
no great wonder, then, that the camel  
has been chosen of God to take you  
across the desert of your destiny in faith and trust;

for in the world of metaphor, where man meets God  
in the mind's own language,  
the camel is your body; dutiful proud servant  
for the journey you must take; your company  
for the length of time that journey takes.

So, traveller, when you reach the green and cool oasis  
at the ending of the day's sufficient journey -  
first tie your camel by the waters of refreshment  
before you kneel; for food; for prayer; then  
resting in the bright-eyed company;  
the eyes of those who scan the round horizon as they ride  
and wonder always, what oasis lies beyond.

Michael Shepherd

# In The Spirit Of Rumi-40-The Nightingale And The Rose

As cold winter turns to warming Spring,  
two lovers return from their winter rest.

The first rose shyly blooms; .  
the nightingale pours out its song.

These are the two most generous lovers in the world;  
do they not deserve each other?

In the daytime, while the nightingale takes its rest,  
renews its generous throat,  
the rose opens to embrace the world with beauty;

In the nighttime, while the rose folds and rests in sleep,  
waiting to drink that purest dew of dawn,  
the nightingale tells the world of beauty;

So each speaks in turn; both speak of beauty;  
one in sound, the other in silence.  
This way, telling of their love to the sleeping other;

Do they prefer it thus? Or is their listening  
as sensitive as a mother's nighttime intuition,  
hearing more clearly, inwardly, in rest?

Which is the Lover, which is the Beloved?  
Does the nightingale return in spring  
at the first perfume of the rose,  
drifting from the hedge and garden  
like the messages of Layla and Majnun?

Or does the rose wait impatiently to bloom in Spring  
until it hears – its petals trembling as they listen –  
the nightingale's song from that liquid throat?

Which is the Lover, which is the Beloved?  
Does it matter to the world?

It matters only if that love is not equal; full;  
generous beyond all worldly measure;  
and then the Lover has become the Beloved,  
the Beloved has become the Lover..

You and I, on our prayer-mat each day,  
seeking God within ourselves,  
which is the Lover, which the Beloved?  
Have we yet become each other,  
equal, full, and generous beyond all worldly measure;  
night and day, as nightingale and rose?

As nightingales and roses sing forever  
of each other's love  
eternally, the round world turning, turning..

*l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.*

Michael Shepherd

## In The Steps Of Rumi 85: A Messed-Up Life

Your life is a mess? In every way?  
And no sign of change?  
Your fault? Or that of others?  
Does it matter which, any more?

Tears maybe? Time, then,  
for a laugh...  
try this:

thank your lucky stars –  
or whatever or whoever  
you might thank, in the unlikely  
chance you feel like thanking –

for the freewill that allowed you  
to create this lifelong mess..

You're joking? What a laughable idea!  
That's totally absurd and inappropriate..  
ineffective, too...

go on – laugh at the absurdity of it..

Sleep on it... and if tomorrow morning,  
there's still the echo of your dismissive laughter –

something, a tiny something,  
may have lodged in the mind,  
saying, it's not hopeless, not  
there, where freewill and laughter  
were first thought of..

are first thought of..

Michael Shepherd

# Interfaith Debate

God is dead.  
God is great.

My God is great.  
Your God is dead.

Your God is great.  
My God is dead.

Who made the Sun?  
My God.

Your God.  
Great God.

So, one God?  
'Not two'

So why are we fighting?  
Oh it's politics.

Then leave God out of it?  
My God – no...

He's on our side  
He's not on your side

Shall we start again?

Michael Shepherd

## Internet Dating: Found Poem 7

'She claimed to be  
37  
but was really  
47,  
asked to borrow  
30 dollars,  
spent the evening  
smoking spliffs  
and told me  
she could see  
her therapist's office  
from the club  
we were in.

Then she said  
she was already  
in love with  
someone else.

And also  
pregnant.'

Michael Shepherd



# Its Jerry Hughes Day

Yesterday was Tuesday.

Today it's Jerry Hughes Day.

Happy Jerry Hughes Day, One and All.

Celebrate it.

Read his poems.

Read them one and all.

Michael Shepherd

# Jewish Haiku

Four thousand years of Hebrew  
and still no word for 'tact'.  
So who needs it?

Michael Shepherd

# Jogruffy

I used to be so vague  
about some place called...Prague?  
but now my mind's enlarg-  
ed, I know it's really Prague..

Michael Shepherd

# John Betjeman, Poet

Six distinguished men, soaked to the skin,  
others with the ladies following,  
a coffin, underslung,  
a walk of half a mile along a rough churchgoing path,  
the coffin swinging like a cradle,  
in driving Cornish rain;  
an almost merry funeral,  
green and flowered with thought,  
full of the memory of laughter

There's a photo – he's  
about two or three years old –  
this is a child born  
with fear on his face  
at having been born  
to death; (the cradle  
swinging like a coffin) :  
instead of looking at the  
birdie in the camera, it's the void he sees.

how to fill the intervening years?  
walking just as Pooh Bear walks,  
(his beloved, patched teddy bear  
which accompanied him for life  
had taught him how to walk)  
solemn, careful, tubby, smallish steps,  
hopping across a road  
as if civilisation had taken him by surprise;  
squashed pork pie hat concealing  
lugubrious face, immobile, melancholy  
when not exploding into laughter;  
laughter, beauty, won the day.

how to fill the intervening years?  
with the gaiety of company, love of women,  
declarations of love and offers of marriage,  
love affairs for all of ten minutes, sometimes lifelong;  
with beauty, observation, comedy; the gift  
of finding life one long party is perhaps of those

who've not forgotten death;

a sad face walking so alone,  
leaving behind him in the lightest verse,  
which won a nation's laurelled love, writing of  
the absurdities of class, the built beauty of  
a nation's heritage, washed by sea and custom,  
wind and Cornish rocks and shore;  
an unspoken magnificence; hints of eternity;  
joy; delight, and eloquence; and laughter.

Six distinguished men, soaked to the skin,  
others with the ladies following,  
a coffin, underslung,  
a walk of half a mile along a rough churchending path,  
the coffin swinging like a cradle,  
in driving Cornish rain;  
an almost merry funeral,  
green and flowered with thought,  
full of the memory of laughter.

Michael Shepherd

# Just 22 Miles Of Water

'To understand all  
is to forgive all' –  
that's one French saying  
that doesn't seem to have  
crossed the few miles of  
'The English Channel', or  
the Straits of Dover or  
'The Sleeve' or the  
'Passage of Calais' or  
however the French translates –  
with the Normans; so

perhaps they left it behind  
at the Conquest along with  
Armagnac and crepes and  
their blonde mistresses  
and never went back for it

like I wonder if that blunt  
English saying,  
'Those who can, do;  
those who can't, teach; and  
those who can't teach,  
become critics...'  
ever made it across La Manche  
to that civilised nation where  
critics, teachers, and the mind  
are held in such respect; but

suppose we equate football  
and poetry here:  
football supporters know their  
playing days are over, if  
they ever happened anyway;  
they aren't equipped to teach  
except their sons, for some  
happy time; and so they  
hold to their precious love of  
the beautiful game

by criticising the team,  
the manager, and especially  
the ref. Shoot the ref. So

maybe it's because  
you, and you know who you are,  
felt you couldn't be  
the great poet which you so wanted  
to be, and found you  
couldn't teach, that  
because you truly, deeply  
love poetry and all  
it stands for, and need  
to preserve that love, you  
criticise poetry so savagely here  
in England, and  
are hated for it;

strange isn't it that  
a few miles across the Channel  
from aggressive England  
you'd be feted, revered, honoured,  
as staunch upholder in critical essays  
of the ever-renewing greatness of  
French literature...

I'll settle for understanding all and  
forgiving all

Michael Shepherd

# Langston Hughes

I'd just like to put it down  
in black and white,  
Langston,  
while it's there  
that I'm proud to see  
your name on my  
'also read' list

I just wanted you to know.

(and happy 105th birthday, February 1 this year 2007...)

{{ and apologies to all those who googled or indexed this in the hope of reading something brilliant about him... the selection of his poetry here on Poemhunter is no way a full representation of his own brilliance. There's much more to find. }}

Michael Shepherd



# Laugh Or Weep, Weep Or Laugh

Those masks of Comedy and Tragedy  
that hang over theatre doors and stages  
go back to those two Greek philosophers,  
the one, who wept at the follies of mankind,  
the other, who laughed at those same follies...

In order to justify the invasion of Iraq  
in 2003, on the other grounds to 'regime change',  
i.e. that Iraq had 'wep-ma-struc' in Bush-speak,  
the federal government has made public  
48,000 boxes of papers captured from Iraq.

These include instructions on how  
to make an atomic bomb.

Michael Shepherd

# Life In Shadow Land (David Taylor)

Our future is a projection of our past  
with the promise of an ever present now  
to grace proceedings  
with spontaneous life and hope  
beyond the present forward reaching shadows  
of our past deeds.

(poem by David Taylor, poetry student)

Michael Shepherd

# Lifelines

'after the divorce  
he resumed drinking  
and continued to write  
his poetry'

Michael Shepherd

# Lights! Camera! ....Action! ...

I'm setting up this scene more carefully  
than any other; it's the key scene in  
that film that's forever unreleased:

we're sitting there, quiet,  
comfortable in each other's company;  
there's an anticipatory pause as  
I turn to her and say  
'You've been a brilliant mother...'

and it doesn't matter how she replies;  
I've said it at last...

perhaps if I do the retake with  
every time, more care in detail  
(faint background music? No;  
that would make it artificial...)  
do the retake, how many, ten, a hundred,  
a thousand times? it would  
come true..

And now I've set that up,  
I can't imagine setting up the scene  
with my father.. even now,  
I cannot bear to think of those  
pale blue eyes fierce with an anger  
I could not bear to meet;

where's the script..? whether it would  
shatter his world if I said (I can't even  
say the words in mind...) :  
'You've been a...'

or worse: if he softened, instantly..  
and in a gentle voice, began to speak  
for hours on end, all he had hoped  
to make this son of his, but how..

.. or if (and here the script

is stained, unreadable...)  
he were, too late, too late,  
to say what fathers must all hope to say  
one day, to grown-up sons..

but who cares a flunkey's muck  
for films about self-pity?

Michael Shepherd

# Like That

It is chandeliers  
brought alive with candles  
and diamonds and emeralds  
thrown up to them  
and the beach after a storm  
a homecoming  
a log thrown on the fire  
the taste of lips  
a baby's smile  
a song remembered  
a walk with children  
a dog wagging its tail  
a welcome  
a meeting of eyes  
a sea-wet shell of pearl  
alabaster  
a kitchen smell's promise  
an old friend after so long  
the scent of daphne  
laughter between  
an unexpected touch of hand on arm  
the first primrose in the hedge  
fresh paint  
the moment the tide turns known  
a smile from a stranger  
a love letter half read  
the first bike  
new socks  
a baby rabbit that doesn't run away  
lavender  
a new knowing  
wind-dried bed linen  
a first memory  
hand knitting  
the garden after rain  
tears of laughter  
raspberries  
a sky full of stars twinkling  
cicadas singing at night

the smell of mountain herbs  
a trickling brook  
greenness

it is like that

Michael Shepherd

# Lines From A Poet's Inner Landscape

His day is but a true disguise;  
a quiet Sunday, uninterrupted by the doorbell,  
unchained by circumstance, freed from fashion,  
in loneliness so deep he can't explain,  
almost crying because he can't describe it.,  
waiting for the rain of the day which has yet to be.

He doesn't have the nerve to speak, just gazes,  
but with sufficient humility to make him proud;  
thankful for the conversation that he grasps,  
but fails to speak out loud;  
the surroundings say everything that needs to:  
dry rot's concealed beneath his creaking boards.

Exploding words and questioned deeds -  
to stretch his mind to comprehend this wealth?  
He walks around outside to clear his head -

his cul-de-sac, come alive again.

(Each line is stolen from a fellow poet here)

Michael Shepherd



# Lines To A Poet Of Middling Age

You are now too old  
to indulge in arrogance

and yet you are too young  
to have anything to be arrogant about

you are in mortal peril  
at the midpoint of a life  
which is not a life

which has no past and no future  
for you are not present in it

yet grace abounds  
and with it, poetry

Michael Shepherd

# Listening To Lawrence Ferlinghetti

The story is.. no..  
the history is.. no...  
the story of the history is,  
that back in the 15th century,  
the wild battered shores of Portugal  
threw up strange vegetable things,  
strange woods, strange scented things, that spoke of  
somewhere that was not Europe; so, was there,  
far or near across the sea, between Europe and  
the end, the plate's-edge of the world  
where anything might happen  
like, a fall into infinite space.. falling, falling..  
an island? and if an island, large or small,  
did it, at the other side, fall straight into that nowhere,  
or did it have a West Coast?

what human excitement for the adventurous!  
and as each of us grows up, this same excitement..

I remember when we were wondering  
in a tired but changing world  
who we were, what the world was, mid-1950s,  
and word came (O brave new world  
that hath such creatures in't...)  
of people called the Beats – did that mean  
beaten down, or beatific, or, right on the beat? –  
from the East and then the West Coast  
of that very large continent across the sea..

and after we'd read Ginsberg, Corso, Burroughs,  
in 1958 came a sweet book of poetry,  
its photographic cover all whites and blacks and grays  
and lights – 'A Coney Island of the Mind' –  
and I treasured it, even when it was closed...

The picture of the wild and loose and free  
that we had then, did not accord  
with the human being of magnificence  
who stood there at the reading-desk,

huge in his eighties, with a face and build  
straight out of Italy of the Renaissance –  
even with a shirt of almost Tuscan red –  
who fleshed out, statured out, the word  
'patrician' – and read his still wild poetry  
to a hand-held electronic score  
of seagulls over harbour lights,  
like some Dante who'd been to hell  
and back, and walked Italian streets,  
and ancient Palestinian mountains too,  
who'd heard that message that time's tide throws up  
of a tomorrow that's not like today;

proclaiming a humanity beyond even anarchy  
with all the kindness of those  
who guard the human race.

Michael Shepherd

# Living In The Heart's Memory

A gentle touch upon the forearm  
with a hand, gloved or warm with life,

outside the church door;  
turning away from the open grave;  
by that concrete place  
where they lay the floral tributes  
by the cemetery chapel;  
or later, as you hand the food around;

a gentle touch upon the forearm  
or a hand sought for to squeeze and hold; or  
man to man, they favour a shoulder briefly gripped,  
as if that's the pressure point  
where empathetic camaraderie should be applied;

the single sentence of consolation,  
sometimes so well rehearsed, it comes out awkwardly –  
'she'll be much missed...'  
'you have so many memories...'  
'he'll always be there in our hearts...'  
'if there's anything...'

they've been through this, themselves,  
or fear the time they shall –

...'words must be said,  
but yet there are no words for this;  
accept then, these few words  
in lieu of that deep silence  
which is itself in lieu of words...'

\* \* \*

measured, immutable, as precise  
as any equation of the calculated world,  
the heart's memories:  
every moment that our heart in many years  
opened to them, the heart has stored.

We know the mind can span the imagined world –  
from travel brochures to the thought of heaven;  
yet we forget that greater still, the heart is vast –  
there's all the room for them to live on there,  
sustained by every moment of love freely given; for  
the whole creation is one single act of love.

[written for a bereavement website]

Michael Shepherd

# Love Love Love

Oh it's so easy to say -

'Give what you think you lack -

You feel unloved? Then give love, and love, and love...'...

On the other hand -

Do you have any better advice?

Michael Shepherd

# Love Me... Who?

Small-town romantics  
once might live in fear:  
demon lovers, married,  
or didn't live near...

now the small ads  
cry from afar:  
'GSOH  
for LTR? '

Michael Shepherd

# Loveknots

In the community of this website  
like a girdle round the earth  
(did you read that, Will?) ,  
sharing the inner lives,  
the hearts laid open in poetry,

I see that love

brings insecurity,  
and disillusion (where there was illusion) ,  
and bitterness at love that's not returned  
or worse, withdrawn,  
and sometimes hate,  
distrust,  
withdrawal from love perhaps the worst

and is there any remedy?

only a small crumb of communal solace  
and a curious technological discovery (thanks to our webmaster) :

that 'my' poem quoting a friend:

'What you think you lack - give that..'  
(because by giving, you find you have it  
and can never lose it, lack it)

has had 100 times more hits than any other poem of mine.

I leave you with that thought.

Michael Shepherd



# 'Me And Teddy Bears - The Truth' (Exclusive)

I've never owned a teddy bear (aw...)

my parents read the child-rearing bibles  
of the time, maybe that's what it was

but I'm not pleading deprivation or  
mental abuse; into my life  
came Rex the lion cub

we loved each other from the moment  
I set eyes on him. We were about  
the same age, that was taken for granted,  
since he was my best friend and

of course, since I can't compare  
lion cubs with teddy bears since  
I couldn't at the time, I'm guessing  
what the pros and cons might be:

Rex wasn't someone you could easily  
prop up on the pillow at the bed-head  
and talk to – he didn't do talking-to  
since he had an existence independent of me

but on the other hand  
he loved to be rolled around with  
with his prickly whiskers  
and good nature, with the reassurance  
that he was a lion, small but already  
with very practical paws and would  
protect me if required; his eyes were always ready for fun yet  
very much set on what was ahead.  
I think lion cubs are a fair match for teddies  
but I would say that wouldn't I

there was probably a difficult time  
when I fell in love with Pooh Bear  
for life  
but I've blocked that out

and my parents (child-rearing books again)  
were very clever at removing toys at  
the 'right' moment to enable their child  
to grow up. Well that failed.

But Rex did prepare me  
psychologically for  
that first puppy who  
welcomed me unhesitatingly  
into his life

but just recently, to celebrate  
my second childhood  
I've taken to wondering if  
it's not too late to acquire  
a teddy bear

but no taking the first one offered thanks:  
I've become a bit of a connoisseur  
rather like signing up with  
a marriage bureau: OK but  
there may be better  
around the corner...

I wander discreetly ('It's for my niece...')  
round department stores  
with all their vulgar rubbish,  
charity shops with their loved, furry balding spotted  
survivors hoping for  
a second happy marriage  
or happier

looking carefully at their expressions  
full-face, side view  
(Good God, are their manufacturers aware  
of the difference 'twixt bear and bear?)  
wondering if it's The One

please keep this to yourself 'cos  
I don't want my friends fixing me up  
with some merry widow(er) of a bear  
just because they're sorry for the old git

I'll take my time thanks  
since I'd like to think  
my previous partners will approve my choice  
after all it's for life and  
we older and wiser ones have  
so much to offer

Michael Shepherd

# Medieval English Cathedral

Once I had this fanciful idea of recording  
the silence in each great cathedral  
and marketing these...

As you pull open the worn and squeaky door  
there's a strange moment of apprehension as if  
you're not sure what will greet you - a fullness  
or an emptiness; a football-stadium roar  
or a silence; an earfull of praise or  
a mindfull of questions...

but the first step inside, and a silent gasp -  
it's bigger inside than outside...  
and the sound of your steps soars to the high  
indescribably glorious roof like a  
small bird looking for an escape.

so that you'd like to sing a note or two  
to hear them repeated by those  
invisible angels of the echo, waiting poised  
in the stoniness of the walls and roof  
like the mountain cliffs and valleys  
from whence the stone was dragged  
by devotion.

and you feel an intruder into the space of history  
waiting for you to find your place.

How wonderful if at this moment, history unreeled;  
played itself backwards; and as the years rolled back,  
the cathedral nave would fill with the quietly respectful  
devout. Then back again, and the voices would be more raw,  
rich with the earth they'd just been tending.

Would the praise, to our ears, sound more heartfelt?  
we'll never know.  
Reel back again to that almost  
unimaginable scene - the walls rising, still part built;  
the clambering masons, chisels singing on the stone,

lifted only a little lower than the angels  
on wooden planks on slender wooden scaffold,  
the squeal of pulleys, the sudden silence of tools  
and the call for the master mason;  
and up there where the roof is still blue-grey sky,  
the occasional bird from an optimistic nest  
built the year before in the part-built spire, fluttering,  
searching for a crumb or two from  
the mason's heady meal

as birds may wheel again over half-there walls  
when please God no the roof falls in and  
respectful visitors walk down the tidy gravelled path  
where once the aisle was walked, bowed head and singing,  
but now so neatly grassed where pews and praise once stood,  
remarking out aloud or in their heart  
how the silence is, still, living, there.

Michael Shepherd

# Metaphysical Weblink Love Poem

How can I COMPUTE love's DATABASE?  
Thus WATCH as saintly love, God IN THE END,  
INCHes its way into immortal life's ASSURANCE  
in the seeming OYSTER of my heart?

As SPAM is to the living red-blood MEAT,  
or TURKISH harem to a WEDDING vow,  
so are my SPIRITS to your LONGed-for BEAUTY;  
thrice DISTILLED within th'alembic of my soul,  
since but EXTENSION of your SATISFACTION,  
the PLEASING of your BEAUTY, is the FASHION  
of my so painful-LENGTHENED, longing love?

You, the LONG-LASTING perfect pearl,  
the faithful JEWEL 'twixt the BREASTS  
of Venus' very self. Though mortal flesh  
may wither, crumble and to DEATH, DECAY,  
love's ROCK, love's MUSIC, live eternal FRESH,  
and jewelled STONES and SOUNDS proclaim Your day.

(acknowledgements to my agent, Bill Wordsworth-Cash)

Michael Shepherd

# Misty Pings

Sometimes fat fingers on the keyboard  
produce the surreal that leaves me  
not cursing as usual  
at the way my brain brain he says  
and hand were not wired up properly,  
but laughing out loud  
with sheer delight like a child  
meeting the joy of absurdity in words  
which somehow gets suppressed  
in the years of growing... down?

I've just written a comment  
about such matters of mistyping, and  
there on the paper it is in black and white -  
'misty pings'...

remember those old steam typewriters  
with their tap tap and just before the end of the line,  
a bell pinged to warn you?

I'm sitting here entranced by  
misty pings,  
thinking yes, could describe some of my poems...  
I think I may have hit a brand-new metaphor, like..  
like a nail hit on the head.  
In the fog, or the mist of dawn.  
ping.

Michael Shepherd

# Montage Triste

The hyacinths intoxicate upon the window-sill  
and I think of you

Intellectual montage –  
Eisenstein was the first to spell it out  
and use it memorably;  
a quick clip of one scene,  
then another; the agile mind  
in each of us, connects the two;  
it's routine now.

The candle on the bath-tub flickers  
and I think of you

One close shot of fires reflected on a window;  
then a long shot of the beach below, the tents, the fires;  
then the sky and fatal stars; seen before Eisenstein –  
read Pope's Iliad, the night before  
the fall of Troy; it reads like  
a shooting-script, a hundred years before film...

The sound of church bells down the road  
and I think of you

Then there's the jump-cut; one scene, then another  
but what's the connection; only emotion  
may later turn the key; this too, poetry may use.

The candles on the altar burn, burn as if for ever  
and I think of you

Michael Shepherd



# Mr. Edward Lear Meets The Australian Poets In Limerick

There was a young laddie named Pefecation  
Who passed hugely and frequently, defecation;  
But the social disdain  
And the blockage of drain  
Made poor Pitt dig a pit for his defecation.

Michael Shepherd

# Mutant

disconcerting from the first moment. how to know  
freak from mutant. what rules and if not rules, what.  
freaks release the mind from proud obligations of duty.  
hate, admire, destroy, venerate; easiest of all, ignore:  
all these are permitted by the freak;  
mutants threaten status; lessons to be learned, vain glory  
to the first to claim to place, relate, pin down, tame.  
but not this. where it comes from, quite uncharted yet.  
not freak but mutant. that is certain. regret that this is so  
diminishes us in our own image.

it lives, works, by night. invisibly. under the skin  
so to speak if speak. in what speech. what brain. for when tomorrow  
next week next year we speak to it, its language learned  
we'll know we knew it not yesterday even today. it speaks us  
not we it. easier then to write it off as freak  
but irrevocably, echo on echo, it's mutant. gratitude  
might even be in order. but not yet, not now.

for uneasiness is the nature of this thing, that lives. the easy-going  
are not invited here. it's there to bring unease. only when  
we have lived with it for say a year, may, may not, reveal,  
not where it comes from nor where it may be going as it passes  
but perhaps a glimpse of why it is here, no more than that.  
you will not like it any more than you like this. naught  
is for your comfort gentles all. one day you may see  
beyond it, a fleeting invitation to gratitude. one day  
you may see beyond it, something like a love so great  
that it's not what you wanted to want from love.  
and then it may vanish whence it came.  
or perhaps become so familiar that you wonder  
why it seemed a freak, a mutant, for now  
forever it speaks you. poetry.

Michael Shepherd

# My Olympics

There was huge pressure –  
we was under a lot of pressure...

But I remembered the instructions -  
keep cool, do just what you've been trained to do...so,

to get through, do so well  
was just amazing..just amazing...

I feel – just – fantastic..  
the whole experience has been – fantastic..

and yes, I guess my sights are now  
on London two hundred twelve..

the stadium, the village, the facilities, were just fantastic..  
but now it's over, I just want

to get home again – I'm really proud  
I volunteered to be a lavatory attendant..

...amazing... just fantastic..

Michael Shepherd

# My Sacred Ant

The milk bottles were resting amidst geraniums  
on the doorstep this morning,  
to be picked up with half-open eyes

but then, put down in the alien land  
of steel sink's draining board,  
two ants caught in their morning explorations  
who had inadvertently hitched a ride, jumped off;  
and now, bade fair to steal my heart;

two chaps who lived to work,  
they presented the soul of agitation –  
backwards and forwards on the steel sink they scurried,  
seeking orientation, seeking to continue their allotted work  
in an alien land where the sun  
had spun a cartwheel in the sky

how to return such swift and now so agile movers  
to their colony which lurks around the wooden gatepost  
as if around some benevolent totem,  
giving itself to its devotees, to be eaten totally away?

I took a sheet of A4 paper, trapped the one  
against the steel; the other refused to join its fellow;  
both evidently suspicious of my kind.

I started back to the front door with my precious cargo  
which was becoming more precious by the second;  
but in its agitation, it dropped off, to find  
some path to life's purpose on the floor;

I with some indefinable sin  
to expiate on behalf of mankind  
which cares more for large things than for small

Michael Shepherd

# My Wife And The Other Man

My wife is having  
a relationship with  
the bank manager

those extra three inches,  
that 20% increase in girth,  
those 18 hours of  
chemically induced  
extended pleasure  
come courtesy of

the overdraft sanctioned by  
the bank manager whose  
smug image comes to mind  
at the most ecstatic and  
inappropriate moments

Michael Shepherd

# New Balls Please... Yes It's Another Rant...

Big sports weekend...  
in a coupla hours, Wimbledon,  
or to local residents, Womble-din...

someone's gointa win; someone's  
gointa lose. That's life  
for millionaire sportspersons;  
love-all. New balls please, loser...

then those post-match, post-coital,  
exquisitely embarrassing how-was-it-for-you,  
high-thrive or detumescent interviews...

will the dreaded HOW virus strike again?  
live-mike brings on rabbit-in-the-headlights syndrome –

at the end of the day, we know  
the answer – that's what it's all about,  
all credit to the other guys...  
yes, there was pressure – that's what it's...

it's the questions, though, where the new  
HOW virus strikes –  
'HOW pleased are you to have won? ...'  
'HOW sorry are you to have lost? ...'

that's like, on a scale of nought to infinity?  
No lawyer would dare to use such  
a leading phrase: 'HOW sorry, Mr Under-age X,  
are you to have murdered my client...? '  
'Objection! Objection! ...'

'Oh, I'm really sorry to have won today...  
it'll put me in the supertax bracket,  
I'll see less of the kids, with  
all those personal appearances...  
who'll get the kids anyway when we divorce? ...'

'Oh I'm really glad to have lost...

gives me something to aim for, I'll  
get to see the kids more, the wife's  
quite relieved... I can still afford  
the tinted windows and the limo,  
then I don't get to hear the shouts  
of 'loser! ' when they see me...'  
and anyway, the other guy  
was better on the day... all credit to the lad/girl...  
I've got better legs, I'll get more modelling contracts  
than that ugly bull-cow...'

OK that's enough, time to switch on  
to those pre-match interviews –  
'HOW confident are you of winning  
today, with that extra pressure  
of being the favourite...blah...blah...'

'HOW much does the prospect  
of being a nobody-yet  
and playing the hugely popular favourite  
with better legs and a winning smile  
bother you...? '

HOW much do you care about sport,  
fatso saddo beer-belly couch-potato,  
in that wanna-be-part-of-it, expensive  
T-shirt...? One bowl of popcorn?  
Two bowls of popcorn? How many  
packets of crisps...?

Hey look at the time,  
there's high drama out there  
on Henman Hill...  
seeyer, chizmate..

Michael Shepherd

# News Headline Found Haiku

National Split Pea Soup Week  
has passed its midpoint  
without incident

Michael Shepherd



# Northern Haiku

In the April wind, white cherry blossom;

On the ground, snowflakes.

Michael Shepherd

# Not Quite Drowning But Waving

Please  
scroll back  
to Chris Higginson's  
'Zimbabwe' plea  
for your  
poetic sympathy.

The prize  
is in the international currency  
of the heart

Michael Shepherd

# November 28,2007 Is The International Day Of Stillness: A Poem For The Day

'Stillness is my beloved teacher.  
From her, I learn new things every day.'  
I said to Stillness,  
How can you teach me so well?

Stillness said,  
By being with you always.  
I said to Stillness,  
How can you teach me so much?

Stillness said,  
Because you have much within you;  
I, but a mirror for your mind;  
I, but a mirror for your heart.

I said to Stillness,  
O my beloved teacher, will you  
promise me you will never leave me?

Stillness said,  
I cannot leave you;  
though you can leave me..  
but what is stillness without a companion?  
I said to Stillness,  
Is your work hard?

Stillness said,  
I have the most wonderful task that I could wish for:  
I sit with babies while they smile;  
I sit with children in the classroom  
as they delight to learn;

I sit with the angry and disturbed,  
and watch them grow to peace;  
I sit with the sad and lonely and bereaved  
and watch them rediscover happiness and joy;  
I sit with kings and queens and rulers

while they find wisdom and mercy;

I sit with governments and committees  
while they find reason and justice;  
I sit with artists and scientists,  
and watch them find new things outside themselves,  
and find new things within themselves;

I sit with those who pray or meditate,  
as they find God in themselves;  
I sit at the feet of saints  
while they become perfection;

I walk in the gardens of the dawn,  
I walk in the gardens of the dusk;  
in the deep of the night, I watch;  
I fly with birds, in the silence of the air;  
I watch the animals as they explore the earth;  
I listen to the growing of the trees and plants;  
I listen to the opening of the flowers;

Said Stillness,  
I am the friend and the companion of all;  
who would not love to share my life with me?  
I said to Stillness,  
May I never leave you.  
And Stillness looked me in the eye,  
and Stillness smiled at me:  
'I am born with every creature born  
to be their friend for life.'

Michael Shepherd

# Nude Erections In Contemporary Poetry

Is the whole of Canada  
supporting itself by the export  
of Viagra and such? And how  
did they get my email address  
and share it so generously  
amongst those who don't know my age  
and how the doctor says  
I shouldn't get excited with  
my high blood pressure and all that?

I hope they all take their work home  
and get fired next day for being late to work.  
I think it's called a pyrrhic victory.

Michael Shepherd

# Oh It Can Happen Any Time

it can happen any time  
and there's no place which is  
too improbable for it or  
cannot be contained in it

you're walking down the familiar street  
or on the familiar crowded train

and you step out of what was before  
though there's no longer a before  
and into here and now into

that place which has no place  
that time which has no time  
where love is not a word but is  
and inside knows no outside and  
you know you've always known it  
in that somewhere which is here and now  
and that you always shall

and there's enough love for everywhere  
and everything and everyone  
now that you've met yourself  
oh it can happen any time

Michael Shepherd

## Oh Lord...

O Lord, out of the depths do I cry unto Thee,  
O Lord, hear my prayer:  
I am stricken unto the heart,  
and mine enemies close in about me;  
to whom but Thee may I cry for succour?

\* \* \*

'We do apologise, but due to an  
unusual volume of calls,  
all our supervisors are currently engaged.  
Your call is important to us –  
please continue to hold..'  
(music)

Michael Shepherd





# On Modern Poetry

On the cover  
of those old black hymnbooks  
in those old dark churches  
you can just about read  
'Hymns Ancient and Modern'

As time goes by,  
'ancient' gets a longer and longer history  
and curiously so too  
does 'modern'

Michael Shepherd

# On The Dawn Of Christ's Nativity [sonnet]

This starry dawn – the wise men yet afar –  
the shepherds are abed, their night's task done.  
Is Mary tired? Or, as one untouched?  
All birth's a miracle; no less this one.

The cattle have bestirred at hint of morn,  
the thought of feeding making moist their muzzle;  
straw is rustling as they, manger-drawn,  
find unfamiliar form – so warm – to nuzzle.

What were the first words Joseph softly said  
to Mary, as dawn broke, this day of days?  
And who, sent from the inn to cattle-shed,  
to feed and lay fresh straw, fell still in praise?

How long, this morn, before the murmured sound  
of voices in the street, as Word gets round?

Michael Shepherd

# One For Andy

Loved your poem about those  
carefully-prepared but slightly  
mis-timed, Famous Last W...

but as Lazarus said, there's always  
the replay factor.. though not many of us  
get to check back on our timing  
or so we might think but then who knows

but the audience, they have  
to live with it: a farmer friend  
saw to the cattle, came back in,  
had his supper, suddenly said to her  
I've got to go m'dear  
she said oh won't you stay for a cupper tea  
he said no I've got to go  
and dropped down dead

she remembers the conversation all too clearly

Michael Shepherd

# Palinode For An Equinox

this time of year offers  
naught for our comfort  
so it might appear

days draw in. the year  
seems tired at the thought  
of doing it all over again

colder as if  
the heart has said its last  
and hope itself had forgotten  
what it's supposed to do

this time of year  
is a test of mind. a huge  
seasonal game, thought up  
by a child's wisdom and  
suppressed laughter, lips  
bubbling with love

on a sunny day, this time of year,  
feel the spring, with  
suppressed laughter haha caught you  
stealing in like Dad to your bedroom on  
Christmas Eve with  
something the heart hopes for  
but didn't expect it would get this year

pull this cracker with me  
and a little present falls out  
wrapped in a curl of timeless...  
here, read it for yourself

Michael Shepherd

# Philosophy

Philosophy  
means, from the Greek,  
the love of wisdom;  
I'd like to think  
it also means  
the wisdom of love

Michael Shepherd

# Plato's Cafe

Scrolling Wikipedia  
for entries on 'Perception'  
this entry – scrappy and unclear –  
produced a new conception:

referring to the standard quotes  
tradition offers, to be safe,  
before the bolder modern thoughts,  
it mentioned 'Plato's Cafe'...

imagination leapt for joy:  
dazzling hubbub of philo-sophy,  
sunglassed and gesticulating;  
strong wine, expressive coffee...

or should it be pronounced today  
as genteel afternoon café?  
or, workmanlike, the niff and naff  
of greasy spoon and bikers' caff?

but thanks, O Wikied editors,  
for this so joyous Grecian twist:  
long may this Left-Bank image stay  
of how philosophers should exist,  
and spend their dialectic day:  
coffee and exquisite gateau;  
Gauloises at Le Cave de Plato..

Michael Shepherd

## Poem For Godfrey

You wear your heart upon a sleeve  
that's shaking with sad laughter,  
knowing a world of tears and smiles –  
yet, which before? which after?

your answer, friend, is blowing not  
in winds of time nor gain nor loss;  
but from a heart that's not forgot  
where tear meets smile upon the Cross.

Michael Shepherd

# Poem For Tara, By Request

I may be  
dyslexic

but I know  
not to

carp  
over someone else's

parc

Michael Shepherd



# Poem For The Sorely Tested

Beside the telephone  
a full-size, professional  
real leather  
punchbag  
on a hefty, weighted  
non-shift stand  
and with a substantial  
recoil

inscribed in fine gold lettering  
'I am sent to try you'

that deals with  
the human  
and the divine  
aspects  
together

(For Tara)

Michael Shepherd

# Poetic Swedes In Outer Space Sensation

Did you see today's news headline?  
'Swedes Beam Poetry into Outer Space'  
it takes 25 years to get to Vega  
and the review comes back 50 years after writing it.

so get your kids to start right now  
and in 50 years time the review comes back  
when they're 60 years old  
saying  
'This poetry reads like a ten-year-old's...  
is that the best you humans can manage  
after all these years? '

space-time has its problems

Michael Shepherd

# Poets Are Holy Hypocrites

poets are holy hypocrites;  
it's their blessing and their curse.

they sit for as long as it takes  
like terriers at a foxhole

or for second-best practice,  
at a rabbit-hole,

totally still, alert, all their powers  
poured into attention;

what a lesson dogs  
are for humans

then – a movement in  
their consciousness; it could be

anything creative – a film, a poem;  
and with it comes the sense

of wonder; they are as children  
living in an eternal present

of the universe as gift;  
they take up their pen or keyboard

and, so carefully, as they  
would handle a new-born baby,

write down this spell for that it is  
for the benefit of others quite unknown

and then like a christening shawl,  
white, soft, handmade with love,

offer it to the world.  
then some who believe its magic

read the spell, are reborn  
or cured, or restored

to good health and humour  
or simply have a good day

while those who don't believe the spell,  
well of course the magic doesn't work for them

so far so very good. But then  
those who aren't into wanting spells

and have opinions about  
their opinions, say, that word is wrong,

so it's not a magic spell. it's a bad spell,  
in fact it's not a spell at all

and others who also have opinions  
about their opinions, say, that word is right,

so it's a good and magic spell; and there they are,  
all crowded round peering through their

dirty glasses, pushing and shoving and shouting  
to get nearer the spell and have their say

and oh dear, there's the poet in there too  
saying oh do you really think that

I'd better look at it again  
and see if you might be right

and sad to say, some poets  
begin to worry, about whether

the words of their spell are quite right  
not trusting the magic, as if

it came from them and not from itself...  
and the magic shrugs its shoulders

and says oh well and goes some place else  
where it might be more appreciated

poets are holy hypocrites;  
it's their blessing and their curse

[with more than a little acknowledgement to the vision of Michael Leunig,  
cartoonist and Living National Treasure]

Michael Shepherd

# Politically Incorrect Feminist Poem 1

So how would you feel if  
you were lined up with the  
80 virgins (I always thought  
it was 76 - tough...)  
lined up for  
a 'martyr'  
who'd just killed 80 people  
including the odd fun-da-mental-ist?

Read the small print, honey.

(And that goes for you too, guys,  
if the guy was.. well, you know?)

Just askin'...

Michael Shepherd

## Politically Incorrect Poem 2

Tell you what

I'll pray five times a day  
if you love your neighbour as yourself

deal?

Michael Shepherd

## Politically Incorrect Poem 3

The latest European edict from Brussels  
commands that horses  
must have a passport, with photo...  
(our local brewery  
still used them for local deliveries -  
accountants proved them cheaper;  
and of course, great publicity)

How many horses  
can you get in one  
photo-booth?

And they'll need quite a few more  
shit-hot  
passport inspectors

so watch that arab stallion  
strolling so casually  
onto the cross-Channel ferry -  
might he....?

Michael Shepherd



## Politically Incorrect Poem 4

Which is the greater hypocrite -

One who kills for the sake of Allah, the Merciful?

One who kills for the sake of democracy?

One who kills for the sake of oil?

Michael Shepherd

## Politically Incorrect Poem 5

I'm a hunky  
babe-magnet  
so should I  
be wearing one of those  
black postboxes  
to spare the chicks from  
lusting after me?

Yours metaphorically,

Michael Shepherd

# Politically Incorrect Poem 6, Or, Jolie Jolie Wedding Vows Updated

... for richer, or for richer still,  
in status or in wealth,  
in parenthood or career opportunity,  
for as long as my current commitments permit,  
I take thee...

Michael Shepherd

# Pollution And Climate Change

First, of nature's course, it was the birds;  
for theirs the air, above and over all;  
knowing by intuition without need of words  
as providential, seasoned, sure  
as sparrow's fall;  
and knowing too  
how much to trust to men  
who do not even trust each other.

It was, of nature's course, the snowy eagle  
entrusted with the task:  
the only bird who may look straight into the sun; and thus  
to whom that message might be given, to ask,  
to pass on to his lord; the only bird  
whose plumage may reflect the sun's majestic rays,  
and live; perhaps to bring a message back.

As to the message - was it just a sprig  
of leaves from tallest tree - polluted, withered, black as crow?  
or was it something inner in the words  
as spoken on the flight from wintry sun to warmth, or  
warmth to Northern spring?

They watched, the conference of the silent birds,  
while snowy eagle, like the teepee's early morning smoke,  
ascended higher, higher, into the sun's great eye,  
which never man - eagle alone - may see;  
and... do birds hope?  
Or as the twilight falls upon the earth, accept  
that what shall be, shall be?

Michael Shepherd

## Pour Gonzille (From The French)

Put art  
into life  
with your work  
and your work  
will put life  
into your art

Michael Shepherd

## Pride - For Mike

You, Lord, are the pride  
You are the bananaskin  
You are the fall  
I am the fall guy  
You are regret  
You are humility  
You come before

Michael Shepherd

# Primavera

Some years, Spring steals in slow and steady,  
evoking a daily increment of warmed gratitude.  
Not this year: first it came too early,  
then thought better of it: a nip of proper winter first  
would strengthen human gratitude, thought Spring...

Now it's trying again, reminded perhaps  
that all this Easter stuff is due; and markets must recover...  
the sunlight curves into that yard or too  
of sheltered space in the garden where  
I dare to sit, five minutes of passing sunlight one day,  
ten the next, and so on.. will the warmth now  
reach my medicated heart?

Botticelli – Marsilio Ficino breathing  
over his shoulder, some suspect –  
tried to cram all this into a 2-D version  
of a moving 3-D world: the spinning top  
of divine love, passing through  
three worlds, the physical, mental, spiritual,  
on the first day of eternal Spring itself.  
A mighty work of failed success, successful failure,  
God's work depicted in a lick or two of fresh paint..

And I, sitting in the sun my fifteen minutes,  
am Primavera too: sun on chest and legs,  
upbeat thoughts in mind; and in that world of spirit,  
the springing stirring of some memory  
of that world sometimes inhabited,  
where childlike wonder was the daily norm;  
and later, that enthusiasm, stirring of the gods within,  
that takes teenagers towards some ultimate career;  
then, adult stirrings of the wiser heart:  
praise; gratitude; and laughter; care, concern;  
all ancient virtues loved for their own sake;  
and shining there beyond, a glory and a splendour,  
a light beyond belief..  
these, to the wintered heart  
bring again, the stronger for that testing time,

the first green showers of the loving spring of truth.

Michael Shepherd



# 'Proportionality'. A Disgusted Rant.

We here in Britain have a traditional  
belief in fair play.  
Like, if we lose an away match,  
we trash their town centre,  
hold the town square as our turf  
for several hours against the  
full might of the police  
who hours before, got us safely  
to our seats and kept the home crowd  
from throwing more at us  
than we could shout at them

(That's one thing about  
not learning foreign languages:  
they have to learn English  
to insult you...)

Proportionality.  
It's reassuring.  
A level playing field.  
And if one end dips away,  
change ends at half time.

Like Waterloo, as we were taught,  
was won on the playing fields of Eton.  
Whatever that means.  
That's Waterloo in Belgium,  
not the rush-hour and every  
man and woman for themselves.

So it's really offensive to our sense  
of fair play when those countries  
of the Middle East who love fighting  
and who's ever going to stop them,  
do they want to, it's  
a national sport, kinda gun Olympics –  
when those countries don't play  
the rules of proportionality:  
the death toll in the 'conflict'

- and Dubya-or-quits agrees with this –  
should be more or less equal;  
and in these democratic days,  
that should include civilians  
in with the troops.

Proportionality.

It's reassuring.

A level killing field.

Bodies strewn equally.

Perhaps if it dips away one end like this,

They should change ends at half time.

Though, would anyone notice?

Michael Shepherd

# Pushing Up The Daisies

Suppose that in the graveyards of our grief,  
so still and silent, frozen by our tears,  
those corpses, by some heavenly alchemy  
pushed up, not only daisies, but new flowers  
of strange, new, glorious species, in their love:  
messages of all not known or said  
when merely human; now, in heaven's bright light  
their gift from death to life of timeless love  
to generate a generation 's seed:  
what heaven on earth would flowering graveyards be...

Now close your eyes, and wipe your tears away-

Why yes - perhaps that's true.

Michael Shepherd

# Rate This Poem

I'd love to be inside the head  
of the Phantom Oner as she  
strikes again... with one deadly One,  
cuts the previous ten right down  
to a grovelling 5.5...

'that'll teach you, you big-headed smug,  
with your groupies and brown-nosers; all your pissy posse...  
THIS IS NOT A POEM...'

and with one bound – I'm free!

No longer need I try to write  
a poem rich in metaphor like some jewelled scabbard,  
declaring sparkling wealth and power;  
distracting from the question,  
is the sharp sword, of discrimination,  
still there, sharp, inside?

or a poem so full of music's sound,  
it sings itself into the mind  
like leprechaun with emerald guile,  
in the ear of sleeping child...

or, any other sort of poem –  
I'm free ... now I know I can  
please everyone, someone, no-one.. on a scale  
from nought to ten or should that be  
from ten to nought?

I can now just be; be my one self...  
write from the heart;  
remembering that all others have a heart...so,  
thanks, O noble one...

Michael Shepherd

# Ratting On The Ratings

They've been at  
my stats!

it's taken them weeks,  
the stupid geeks

I've gone from nine or ten  
back then

to average four  
or not much more

they haven't finished... so it seems...  
do I feel diminished? In your dreams!

like a melting, sad poetic snowman?  
the answer's a belting, glad, oh no, man!

doing all those hits  
must be boring, silly shits

but although it's boring  
they've sent my 'total hits' soaring -

raised to the skies my poetic cred -  
you'd think, by thousands I've now been read!

sticks and hackers  
may hurt my knackers

but at least these nerds  
can't mess with the words

yet

Michael Shepherd

# Relationships

'I love him – that's why we're together...'

'I love her too – but sometimes  
we drive each other up the wall...'

If your past, mate, were her past –  
this person that you oftentimes love;

if her pain – which she does not  
herself understand, yet feels;  
(and always at the wrong time for you..):

if her self-awareness – sometimes  
so sharp and so perceptive –  
matched at every moment  
your fluctuating, sometime  
equally sharp, perceptive, own –

then, you would think and act  
exactly as she does...

ah, there's forgiveness;  
there's compassion; and there's peace;

and then, there's only - love;  
there's only love.

Love is always now;  
and then, there's only love.

(With acknowledgements to Eckhart Tolle...)

Michael Shepherd

# Rilke To The Young Poet

Believe that  
with your feelings  
and your work  
you are taking part in  
that which is greatest;

the more strongly you cultivate this belief,  
the more will reality  
and the world  
go forth from it.

Michael Shepherd

# Rudagi's Wine Song

I'm writing to you from that blessed place

where desert meets oasis, in Iran

and it's the 10th century, now, today, just here:

and so I write of wine; and how

it speaks of God's great grace and gift;

you may wish to translate the word as 'beer'...

this Al'Cohol is given us to reveal

that, which we hide but really are:

who guessed you had such courage

and such strength when you, (with all divine respect)

so wisely measured, generously, your drink,

and drink revealed the measure, too, of you?

And you – who think yourself a slave to home and work

or lack of all the things you most desire,

now know yourself to have been born as free..

for freedom is the first thing men require..



and if I say the joy of drink

is like 'the rose's scent or jasmine bloom' –

remember, I, Rudagi, was born blind..

a rose or jasmine flower lights my dark room..

The arrogant stiff upper lip; the cold, aloof thin man;

the wild of mind – yes, even they may yield;

the miserly; who finds his real self

and showers bounty on the world;

with my poured art, yes, even they may yield;

I, Rudagi, prince's princely poet in Bokhara,

drink to you at ease in friendly pub,

in mutual praise at what God's secret art

may show you of what lies within your heart..

\*

Freely adapted from Rudagi's poem, as his tribute.

Michael Shepherd

# Saint Valentine Defines Tough Love

When those you most love  
die  
that's the time to speak in praise of love  
(said Saint Valentine) .

When those you have most loved  
up and go, without a word,  
that's the time to speak in praise of love  
(said Saint Valentine) .

When those you would most love  
want nothing to do with you,  
that's the time to speak in praise of love  
(said Saint Valentine) .

When you feel that all you need right now  
is a little love, to change your life,  
that's the time to speak in praise of love  
(said Saint Valentine) .

When you feel cheated by love  
because it's never come your way,  
that's the time to speak in praise of love  
(said Saint Valentine) .

Trust me. It's not easy to become a saint;  
said Saint Valentine.

.V.

(revised)

Michael Shepherd

# Samuel And Harold Discuss Ovid's Dictum

S You look much the same, Harry  
H You don't look much different, Sam  
S Though times change  
H They don't stay the same  
S Or perhaps they seem to change  
H Or seem to be different  
S And we change too  
H We're not quite the same  
S Though perhaps they only seem to change because we've changed  
H Perhaps we're different and they only seem to change  
S On the other hand, perhaps times do change and we only seem to change  
H Perhaps we only seem to change because times do change  
S Or perhaps both change  
H Perhaps neither stay the same  
S That would make it difficult to tell  
H It wouldn't be easy  
S Perhaps you've changed and I don't notice it  
H Or perhaps I've changed and you don't notice it  
S I feel mostly the same, though  
H I don't feel much different  
S Though in some ways I feel different  
H I don't feel quite the same myself  
S Life moves on  
H It doesn't stay the same  
S Though I'd know you anywhere  
H I can't imagine not knowing you. Anywhere.  
S Our plays change, but the dialogue...don't you think?  
H They are different, but the dialogue...as you say..  
S Alive or dead... the play doesn't change...  
H Dead or alive...the play stays much the same, , ,  
S Though the dialogue...  
H Ah yes, the dialogue...  
S Yours, for instance...  
H Or indeed, yours...  
S That dictum of Ovid...  
H Ah yes, Ovid's dictum...  
S So true...  
H Not untrue...  
S Plus ca change... as they say, Harry...

H... plus ca la meme chose, as they say, Sam...

(Curtain)

For Jerry.

Michael Shepherd

# Sandy Claws, Avenger From The Ocean Of Goodwill

The tale I have to tell, children,  
is not a pretty one – so,  
PARENTAL SUPERVISION IS ADVISED;  
though on the other hand,  
as moral tales should, it has  
a happy Dickensian ending,  
where, as moral tales should tell,  
the last state is infinitely better than the first;  
and perhaps, who knows, your parents  
may even benefit from the telling  
though, naturally, without mentioning the fact.

'Twas Christmas Eve. The Smugg family  
were sitting around their fine dining table  
made from wood from sustainable forests  
in their photographable and photographed  
Bahamas beach bungalow in its  
gated enclave with 24-hour portage and security,  
about to tuck in to their Christmas Eve locally sourced  
corn-fed free range hand-reared organic  
turkey –  
Dad, Mom, and their 2.4 children;  
Point Four was attended by his personally recommended  
Filipino nanny who it was understood  
did not take part in the general conversation.

The Smugg family were feeling good in themselves  
and let's leave out the obvious wordplay here.  
Since October 1, when the calendar in the main  
restroom had been annotated 'Start Thinking  
About Christmas Presents! ', they had each  
in company with their Family LifeStyle Consultant devised  
exactly the right present for each other  
and their family (Dec 15 5-9 pm)  
and friends (Dec 15,12 noon-3 pm) .

\* \* \*

Christmas night (the turkey was rich in vitamins and essential oils)

was a disturbed one for the Smugg family -  
snug and smug as a bug in a rug yet  
afflicted by nightmares which despite  
24-hour security and panic button with  
guaranteed five-minute guard attendance  
all shared the same dreadful sound -  
the sound of sandy claws... scraping... scraping...  
at the locally constructed handcrafted  
front door... scraping... scraping...  
a sound so terrible that not a hand  
reached out from the bugsnug Smuggs  
to press the panic button... for how unSmugg  
a false alarm on Christmas night...

I need not tell you how  
there were no marks on the handcrafted  
front door - just the most horrible smell -  
and... and... footprints of a hideous size  
leading from the so-innocent blue morning Bahamian sea  
with hand-raked foreshore sand (Christmas Day: afternoon only)  
to the front door.. and back again...

The Smuggs, after their fairtrade morning coffee  
and non-biologically-enhanced cereals,  
sat around, opening their predictable, expensive  
presents with feigned surprise and delight but with  
an overpowering sense of anti-climax,  
despondency, and all that post-Christmas  
jaded exhaustion without the Christmas bit before it..

However, their Family LifeStyle Consultant,  
paid to be bright, and fearing for her job,  
had the solution on hand - a Roman Style  
Anti-Event in ancient traditional style,  
a re-run where however the presents were to be  
the worst and cheapest and most inappropriate;  
the games, the ones they all dreaded..

never had shopping been more fun,  
or games so merrily acted out.  
New Year's Eve that year at the Smuggs'  
is still talked about; a riot of laughter, fun;

indeed, you could hardly distinguish  
between the Smuggs, their family, and  
their friends – and that, I needn't tell you,  
is Quite Something at this merry time..

There's a moral here, somewhere buried in the sands of time;  
the Smuggs' Christmas parties are renowned,  
the gated enclave comes together, invites  
the under privileged (from 2-6 pm, approx.)  
but in their hearts – for in their hearts – they don't forget,  
know each, the deep significance, of  
the footsteps in the sand, and at the door,  
the scraping...scraping...scraping... of those sandy claws...

\* \* \*

(For Max Reif, who introduced me to Sandy Claws...)

Michael Shepherd

# Sculptor Under Tree (Zimbabwe)

The sun so hot,  
green grass now brown

under a tree  
a sculptor  
working  
his eyes shining with -  
all

all  
is not lost,  
Zimbabwe!

Michael Shepherd



# Seeking Metaphor

Metaphor's the soul of poetry:  
this incongruous instrument of speech  
with which we say one thing,  
when we mean quite another:

I wish that Shakespeare, its greatest English user,  
had coined a truly English word for it –  
or perhaps, those blunt and foursquare Anglo-Saxons  
who came before; their words as hand-hewn as are spades –

the word comes from the Greek, and means a transference;  
'My lord, your transference is apt and shrewd...'  
no, even that's but transferred to a Latin stem,  
'carrying across'. Too late to seek some native word –  
a 'thoughtshift' or a 'mindmatch' then?

We wear it down, and make it less  
by thoughtless grabbing at the candy-jars  
upon the shelves of sweetshops of our speech,  
as if to mimic poetry that we haven't earned..

but at its height, a metaphor shines like new light;  
bringing together, two images so disparate  
and making of their neighbouring, a moment magical in memory  
as if we'd never seen the world so brilliant  
or so revealing; moments when the mind's a god,  
and life itself a metaphor; a glimpse  
that somewhere, two things mentioned meet  
under the astonished, single gaze of eternity itself..

Metaphor's a holy sacrament: one should never dare  
to use it without some faint echo, of a moment clear recalled  
when that which one refers to, came dazzling bright into the mind  
as life transfigured to another world,  
time lifted to the timeless;  
the radiance of the world's first day,  
Creation, in itself, one glorious godly metaphor..  
and nothing ever less than one.



# Self-Respect - To The Troubled

'Your only enemy

is yourself'...

Easy to say?

Prove me wrong.

Michael Shepherd

# Several Oranges

At what age does the recognition dawn  
that grown-ups aren't quite as bright  
as they would like – and would like you –  
to think?

An early proof among the many  
was marmalade – the stuff best tasted  
when licked off the marmalade spoon, or  
if Mom tried to make it (big wooden spoon) or  
scraped off stodge pudden at your school...

and best, the one that came in brown stone jars  
because that was cheaper; lettered in black  
to say it came from Keiller's; and was made  
from several oranges, so grown-ups said...

well, how obvious can you get? A big stone jar  
or even a glass jar, was bigger than a single orange..

and couldn't grown-ups spell either?  
Their later proffered excuse was to be just as phoney –  
How could all that marmalade  
come from just one town which the Jogruffy mistress  
said was somewhere in Spain?

Yet another reason to add to your growing decision  
never to be a grown-up... so sadly over-rated...

Michael Shepherd

# She Of The Heavenly Happiness

No-one knew what subsequently became of her  
after he went so dramatically, and after all those goings-on.  
He got all the headlines.  
The police didn't even bother  
to take her in for questioning.  
There was talk of riots,  
they needed every spare man.

But the story never quite went away.  
You know how it is with journalists -  
we file it away for a rainy day,  
then it sticks in our mind  
for when we retire and write a best-seller, I wish...

I doubt we'll ever know the truth of it;  
but every now and then  
some nutter with a convincing sighting  
makes a free gift to journalists  
with no personal responsibility for us either.

France, Spain, Italy, gipsy communities -  
you name it, they know her  
except she was never there that day.

The story among her friends is  
that she went on a long Mediterranean cruise  
with two other ladies.  
Yet there's no account of their returning  
and there are stories that they all separated  
and took up new careers in foreign places  
where they acquired new names, locally  
so the trail's gone cold.

But stories like his, and hers,  
and whether they - well, you know -  
never quite go away  
and the part she played  
though brief, sure was dramatic, so  
it's made her a role model for those women -

and there have been many over the years -  
whose lives have taken a turn for the worse  
(no man can know what it's like  
for a woman to have to sell herself)  
and who see in her story  
a hope of life's big U-turn  
and all that we really hope for.  
God knows we all need one.  
Could be a Lloyd-Webber musical,  
come to think of it.  
After all, she was there  
at one of the world's big events  
- that most of the media  
strangely missed...

Maddalena - it's a beautiful name  
in Italian.  
And then there's that delicate cake  
that Proust dipped in his tea.  
There's a place in Italy  
where they take her story very seriously,  
because some local writer  
turned it into a classic of hope for the socially rejected;  
a rather 19th century theme.  
The critics panned it; but does it matter  
whether it's truth or fiction,  
if it goes so deep, that it's true in a different sort of way?

It's called 'Maddalena of the Heavenly Happiness';  
it sounds better in Italian.  
no, it never got translated into English -  
it's rather  
Catholic  
if you know what I mean.  
Though it actually took place  
in the Near East  
or whatever it was called then.

Michael Shepherd

# Sicker Soccer

The £10,000 a week defender can't quite  
catch the £20,000 striker who's got  
the ball at his nimble, expensive feet, the stadium yelling  
fit to raise the roof – what does he do? why,  
he pulls the striker's shirt, of course...; the ref, the commentators  
remain silent. We, we were told off at nursery classes,  
for pulling little Johnny's shirt... I mean, for Pele's sake,  
what is this about? ! ..

then at the end of the game (one side's got to win,  
you'd think the fans are like they used to be,  
paid good money to watch a good match)  
the managers spit out their gum, pat each other on the back  
whilst walking away, and not looking each other in the eye...  
none of that love of the game stuff, the sparkling eyes  
of those who love their sport, shaking hands  
with a worthy opponent...ha...

and as for cricket – 'sledging' – can you believe it?  
making sneery remarks to the batsmen while you stand in close...  
never happened when sport was something you  
enjoyed, loved to do, enjoyed the challenge and the company...  
'oh it's all in good fun'... yeah?

tennis, being one-on-one, ain't so bad; psych yourself up  
but put the venom in your shots; but then,  
when the match ends, run up to the net (or so they  
used to) , eyes meet, shake hands, a few words? not  
so often – shake hands without making  
eye-contact, off to thank the umpire who's  
up there out of reach...

it's like some sorta natural law: when sport is a game  
like life, the game's the thing, and well-played, sir; pay  
your 'sportsmen', your mercenaries, in the name  
of 'popular entertainment' and big business, and  
something disappears, as revenues increase;  
how long before poetry becomes  
a 'spectator sport' with a World Slam League out there

and TV rights?

Michael Shepherd



# Sin And Stuff

Lord – if that is how  
a stranger, I, should address  
that stranger, you –

I – or one resembling I –  
have done so many actions  
which the world would classify  
as crimes, or sins, according as  
the one who classified them might believe...

and in the classifications which  
men attribute boldly to that presumed you,  
there must be crimes or sins which are unnamed  
which I have done; good left undone...

indeed, your devotees would see it as a sin  
if any single breath, any heartbeat passed  
without their holding you in mind...

So if I understood forgiveness, as beyond  
the way we scold our children, even punish them,  
yet never cease to love...

then I would ask forgiveness of my sins  
in that same spirit; yet I would ask, first,  
understanding; mine, and yours  
(though I would hope them finally the same)

for I believe that really, the you  
that I perceive you as –  
that really, you're my best friend...  
who understands my crimes and sins  
better than I do myself...

and in that understanding, love.

Michael Shepherd

# Slither

Slither.

If you're a fellow sufferer,  
you'll know exactly what I mean.  
Is it worse for those who live by the word,  
or those who hope to avoid it?

It's that pile of papers, CDs, books, leaflets,  
sitting beside the PC, vital at the time  
when time was of the essence;  
soon covered like a game of impatient patience  
with another vital document...  
file everything after use? Who's that anal?

It's that pile of mail on the kitchen table  
with a touch of marmalade between some items, that  
you opened during many breakfasts (it's a cereal story, this)  
and hope will answer itself.

Above all, it's the pile of mail-order catalogues  
that come in cellophane wrappers  
which you haven't taken off of course,  
knowing that you will, one day, be grateful  
(as so you thought about the previous editions of same,  
further down the pile...)

And the pile of folders, which obey that law of nature -  
that spines of folders are thicker than  
the other edge - they're the first to

slither. And you should know by now -  
there are demons in them thar piles:  
if there's a page or two  
which you need right now as you fly out the door: abracadabra! -  
five minutes ago when your right hand and eye put it right there  
(who's taken it, c'mon, quick...?)  
in two seconds flat, your left hand and eye  
slipped something else on top of it..  
left brain, right brain co-ordination? ha!  
RH reason put it there; LH emotion said, hate work, hide it....

and then, one day -  
slither! And  
you hate yourself, look around for someone else to blame,  
blood-pressure goes up - again -  
your day's ruined and it's still breakfast time...

Slither. Moses didn't have that problem.  
It's yet another giant step  
sideways - damn - in the evolution of the human mind.  
Maybe marmalade is the answer, after all.  
You've suffered, too?

Michael Shepherd

# Slugs And Snails And Homelovers' Tales

You asked me for a poem about home and I remembered  
that millions of years ago there was plenty of food for all  
in the Garden of Eden and slugs  
were well supplied with greenery and all was one big happy family  
until slugs found that other species found them tasty  
chocolate jellies or unjust desserts especially when after  
a good night out they were, well, sluggish about getting home  
and the sun came out and gulp quick as a slug of Jack  
but spotting one night or was it day, a battered caravan  
serai, it occurred that a portable home would be a good thing  
to evolve. Became snails. Just took time.

Poetic point of this is for there is a point, that  
human beings are much the same, there's the bricks and mortar thing  
we call home but really home is  
in the head or heart, we carry it with us, it's the place we go when  
there's no other place to go.

And next time you feel a bit sluggish  
about going to work, or like a snail unwillingly to school  
you'll have to admit that Evolution  
does a goddamned good job, a home in your backpack  
beats commuting to work any day. Respect.

Michael Shepherd

## Small Talk Angel Style

I saw something white in the bushes  
it was a bunch of angels  
wings folded taking an  
ambrosia break and  
laughing gently over  
the lies they hear most often  
when they're passing over

they were saying that  
apart from the old ones like  
we must have lunch sometime and  
the cheque's in the post and  
I promise to take it out before.....

there's now I could do this with you  
all day where's the remote

but then they got on to the  
more serious ones like  
we only ever wanted the best for you  
so this is what we...

and their voices got quieter  
so I crept away without their  
looking my way

but I bet they knew I was  
there listening and  
I bet they knew  
I'd tell you

Michael Shepherd

# Snow

Snow,  
remember those tender shoots  
and smile  
warmly

Michael Shepherd

## Snow: A Haiku

Grey clouds,  
brown earth,  
a broad white smile

Michael Shepherd

# Sonnet And Sonata

May sonnet ever match sonata form?  
whose opening movement catches restless mind;  
whose new and ever-fresh harmonious sound  
puts spark in eye and ear, and feet on ground;

then, slower movement, drawing us to still peace,  
takes mind within to where all movements cease;  
murmuring all that inner nature knows,  
restoring to our self its true repose.

Then! final movement, dancing out new joy  
in life within to outward present joined,  
send us out Creation's messengers  
to sing that song our heart in truth enjoys.

Coda, last, or couplet: solemn sum  
of all before; that's present; may become.

Michael Shepherd



# Sonnet For The Day Of Epiphany

Their wives were not too keen about it all:  
beyond the call of duty, so it seemed;  
for, if they read the heavens' portents so well,  
what need of proof, of presence at the scene?

And then, to go without due retinue  
through unforgiving deserts; foreign towns;  
and forests hiding thieves and wild beasts too?  
And carrying rich gifts? And worse, their crowns?

And so to risk three kingdoms, not just one?  
And for the sake of some religious creed  
not even ours? 'Nay, love - it must be done;  
we crown our lives and kingdoms with this deed;

these crowns are symbols of our rule on earth,  
to yield the King of Heaven at His birth'

(revisited)

Michael Shepherd

# Spider On The Hedge

The spider on the hedge  
doesn't seem to catch anything  
but grows larger.

Sometimes not knowing is a blessing.  
Sometimes it's sad-making.

Sometimes it's bloody annoying.

Michael Shepherd

# Sporty Thoughts On Wimbledon

Henman, Henman,  
winning-now-and-then man,  
give the other guy a chance, right?  
tennis should be just a game...  
why be in a hurry  
like that wee brash Andy Murray,  
who's on the way to riches, and to injury, and fame?

Michael Shepherd

# Squirm Worm - For Cj

Can you remember  
when you were, oh, five,  
and something just more perfect than  
whatever that word meant then  
and more delightful than  
delight  
just made you squirm, it was so - well, that? just - right?

today I squirmed  
and I'm great-grandfather's age.

I wonder how many others there are  
around the fountain of life  
squirming with delight  
like a wriggly mass of  
white  
cherubic  
maggots

at poetry

Michael Shepherd

# Suspended Sentence

and while children, to whom  
the future's still a playground,  
are complicit in computers' fantasies,

not so this adult; scared  
witless, that one wrong button pressed  
will spell oblivion; a lifetime's guilt  
stirred by the one word ERROR! in its deadly box;

and then that solemn judgment that  
'this computer has committed  
an illegal act' – so that I go  
to the window, switch out the light,  
and around the curtain look for that  
dark unmarked car across the way with its two  
immobile figures frozen in a mindless anonymity  
which could not be more suspicious –

and now it tells me in unrolling words that  
'an uninterrupted playback will commence  
in more than one day' – and life's put on hold,  
the present time is stopped, and all our yesterdays  
are to be fast-backwarded, as it's said  
may happen at the moment of our death;  
no longer are those sci-fi films the mind's brief game;  
today I am to live in no placed place  
nor now-timed time; and as tomorrow's dawn  
breaks grey and fearful, outside time itself,  
the playback of my puny life will roll...

time (so to speak) for final cyber-irony:  
press Start to stop this virtual memory's oblivion,  
and wonder if Prince Hamlet felt like this.

Michael Shepherd

# Temporarily Pissed-Off Poem

Why the hell should I respond to  
'I'm new to this site, please read  
all my poems and  
comment (you'll enjoy them) '- when  
you haven't the courtesy  
or even the guile  
to read just the odd poem  
of mine? Why should you  
trust the judgement of a poet  
you don't even admire or  
despise?

OK I'll have cooled tomorrow but  
I'm glad I've let off steam  
and  
by the way that first bit applies  
to older acquaintances too.  
'Lousy poet but  
good for a comment', huh?

(OK, guys - the moment passed...)

Michael Shepherd

# Tenworder

Does this laughing baby brook know how far its journey?

(A tenworder is a one-line poem with no more than ten words; can be less)

Michael Shepherd

# That Damn Cupid

...who or which is the main topic of this site  
in any season, let alone this one in the Northern hemisphere,  
as the hormones stir a young man's fancy  
and an old man's mind...

It's difficult I find, being a poet, and a scientist by training -  
you want finality in the experimental results  
but you love the constant mystery and beauty of the world,  
never quite reached, never quite expressed.

Take this Cupid. Not the actual one,  
but the head of Eros, Venus' very active young assistant  
obviously under general orders  
but with a very free remit under his blindfold -  
or so it seems to us who don't get to see  
the universal script if such there be.

He's one of the few 'archaic' treasures of Greek art  
neatly plundered for the British Museum  
in circumstances not to be enquired into -  
'saved for civilisation' would be the spin -  
but a winged messenger to this house  
in no small way.

Which brings the whole matter of the non-material  
into question. And which is what some scientists  
find a challenge, others try hard to deny with cold facts.

To get to the point. The beloved point.  
A reproduction of this little chap  
in a mixture of polysomething and marble dust  
sits on the table by the window here,  
I'm looking at it now. Why do I know  
that it's not just anyone's baby, baby,  
but Eros himself? (Venus, note, is a mature woman,  
Cupid just an innocent (ha!) child...)

The problem, O scientists,  
the blessing, O poets,  
is that his expression, his intention dammit,



is never the same two seconds together;  
and, always two seconds ahead of what  
I'm thinking now he's up to...  
he's always up to something  
and he knows I know it...  
and don't exactly know what  
and I'm two seconds after him, all the time...

For instance, right now  
before I wrote this, I thought it would be good  
to give him a wipe.  
He submitted to it with the closed eyes of a child  
just old enough to submit to having his face wiped  
without screwing up his face into a performance;  
a beautiful, gentle submission  
(for once; first time I've seen him look like this) :  
now already, he's up to something - the corner of his mouth  
on one side has a mischievous little thought (or maybe not so little)  
playing around it; while his eyes are resting within himself  
in a meditation on pure wisdom, it seems

(just a second, let me check on him,  
you can't leave him for a moment)

aha! that's his game - the sculptor  
who trapped him, or thought he'd trapped him -  
no - was trapped by him! has seen two sides to his face:  
the left side would pass for a meditating Buddha, almost;  
almost blind, unknowing, unjudging of all worldly actions;  
the right side has an up-to-something muscle-pull  
at the corner of the mouth and cheek and eye  
which gives that side of his face a look of active goodwill;  
put the two sides together, and ha! it looks like mischief;  
but more like the divine mischief of Krishna  
sporting with his cowgirls.

Is all this the moving theatre of my fantasising mind?  
Left and right lobes of the brain in see-saw mode?  
I think not. Ikons are famously said to play this game  
with the devotee; outer portrayal drawing out one's inner truth;  
and here's this Cupid, more alive than I am, I suspect...  
allowing me, who have acquired him/been acquired by him,

to watch him as he makes the whole world go round  
and conquers all.

But as to warning you in advance  
what he's up to with your erotic stirrings this fine Spring morning,  
all I can tell you is  
he's always on duty; always hatching some new divine mischief;  
and I'm always two seconds late in catching his newest  
cast  
of mind..

Michael Shepherd

# That Jones Boy

Seattle, 1943. He's just ten.  
The family's poor beyond hunger,  
thrown out of Chicago by Al Capone  
for making too much money.  
When it's dark and quiet,  
they break into an armoury  
for - pie. In the dark  
he sees a piano he thinks it's called,  
plays a note or two and knows  
this is what you'll be doing all your life.

Later, after years of playing  
stuff like Debussy with Ray,  
he gives Frank a jazzy edge,  
later again, a thriller  
for Michael

He says, don't wait  
for the paralysis of analysis,  
listen to God's whisper,  
and if it gives you goosebumps,  
go with it.

It's said that truth  
is stranger than fiction.  
I think not: it's sweeter, for it's  
nearer the bone,  
sweeter as the sweet notes  
that he hears

Michael Shepherd

# That Poem

It was a day much like any other.  
Too many letters to open right now;  
The phone pipped and bleeped and hissed  
as it recorded too many requests  
to read here, go there, answer these questions,  
be interviewed;  
why did you write this poem,  
did you mean – ten lines  
of prosaic speculation follow, about some mere  
two words; wouldn't this poem  
be better without the last two lines?

please read my poems and  
return the manuscript with  
your extensive comments...  
(the invisible PS reads 'I'm just  
as good as you, and younger, and, moreover,  
more in touch'...)

the occasional face peering  
over the gate; once every few weeks  
a stranger boldly knocking at the door  
so sure the poet would be glad  
to meet a fan, unannounced,  
eager to tell them what their  
poetry really meant...

his fame, like some dark aura  
which he would have craved, in those days  
when he rose early, wrote for hours  
to preserve his sanity, before he went out  
to that job which made him miserable – his fame  
now pressed around, demanding.

It was a day much like any other:  
a poem might come, life  
might flow; flow down, flow through, flow out..

Dusk and a sigh and a laying down of pen;

should today's lines go straight into the overflowing bin,  
or be returned to tomorrow, in the fresh of day -  
there seemed to be something there  
around coffee time that morning,  
it was going somewhere...

Years later, this poem, found in his  
random papers when his widow  
paid her last gleaning respects to the genius  
which she loved less certainly  
than she loved the man -

this poem would be pounced upon,  
chewed, spat out with discriminating pride  
by literati - look, our idol has his feet of clay..  
shall we measure his greatness by his failure  
or feed our envy and our self-regard?

No. Sit here, in his chair; take up his pen;  
put that poem in front of you;  
be there, on that day like any other  
when no sublime inspiration came;  
yet, work was done, somewhere, innerly;  
know that;  
love poetry.

Michael Shepherd

## That! ? Moment? !

What would writers do without  
the question mark?

(luckier still, Spanish writers, who can begin their questions with  
an upside down, wrinkle-your-brow-here question mark,  
to begin their questions...) :

and then there's the rather immature mark, some say:  
of share-it-with-me exclamation - surprise surprise!

But beyond all punditry, there are those moments  
when life unexpectedly confounds us  
with some event that's simply! ?  
- or one that's rather more? !

Once when I wrote for a magazine now defunct,  
I was offered one day as a kindness by our Editor  
to present myself to a famous ophthalmic  
(that's an eye-test in itself, that word)  
surgeon, who might have a part-time job  
to suit an underpaid journalist:  
an Indian in grand, top people's Harley Street.

this Dr. Hiranyagarbha ran a sideline,  
a magazine for the Diplomatic Corps;  
in return for which he begged 'spare' eye corneas (don't ask)  
from more wealthy (or loosely-regulated?) nations  
which he then implanted nobly free of charge  
in the less fortunate around the world.

The job was not quite up my Grub Street;  
but he offered for my trouble,  
a free eye test...  
I checked the exit at that stage.

The test done, a dramatic pause...  
Then the great man announced  
'Your eyes are ten years older than your face..'

That's what I mean by a

! ? moment.

A vision then arose, so to speak:

ten years of blindness while my dying face caught up...

dark glasses? or a small but decipherable, poetic

plaque, pirate-slung over the forehead:

'Here lie those eyes of wild surmise

which I unwisely failed to prize...'

Maybe on reflection it was more of a

? ! moment, do you think?

Though the other way round for eyes and face

would be pretty scary and! ? for the funeral director?

Michael Shepherd

# The Everlasting Throes Of Those

The Everlasting Throes  
Of Those  
Who Argue about Poetry versus Prose  
And about the Propriety or Crime  
Of Meter and Rhyme  
In Poetry:

as I see it, it's back to the ancient Greek idea  
of three near-absolutes – Truth, Beauty and Goodness  
and although they're all absolute in their aim,  
and therefore theoretically equal,  
most of us, I suspect, have our personal order for this list

those who put Truth first at all costs are more likely  
to write prose; but if they love beauty in words  
and have the urge to write something beautiful in words  
they may try poetry; but to them,  
rhyme is untruthful, dishonest, because  
looking for a rhyme  
becomes a crime:  
and leads your mind away from the strict Truth.

while those who put Beauty first don't have  
a fixed attitude – they may, as children do,  
love the formal music of hearing about

A certain Mrs Dhutti  
Who was very slightly nutty  
She wouldn't wear a saree  
As her arms and legs were hairy  
And thought it was much better  
To wear trousers and a sweater  
etc.

or they may feel that their response to the world  
is so full of love, of awe, of wonder  
(of which Aristotle said the second and third  
are shared by philosophers, that is, lovers - note the word - of wisdom,  
and poets – though a poet  
may not know it...)



where was I oh yes, their response to the world  
is most truly - note the word - expressed  
in free verse  
which may be better poetry  
or worse

and what about Goodness – oh let's not  
get into that: the poetry Forums are full of the emptiness  
(though it's a necessary evil, looked at in a way)  
of poets and readers and critics saying  
what's good poetry and what's bad  
according to them and feeling  
they've made a contribution to  
Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, in that order  
by pronouncing this.

some few, some worthy few, and I'll mention no names  
for reasons not unconnected as Milton might put it  
with the previous stanza,  
whose brilliance of that servant mind which we all share,  
manages to juggle Beauty, Goodness and Truth,  
in that order in this instance, and not only juggle but  
remain faithful to them all; we could call them  
The Absolutely Great – they speak straight from heart to heart  
and they don't worry about prosaic considerations like the above  
because they've got it all, all this, within their art; within  
their constant heart.

(Readers, please note,  
that last line's a quote.)

Michael Shepherd

# The Family Room. For Mary.

You put up with it because  
as tiresome as it is, and as they can sometimes be,  
somewhere there, there's always love.

He may take interest  
in something to be repaired  
that's mechanical; and  
there's cars to wash and clean,  
hobby things to sort and tidy.

Some kids are good or disciplined;  
but there's never quite the time  
in their expanding world  
for doing just what you do  
for the house..

But in the human heart  
there's this locked, dusty room - you haven't dared  
to look inside for years - or indeed  
since childhood, for some people -  
full of junk, of cobwebs,  
broken windows, their sashes jammed,  
cupboards that won't open, drawers  
whose contents stop them opening; even  
the birds have stopped their nesting there;  
a room of memories that whisper when it's dark

It's the room that's family.  
And surprise - the light still works..  
A family can sort and dust and wash and clean and tidy it  
in less time than they take  
to slam the door  
yet only you know that it's done, and how it's done.  
And you say nothing.

Somewhere, two strangers  
smile at one another



# The Foolish Verges On The Wise

You hear it said at  
the oddest times and in  
the strangest places

often with a knife-blade at  
your chest or  
a thumb expertly on  
your wind-pipe or  
a hand itching towards  
a holster or the belt of jeans

nobody tells me what to do

seldom are the crime,  
self-knowledge  
and the remedy put  
so succinctly  
together

Michael Shepherd

# The Guy Who Stands At The Entrance To The Year

Round about 4 a.m.  
when I get up for a pee  
or just occasionally, go to bed  
there's a light on across the way  
every morning

and I wonder, is he the guy  
who starts the whole of London off?  
Is he the one who drives the unscheduled train  
which gets all the other transport workers to  
their stations and their trains? Or just gets that first train going?  
Or unlocks the gates to where the trains are sleeping,  
relieves the night security man, pats his dog,  
brews up those cans of tea the drivers take with them?

Or opens the gates for the milk lorries  
to come in, the milk floats to quietly trundle out?  
Checks in and out the storm-tossed vans that bring  
the vegetables and flowers overnight  
from Holland on the ferry? Rolls up  
the shutters on the yet unbloodied meat market floor?  
Switches on the lights that light  
the daytime panels of the electric grid,  
his footfalls echoing in some vast white hall?  
Sees the first dawn passengers, red-eyed, stagger  
Off the plane and into the half-empty terminal?  
Wakes up the rough night sleepers outside department stores?  
Cleans up the beery sickness around Leicester Square?

First down the sewers to warn the big black-brown rats  
that the chemicals and the water are on their way?  
Or at the best, sociably relieves some night staff, themselves  
relieved it's homing time – 'Morning, Jack! '  
'Goodnight to you too, mate! '

I sometimes walk past his housefront – it's unlit, no clues, whether  
he's been up all night with the teething youngest of their six; or lost  
a partner who just couldn't stand his hours..

Regular as clockwork, though he missed  
'seeing it in' until the wee small hours,  
he's the one who started up  
January the first, two thousand and six;

and after a lifetime of devoted service  
no one may think to recommend him for a medal  
for Services to the State. I may catch him, shadowed in the light  
from the window he has no need to curtain at that hour, and  
glance a silent thanks his way, wondering  
if he loves his job; in the sacred stillness of unsullied dawn?

Michael Shepherd

# The Honest Man

The honest man, it's said,  
does exactly as he says,  
and says exactly as he feels,  
feeling as if he is  
the whole wide world;  
himself the universal man;  
lives a measured life,  
nothing too little or too much;  
the universal man, himself

Michael Shepherd

# The Last Day

The eyes of the guard  
who motioned her forward  
told her he'd done this  
many times before

behind his peremptory bayonet  
his eyes were dead like  
an anaesthetic before  
the operation from which  
she'd not recover

after that, it was merely  
a bad dream  
the stripping,  
the clang of the doors,  
the singing. the singing

for death had spoken her already  
a small mercy  
in a day without mercy

Michael Shepherd



# The Man Who Fell Into Eternity

It may be one of the few images  
that last as long as the world has eyes  
- no shorter, no longer -  
the man who fell and was uniquely caught  
amid so many others, on 9/11

Which of us, bearing eventually to examine  
those photos with an open mind  
and open heart  
can make a leap of faith  
and invert that photo,  
of a man rising  
to the occasion?

Michael Shepherd

# The Mind's Strange Beauty, With Its Smile

It's said, that when our mind  
awakes, out of that sweetest place  
in which it sleeps, rests, is refreshed;  
in the morning; or in those  
rare moments when we let it take its rest;

this wondrous instrument, invisible,  
yet holding all we think is ours...  
in the twinkling before it spreads our world  
before us, like some awed geographer  
unrolling with two hands a map from polished rods,  
inviting exploration, conquest, or desire...

in that great moment, as it emerges from that place  
which is to us no place... that holy place,  
of universal mind before it's individual –  
that bran tub where we thrust our eager arm –  
splits its precious unity, which some mighty force  
beyond place and time itself, has decreed that mind  
may find itself, or lose itself, in multiplicity –

splits this onely mind into polarity:  
scans like some godly radar,  
its whole vast world surveyed;  
surveyed in truth; indifferent  
as that sweeping line which arcs incessantly  
to show, there's this and this...

a fraction of a moment, and then we  
clothe all this playground of the soul  
(glancing so quickly, setting up  
imaginary walls, beyond which  
be dragons and our mortal enemies...) with our illusions,  
our beloved illusions, the land  
where we may play, pretend ourselves  
to be ourselves... our world  
of friction and duality:

from small (it thinks) to great (it fears) ,

from good (it likes) to bad (it scorns..)  
the pleasing and unpleasing there;  
the loves and hates; all the illusions  
that we defend, fight over, argue, build...  
the friction of the tire on road...  
all set against each other – in our mind;  
'nor good nor bad, but thinking makes it so'...

This is the magic of the mind; with this,  
ourselves as conmen, tricksters – sometimes  
healers, teachers, wise men too –  
with this, in this we play,  
as poets with a dictionary;  
know this – and watch this ticking, exquisite watch,  
its intricate fine mechanism  
running on until its spring winds down:

know this, and laugh that heavenly laugh  
that blows away illusion; that laugh  
that has the sweetest sound you ever heard,  
as if you laughed with gods; or,  
smiling as a goddess smiles.

Michael Shepherd

# The Monday Bluesky

It's true – 'true love no alteration finds' –  
love is a state of being, as yourself:  
your love is not outside, but deep within;  
it is not something you can ever lose;  
nor something that can leave you 'low and dry';  
does not depend upon some other form,  
some other body's sometime warm embrace;  
and when you're silent, still, you know this so...

Believe me, love – I know this in my heart;  
beyond all blandishments, this loving rhyme  
rhymes all our hearts, which cannot live apart;  
we know we know this, past all timeless time..

Michael Shepherd

# The One Who Wrote

and because their soul  
had found a rest  
beyond action

their spirit, freed,  
roamed without movement  
in freedom  
through the world  
whispering

of rest,  
of freedom,  
of words,  
of silence

singing, singing

Michael Shepherd

# The Pain Of Not Being You

How can you say,  
I never felt in possession of my life  
until this moment, to  
someone who has not felt  
the each, the both?

or, I shall remember this moment  
for the rest of my life  
not for what it is but  
for what it may yet mean?

a lifetime with a pen  
may alleviate this pain  
somewhat  
while I write

Michael Shepherd

# The Poem That Failed

There is a place where significance ends -  
that is the place where the metaphors tire  
and the similes dimmily fail to inspire  
and the poem runs out in a meaningless flood  
but the poet won't give up and declare it a dud

for the critics they spot and the readers they know,  
you can get up and go, it's the end of the show...for  
there is the place where significance ends.

Michael Shepherd

# The Sadness Of This Afternoon

The sadness that, this afternoon,  
pours over me, settles  
like a dark cloud, watched  
as it descends, inexorably,  
becoming heavier as it encloses me,  
blotting out all thought -

where do you come from, sadness?  
where are you taking me? do you have a purpose?  
and will I ever know what you intend? do you  
come to me, or have I secretly  
come to you? dragged my heavy boots to this dark marsh? am I  
to welcome you, as if some long known friend  
who comes slowfooted, bearing an uncomfortable truth –  
'you won't like to hear this, I know... but as a friend...'?

or are you some bitter enemy, whose only way  
of stealing what I am, is to leave me flaccid,  
wearied, slumped into the chair  
a backbone without spirit, naught but sorry flesh?

or do you have a secret spell, which like a fairy tale  
I only have to speak, and zap! you'll vanish whence you came...  
And look up there, there's movement in the sky  
and edging round the cloud, a rim of light...

or are you like a children's birthday trick,  
conceived with excited giggles in the other room,  
a bundle made of old brown paper, dirty newsprint, knotted string,  
which, shed, reveals some little gift they knew  
would tell you of their love more warmly than  
a shop-wrapped parcel with its ribboned neat rosette?

sadness, you shrank immediately I named your name;  
now I'm laughing at you, like some old friend  
who steals up on you, bored and dreaming in some queue,  
to give you then, that gentle shock of love;

and after you've gone, sadness, I may remember



something valuable.

Michael Shepherd

# The Search For Self. From The Indian.

I read about the Self  
and sought it  
but it said nothing

I worshipped the Self  
but it did not smile at me

I surrendered every action  
to the Self  
but it only watched,

said nothing,  
did not smile

now I am silent,  
watch, and smile:

how can you find  
that which you never lost?

Michael Shepherd

# The Unwise Wise

Proudly, fiercely, they guarded wisdom;  
wisdom that had outlasted fashion,  
the cults, the sects, the mass conversions,  
the messiahs, and the promises;

They had gathered this knowledge  
in the days of garnered wisdom  
250 years before that guy from Galilee;  
and then around twice his lifetime upon earth  
as numbers dwindled, they stored this knowledge  
in a cave not so far from Jericho,  
near the sea that died into a lake.

Discipline, ritual, held them together;  
and cleanliness; the communal latrine  
was 1,000 cubits or a little more, say half a mile,  
from the city where they lived; I guess  
some walked, some ran  
there from Qumran  
– except on Saturdays, when  
they were not allowed to leave the town  
and therefore did not defecate that day..  
then on return from the latrine, their faeces neatly buried,  
a ritual, totally immersed bathing was required.

Alas, if these wise men had asked the Arab Bedouins  
they would have known that, had they left their faeces  
uncovered in the sun, it would have killed  
the roundworms, tapeworms, whipworms, pinworms,  
which, walked back on their feet and thriving in the ritual bath, slowly  
killed this community of wise men from inside,  
so that only 6 percent lived beyond forty years;  
eventually depositing their wisdom on scrolls  
(how few men left to place them there, that solemn day?)  
to be uncovered after nearly two millennia  
darkly in a cave.

That is the story of Qumran. I guess it's one  
for those who say, what you live by, that, you die by;

in this case, ritual.

Michael Shepherd

# There Once Was A Poet Of Ireland, A Bore An' A Pest...

If a dactyl's reversed, it's then called by the name 'anapest',  
Used by Browning and Swinburne for horses and wolves in their haste;  
Though Matt Arnold of Rugby found sadness could be to its taste,  
It's the writers of limericks use it – alas – to excess...

Michael Shepherd

# There's Hope For Hypocrites...

Yes, there's hope for hypocrites –

hypocrite poets, who write  
from the goodness of their hearts  
of the good, the true, the beautiful;

out of the chaos of the well-intentioned  
and sometime messy life;

hypocrite readers, who turn  
to those same poets for reminders of  
the good, the true, the beautiful

out of the chaos of the well-intentioned  
and sometimes messy life;

(hypocrite editors, dare we add, who,  
knowing the good, the true, the beautiful,  
turn down our poems, because  
it's been said oft and better, long before...)

the blessing for all hypocrites  
is that they know better; and one day...

may match their actions to their words;  
words, well-intentioned, sometimes messy,  
written from the goodness of their heart;

and in the heart, as given timeless time,  
hypocrisy dissolves...

Michael Shepherd

# These Poems

Greet these poems as you would greet  
at your tent-flap a wise man come from far;

drink with him a cup of wine  
that tastes like the memory of roses;

then sit and eat with him as the evening falls  
by the flickering flames, under a canopy of desert stars,

remembering great men and great deeds;  
feeling your backbone tall with their memory;

recall lines of poetry which have crept into your heart  
like your faithful hunting-hound, sprawled with a long sigh  
beside the fire;

and look around at the glowing embers catching  
with their light, the shining eyes of your companions  
cross-legged in a circle,

rejoicing in their hearts at a fortune which is theirs  
so great that they can only sit in silence and become  
a stillness beyond time.

\*

Freely adapted from Ibn Qutayba's 9th-century book on literature.

Michael Shepherd

# Theses, Faeces, Syntheses

O the language of the thesis!  
O the octopus of Academe!

'As I argued in my previous book,  
'Some definitions of 'definition' in contemporary philosophy' –  
an argument which I hope to pursue  
in a following volume, (and I quote) :  
'to define what we mean by 'definition'  
we must first consider  
the nature of definition:  
can it be itself defined? Is  
its definition itself a retreat  
from what definition defines? ...'

and the wood of academic chairs  
creaking as a lecture ends,  
from which once the young sap rose  
like the hope of definition  
dries, decays and dessicates.

Michael Shepherd



# Things Encyclopaedias Don'T Tell You

Where do bogies go  
when you leave them be?  
Do they, Dr. Einstein, cling  
to the nostril wall until  
dessication overbalances the force  
of adhesion against gravity, and  
they fall on someone's floor?

How can one equate  
the working-out  
of natural law with  
a clean, scoured, functional nostril or  
the pleasure of finger food?

Michael Shepherd

# Thinks - Sphinx?

Yes but has anyone tested it lately?  
(Or Him. Or Her?)

Well, wouldn't you get fed up?  
You've sat there, haunched,  
for tens of thousands of years,  
all your friends have long ago gone  
to that place you could tell tourists about  
if they only asked

but no, they take photographs of you  
or pay over the odds for them,  
make silly rude comments  
about your missing nose,

concoct theories about the Pyramids,  
eat fast food, Nile style, which goes through fast,  
and you've waited all that time  
for even a half-decent question  
which could pass on the wisdom of ages,  
hit the Nile on the head,  
restore civilisation to its true stature,  
questions that didn't arise  
when the pyramids were being built  
since they reckoned  
they knew the answers

like, how did it all begin? or  
have you allowed for the precession of the Poles? or  
where do your builders go  
on the days they're not here with you?

Michael Shepherd

# Those Wild Pink Salmon

Now, this 'wild pink salmon' thing...

are they just wild about pink  
like that designer with the limp wrist

or wild like you wouldn't want  
to share an estuary with them

or wild that they're not so good  
at jumping up the waterfalls

or wild that they're pink  
when they'd like to be red  
and so, wild that the other salmon are red

is it some muted colour-snobbery  
like used to be in the Windies  
between chocolate and coffee

and possibly I don't know  
between Red Indians and Pink Indians  
whose mother got around a bit

though on the other hand  
it could be boring on the reservation  
being a Hiawatha brave or squaw  
10 to 5 each day for the tourists

envying the other Indians  
with a real job  
like standing outside a cigar store  
stained with nicotine  
or even inside

is it like the Monty Python sketch  
the pink salmon look up to the red salmon  
but look down on the tame salmon

but then, are wild and tame

really opposites anyway  
even if those are the correct terms individually

is it any consolation to wild pink salmon  
that we think  
they're supposed to be salmon-pink anyway  
so red salmon are the ones  
to be red-faced

I mean how wild is wild  
and how tame are farmed salmon  
if at all  
they could be wilder inside  
about being hemmed in  
when their wild brothers and sisters  
are having a wild time  
in the spawning grounds off Newfoundland  
(though salmon won't know it's called that)  
and so, excuse the phrase, see red?

and – the thought's just struck me  
like a slap around the gills  
with a wet fish –  
they probably don't  
read the label  
there's a message there  
for all of us in this  
colour-conscious age

Michael Shepherd

# Thought For Today

Today's Marathon Day here in London.  
An unpleasant image strikes me:  
suppose the journey to the Pearly Gates  
looks just like the TV coverage of the marathon?

Michael Shepherd

# Thoughts On World Poetry

To coin a metaphor:

It's like a Protestant  
wandering into a Catholic church  
and hearing someone just out of the confessional  
muttering 32 Hail Mary's as instructed  
huddled in the nearest pew,  
and thinking  
hey once is enough...

for some, a ceaseless act of worship;  
for some, a wake-up call;

the intention  
could be the same

Michael Shepherd

# Through A Glass Darkly

The Chinese lady optician, her upbeat manner  
coming over rather strangely in her pronunciation,  
peered deep into my eyes, though giving no sign  
of having found my soul there.

My roving mind suppressed something between  
a giggle and the heard sound  
of holy laughter – as of a group of nuns  
laughing at the teasing of Our Lord,  
or the cow-maidens laughing on the river-bank  
of cool clear mountain water, at  
the mischief of that boy Krishna...

and through my mind, scrolled the Book of Psalms –  
... I lift up mine eyes unto the hills...  
...O Lord, help me in my unbelief...  
...look upon me with Thy merciful eyes, O Lord...  
... and renew a right spirit within me...

now and in the time to come,  
to focus on infinity...

The Chinese lady optician,  
acting out inscrutable,  
turned and wrote down in some timeless book  
the record of my sins, visual, visible and invisible,  
as in a glass, darkly;  
but now, face to face,  
resumed her study of how my mind if not my soul  
has limited my vision.

Michael Shepherd

# Time, Perhaps

Time perhaps, for wonder –  
to look around in awe  
at how all that surrounds us  
has somehow come about..  
we who do not even know  
how to grow a fingernail...

time perhaps, for gratitude –  
for what we have already,  
forgetting for a moment, our desires...  
we who have forgotten  
whom or how to thank..

time perhaps, for praise –  
if not the Lawyer, praise the laws...  
if not the lover, praise the love...  
we who might become  
praiseworthy through our praise...

time perhaps, for imagination –  
to consider how things might be,  
for then they might become...  
we who have the world itself  
inside us, just as much as that  
great cosmos that's out there...

time perhaps, for simplicity –  
to pare life down to those things  
which give us greatest joy –  
and then, enjoy them all the more...  
we who love complexity  
when masquerading as the new...

time perhaps, for time –  
to live a measured calm  
of stillness, peace and rest  
and find the joy there all the time ...  
we who ceaselessly invent  
the labour-saving, and then find



ourselves a slave to these new toys...

time perhaps, to transcend time –  
and live a timely life  
of timeless joy; and know then,  
all that's not been mentioned here...  
we who have yet to know  
what human beings really are...

Michael Shepherd

## To A Fellow Poet, Rmw

didn't ask no explanations;  
list'nin' cuz youse an honest man;  
t'ain't the words but the sound behind 'em;  
so keep 'em goin', cuz i knows yer can...

Michael Shepherd

# To An Almost Unknown Poet As Of Now

Poetry and that's without quote marks  
poetry is the place for the big things  
and long may it be  
but that would be an inappropriate dialling tone right now;  
quiet sincere OK?

You  
regard the world with  
affection  
it's the first time I used that word in a poem  
and meant it.

Affection.

I hear the angels murmuring it among themselves.

Michael Shepherd

# To Be The Veda

Who am I?  
Who put me here?  
Why am I here?  
What should I do?

Who will tell me who I am?  
Who will tell me, who put me here?  
Who will tell me, why I'm here,  
and tell me then, what I should do? ..

Sometimes, I am all thankfulness  
for what keeps all of me alive;  
is there a greater one whom I may thank?

And sometimes, I'm alive with praise;  
Is there a greater one whom I may praise?

Sometimes, as thunder rolls and lightning strikes,  
earth quakes; seas foam,  
I am all fear; is there a one  
who'll tell me, the other, or the greater  
things that I should fear,  
and tell me what I need not fear?

From day to day, my thankfulness  
wells up for this; and then for that:  
the earth that yields me food,  
the rain that helps it grow,  
the sun and light that help it ripen,  
the air that I must breathe,  
the sounds that draw me to my fellow men:

so are there many such, whose mighty powers  
I should thank and praise,  
or is there only One?

Or are there many in the One  
whom I should thank and praise –  
and what then do these greater powers

know of each other; know of that One?

Sometimes, when all is silent, still,  
I seem to have a hint of whom I am;  
of why I'm here; what I should do;

then who will tell me the greater more  
of all the more I think I know?

Sometimes, when all is silent, still,  
I wish to spend my days deep in that place;  
but I must work; then should I trust  
some other man or woman, who will spend  
their days in thanking, praising, in my place?  
or can my work be also thanks and praise?  
who judges thanks and praise enough?

Sometimes, when all is silent, still,  
I feel a greatness in me, that  
joins me to all things in myself..  
who shall tell me more of this?

Sometimes, when all is silent, still,  
I seek for sounds, and words, and song,  
to measure all that this heart feels:  
oh, who will teach me greater words?

Is there a teacher, and a taught?  
Or is the teacher all around?  
Or is the teacher all within?

Oh, who will tell me whom I am,  
in words that sing as from myself?

\*

[An ongoing attempt to 'imagine myself' into the spirit of the Veda]

Michael Shepherd

# To Hn: A Nonsense Rhyme For A Troublous Time

bind your books  
in crocodile skin

and then thereout  
won't trouble therein

Michael Shepherd

# To Joyce And Blue Jays Everywhere

Thanks be to God  
or Darwin's theory,  
or perhaps both?  
that blue jays  
and all the birds that live in splendour and eternal peace  
on the pages of Audubon  
still, but some now only there... and  
who look through our windows  
at the TV screen,  
maybe sneak a look at the newspapers,

can't read - yet -  
or understand  
intellectual montage like Eisenstein  
and the jump-cut in film  
and are spared the question  
whether mankind is evolving

William Blake would put this better  
through his tears  
and faith

Michael Shepherd

# To Jrr Tolkien And Christopher

Do cats dream of lions,  
and shirts dream of irons?  
Do cats dream of leopards,  
and sheep dream of shepherds?

Michael Shepherd



# To Linda Smith

'I play all my country and western music  
backwards -

your lover  
returns,  
your dog  
comes back to life  
and you cease to be  
an alcoholic'

(Linda Smith, comedienne and humanist, died yesterday.)

Michael Shepherd

# To Mary Ruefle, Poet

and since you're an  
American Poet or  
a poet writing in English  
or however you might put this  
in a cv which you'll surely  
never need being unique  
and therefore beyond all  
job descriptions except poet

since you're, well, those things or  
that thing  
you may never have seen  
a kangaroo (and in a zoo  
they can't hop..)  
but if you do you'll recognise it  
when I say it - your mind  
is metaphorically, and no-one  
handles metaphors like you do may I say,  
like a kangaroo - huge hops  
off into the horizon of thought  
with what in marsupial body-language  
may be bounding, boundless  
joy

a kangaroo which might in the world  
of your poems which I can't hope  
to imitate but I'll have a go,  
be carrying a baby roo in its pouch with  
its head sticking out  
and a backward glance towards you  
who one day will return grown-up  
with a crumpled poem  
in its own pouch  
addressed to Mary Ruefle  
mentioning in passing  
immortality

Michael Shepherd

# To Sandra

As I walked in the sunlight  
and slowed at the pedestrian crossing  
a woman waiting there  
laughed

and I saw in her,  
pure joy

and a fine, quick, timeless  
vision of soul

and yes, God.

Michael Shepherd

# To That Future One

the brain a gray worm  
ceaselessly explores itself

and sometimes I think of all  
the poems yet to be written  
and which I'll never read

and marvel

Michael Shepherd

# To That Guy Towards The Back Of The Class, He'LI Know Who I Mean

Yes you,  
the one who's noisy when  
he's here which isn't so very often -  
you'll never believe it but  
I know you better than you'll ever know...

□

oh yes I do and  
maybe I could tell you but  
the one who I don't know is  
the you that stands in front of you,  
that writes your name, and not much else, that sits in class,  
that looks at me as if  
we were born into two different tribes  
sworn to enmity

sometime in your life  
someone told you you were nuffin  
maybe they didn't say it, just assumed it  
maybe they said it when they were feeling foul  
maybe they even said it when saying  
the very opposite but  
the way they said it meant  
they didn't quite believe it themselves because  
they felt themselves to be like that  
know what I'm sayin?

yes I know you better than you know  
I know it from that great great place,  
that great great space  
that's the same in you and me  
and maybe we'll get a chance

to talk about this some time  
maybe meet accidentally in MacD's  
you'll be embarrassed by the intimacy of that  
as if you'd been captured by the other tribe  
and you have to bribe your way out but

maybe we'll chat and I'll try  
to hint to you about that great great space  
which somehow doesn't get  
into the classroom... targets etc

that's if, I don't change schools first  
or give up teaching, it's a near thing; maybe  
we'll both be glad of the chat, it  
could be the start (but keep it quiet)  
of something new for you  
you'd better believe it; with your life;  
( 'bettuh bleevit')

so try to attend more often,  
know what I'm sayin?

Michael Shepherd

# To The One Who 'Ones'

Sometimes I wonder what it's like  
to be you - eagerly seeking out  
new poems of mine and of some others, too;  
triumphantly scoring them a 1,  
or if they're scored already 10,  
then, zap! it's down to 5.5;

or if it's already so enjoyed, it's scored two 10s,  
zap! got it down to 7.0...  
have a go at this one, while  
it's still unscored...  
the superscription calls it 'user rating' -  
how can you rate it when you've haven't 'used' it?  
just abused it? (You'd score it 0  
or -10 if they allowed it...)

what really saddens me is that  
you can't distinguish between  
a bad poem and a bad poem about goodness..  
so when you 1 my next poem, does that signify  
the narrowness of my mind, or of yours?  
Sometimes I wonder if you write  
poetry of your own; and whether  
your poetry improves, or worsens,  
as you demote on your own private scale,  
the poems of others...?  
Now that's a serious thought.

Michael Shepherd

# To The One Who Taught With Life

When I first looked  
so deep into your eyes

I remembered  
all that I knew

and had forgotten.

Now, your eyes are closed

but mine are open, and  
I look around to see

whose eyes meet mine.

Michael Shepherd



# Today A Windy Monday

Today a windy Monday,  
brisk, businesslike north wind,  
I would make a great altar  
and pile it high as heaven  
with washing straight off the line  
shirts like roly-poly hunchback  
astronauts like human kites  
a sharp flapping of hemmed edges  
the squawk of hens surprised  
laundry baskets full of the smell  
of Spring and freshness and new beginnings  
laundry baskets that smell as if  
a walk along the shores of love

all Your wind and air and water, and  
sunlight soap, soapy sunlight making  
iridescent bubbles in the washtub  
the squeak of the mangle,  
dripping into the sink  
stained heavenly with Dolly Blue  
the smell of love and motherhood  
the hot iron's steamy smell  
the starch, the sharp warm ironed piles  
ready for the cupboard shelves

and say, look everyone  
this is a woman's lifetime of unspoken love  
see it made of the holy elements themselves  
as on the first day of Creation  
that is ever a woman's life

men, worship this

Michael Shepherd

# Too Much Self Criticism Can Be Stifling

this poem just  
doesn't come off  
because

Michael Shepherd

# Trench Warfare Haiku

kick aside that rat as you charge  
that's busy on the face  
of your dead mate whom you've no time to bury

Michael Shepherd

# Truth Is Stranger Than Friction

The joy of truth is  
that it can be funnier,  
crazier,  
than fiction.

On September 16 the referee  
suspended a football match  
following complaints by the spectators  
that the players on both  
multicultural or should I say  
multiracial teams  
had been racially abusing each other  
with terms like 'black bastard'

a player corrected this, explaining  
that it wasn't racial abuse but  
'sledging' - to put off  
players from kicking penalties etc.:  
'Sure it was abuse, but there  
was no racism'

well that's alright then, after all  
it's a multi, er, cultural society  
and the tackling was clean and  
good sportsmanship sorta

Michael Shepherd

## Two Poets

You know what it's like  
- surely you do -  
you introduce one of your bestest friends  
to another bestest friend,  
hoping for something wonderful..

and they shake hands warmly,  
greet each other,  
then find nothing to say..

so you leave the room, hoping that  
they'll start by saying something about you,  
then find how much else they have in common;

if you come back, and they're talking so vigorously  
that they soon leave together, forgetting you...  
a little child in you may be sad a moment,  
but the grown-up will rejoice  
that great things may come of it...

but if you come back, and  
there's still a strained silence...  
and later, each of them implies  
they can't understand why you like  
that other one so much...

that's why I'm a little fearful  
of introducing Rilke and Rumi to each other...  
since they both live in a place  
where I'd like to walk too,  
and listen to them talking to each other..

but suppose they didn't get along,  
I don't think I could bear to hear  
why not...

All this in my head, chatting  
with my heart...  
and not the movement of an eyeball

to tell you this. You'll understand,  
I hope, now that I've mentioned it.  
There's love somewhere there.

Michael Shepherd

# UNICORN 15

Those to whom it has revealed itself  
- grazing in a grove of trees,  
a ray of morning sunlight  
lighting the dewdrops on the mossy grass;  
or galloping, white mane flying in the wind,  
over the high green hills;  
or briefly glimpsed, shining-eyed  
between the white-spumed waves –  
they bring back with them, the experience  
which always will be theirs;  
some place of inner peace  
to which they may refer all the events  
of life; so that, like some shaken bright kaleidoscope,  
all falls into its place.

Some never speak of this; some see no reason not to speak;  
and risk response: thus, some envious, as 'why not me? '  
some, just curious; some, eager to hear all,  
as if they always knew, or 'thought they guessed', that it exists...

Even spoken from the heart, words live a life that's perilous:  
some who are so fortunate as to catch it there  
in that sacred grove of trees, and on whom  
the unicorn bestows its glance, as eye to eye,  
speak of a softness, of a sweetness; some  
say, it looked into my inmost soul;  
some simply fall in love with their true peaceful self;  
some speak of being so at one with it,  
that all the world is ever one: so that,  
its glance bestowed on them, their every glance  
henceforward, sees that unity in everything.

some speak of it; some hold it in  
pure silence of the heart, and live it  
in themselves, as if  
they are its children in the world;  
their glance, as sparkling eye meets sparkling eye,  
will tell us all we need to know

that moment when we know  
that there is something which we know, have ever known,  
but knew not what it was until  
- like some glimpse of the unicorn,  
here, now, always; one glimpse, one glance,  
and its work done -  
we know we know

Michael Shepherd



## Unicorn 10

Did they already have the image of that creature  
grazing deep within their heart and mind  
before the day when it revealed itself, gentle, sweet and mild,  
living its life of glorious detachment,  
invulnerable, free as freedom lives forever, is itself?

Or did it reveal itself to those who needed  
the vision of itself, magnetic in its beauty;  
the reassurance that it's there, and  
may be loved; loved unconditionally?  
It's difficult to say which is the truth.

But those who've seen it, leave it with the memory  
that their lives are merely a battlefield,  
a place of examination, a ground for test -  
but that within, without, all this  
the unicorn lives within themselves; detached; serene; and  
shining; shining.

Michael Shepherd

# Unicorn 11

Where the unlimited, expanding, limiting itself as it expands,  
reaches where it can limit itself no further –  
there it is; there in its, our, world; there you may see it;  
where it could not be more beautiful  
and yet be seen; where it could have  
no other form, and still have form;  
where it is most itself.

And so, where we are most ourself,  
when we are most ourself, it's there;  
near; you may see it; you may not; near;  
you and it, so close; and where  
we are where all the stories tell –  
the gate, the door, the mirror, the key that calls the hand,  
the undergrowth pushed through, and there –  
in the clearing in the woods, it is;  
treading on the silent mossy ground,  
can white be so transparent?  
waiting for nothing and yet there;

where the limited meets the unlimited,  
where we know  
that whom we always knew we are,  
unlimited;

Unicorn.

Michael Shepherd

## Unicorn 12

where the unlimited meets the limited,  
and the unimagined meets the imagined;  
where the unseen meets the seen,  
and the eye meets the heart;

where the earth meets the seed,  
and the seed meets the root;  
where the root meets the earth;  
and the flower meets the air;

where the heart meets the thought,  
and the thought meets the sound;  
where the sound meets the word;  
and the word meets the voice;

where joy arises,  
and where sorrow ends;  
where love arises,  
and the world is one;

where magic lives,  
and miracles are law;  
where childhood lives  
and freedom is always now,

the unicorn is.

Michael Shepherd

## Unicorn 2

Whenever we're nearest to one in ourselves –  
that's when they're most likely to be seen:  
as we step out from the trees  
into the gently sunlit glade, moss under hoof and foot,  
it's there. And so, because the unicorn already in our mind  
is now prepared for this, it's not a shock, or palpitating heart,  
but like an old friend whom you've never met before.

Some, of course, have waited years  
and only want to touch, to register for future tales  
some special personal relationship –  
they're least likely to be given the chance;  
but even those, I'm told, who live to touch,  
in its so quiet presence, cease to want to touch.  
And if you did, the story goes, this animal would know  
your reasons – and might disappear; or yet, it might submit;  
as woven hangings show it; meek in Mary's lap.

Those who were so graced and speak of it  
say little. For when the unbelievable  
just happens, what is there to say  
in words that were not used thus yesterday?  
All that they can tell us is, that they and it,  
under its sweet and gentle understanding  
were so at one, that what was known, was known...

Michael Shepherd

## Unicorn 3

What was known, was known. They asked  
the artist who had sat all that bright morning, cool upon the hill,  
to draw the trees in front of him, as sunlight crept  
among the leaves, now here, now there,  
lighting, upon the moss, the dewdrops one by one  
sun-sipped; when the unicorn was, in a moment, there;  
there, detached, yet offered; they asked the artist how it was.

He said that as the sun moved round and caught the leaves,  
a love arose; so that when that creature was, so quietly, there,  
it was no different from the love.  
At first it stood quite still,  
as if it knew what made it easier for him;  
then later, walked around, sometimes its head raised so that the  
sunlight caught its horn; moved, so that the artist then might know  
what moved it. It was love.

Some asked eagerly: was it then as if the creature  
drew itself? The artist could not answer. That was not untrue; and yet,  
it was not quite like that. Rather, what was known, was known.  
Known gently; meekly; sweetly. It seems  
there is no other way for love.

Michael Shepherd

## Unicorn 4

What is known, is known – known gently,  
meekly, mildly, sweetly; that's the experience  
that men bring back who've seen that creature plain.  
But since the unicorn grazes in all our minds and hearts,  
each has his image. Poets love to write of that creature  
as they picture it; but what of those who met it plain  
in forest glade, upon the hills, or white amidst the waves?

It's said that, then, some poets put away their pens forever or awhile,  
despairing that their word-hoard holds no words  
that can describe those things invisible which  
that creature brings to the mind, when met;  
some can no longer give it even a name  
as if that very word can seem to falsify.

They're asked, was it, just, beautiful? – and hesitate,  
because what yesterday, was 'beautiful' is a different word  
today; that creature shows them that a word  
means what it does; today, 'beauty' has done more in them;  
it speaks a unity which is not static – can do all things  
as Helen's beauty, so we're told, could make a war from peace;  
so beauty can make peace from war – as poets prove.

And so, those who've seen it plain but wish  
to say no word that might be less than truth  
find that its subtle magic guides their pen  
so that they may write with that same ease  
with which that creature lives,  
write of any, and of all things.

And all who've seen it – who've seen it move  
within the utter stillness of itself  
as never before have they seen a creature move  
and hold that in themselves, wish, wordless, to return  
to be again in that creature's still shared self-presence;  
the wisest of them finally to find  
that it may graze forever in the poet's mind.



## Unicorn 5

To graze forever in the poet's heart; how could this,  
they asked, be possible? An image, yes;  
a memory; but could it really live its life within the mind,  
graze undisturbed, at ease, at home,  
and glance the grave, sweet meaning in its eyes,  
when there's so much of else that fills the world, the mind, outside?

Those who first saw it first, were content to be, just gaze,  
attention focussed as its heavenly horn marks head and mind,  
drinking in that other which themselves would be;  
but as its sightings grew, so various,  
the theorists sought to build an image  
around that which they had not seen,  
worshipping a space in which it was not yet;  
it must be questioned, says the ordered mind.  
Others who had not seen it wished  
to have some part, share in reflected glory; maybe learn.  
It's understandable. That, too, the creature understands.

But those who'd met it, in a forest glade,  
or, mane tossed by the wind, among the high clear hills,  
or proud-necked, white-toothed like a smile, clear-eyed,  
among the white-foamed waves – they in whose minds  
a space already was; a space, a peace, a stillness -  
knew, gracefully, that it grazed in its forever, lived  
within themselves;  
self-moved; self-stilled.

Michael Shepherd



## Unicorn 6

Self-moved; self-stilled; why then for us  
this noble creature takes the form of unicorn?

Part horse, with shaggy goatlike hooves,  
and lion's tail; and on heraldic shields  
its glorious spiralled horn so fitly crowned  
with liliated coronet, marking royal intelligence;  
proud in its humility and gentle in its strength,  
sometimes rearing up, and sometimes bowing low.  
Why then this form?

Forgotten, then, the ancient reasoning, or only  
part remembered: that the Creator gave to man  
dominion and tender care of all His creatures.  
All living things called animals, share living heart;  
Thus all with heart are in our close-knit care.

Man and horse  
the ancient working team; so agile in the battle,  
so bonded in a war of death and life; so faithfully  
untiring in the working, drawing, ploughing day;  
and in play, in tournament, so joyous,  
bonded to mankind; what wonder  
that this creature looks so nearly as a horse?

A lion's reminiscence, lordly in authority, there too;  
and goat, so footsure feeding on the crags; so when  
the kingdom of the beasts seeks to repay mankind,  
it's said their gratitude then takes this creature's form  
to be more ready recognised by man; leaving  
to those beasts more domesticated – and more consumed –  
who used to share even man's abode –  
the cows, the sheep – and, prophetically,  
the humblest, least complaining, beast of burden, ass,  
the honour of attendance there  
around the stabled birth of God as man...

When love and gratitude bonds man and creatures in his care  
- with fellow creatures of his own mankind -  
this creature, purest love, is seen to gently graze

as if it were forever there; self-moved; self-stilled.

Michael Shepherd

## Unicorn 7

This forest glade, mossy, silent underfoot,  
shaft of sunlight catching the quivering flight of woodland moths,  
tempts even the shyest, slender deer  
whose slightest nostril twitch, reveals a whole forest's map;  
the crackle of a single twig, a disappearing, graceful leap;  
yet even the deer graze undisturbed  
when in a thought's space, that creature's there;  
for not proximity but presence, is what they share;  
each, in peace, moves in the other's presence;  
this we know as peace.

and on the high hills where the air is ever on the move,  
the eagle, circling like the first navigator  
of the globe – yet seeing so much more –  
glances undisturbed; with knowledge, and love, too, that's beyond  
family, or prey, when that strange, familiar white creature  
with flowing mane, prances, canters, into sight; their presence shared  
so far apart; so near.

and in the foamy waves, the dolphins leap and sport  
around it, as that creature, open-mouthed as if in joy,  
shakes from its wet and glorious mane  
the salty drops of water, while the dolphins  
speak to it in a language beyond beauty's sound –

so this noble creature in its turn  
undisturbed by those to whom it shows itself  
beyond all perturbations of the world;  
detached, yet gives itself to all;

Orpheus, or unicorn, or Muse –  
to be led by such a creature, joyously,  
knowing nothing of the where or here or there  
but trust – this the poetry of the world.

Michael Shepherd

## Unicorn 9

For most of those who are graced to see it, the vision's enough –  
they bring humility, are still, drink in  
this creature, which for a space of time  
is in this world, and yet not of this world,  
who shows them who they are, and always were –  
so what is known, is known; they leave its presence  
as themselves.

but some find it's quite natural to speak,  
as one might bear a sacrifice in outstretched arms  
of all that is and is not of themselves.  
That glorious creature does not speak; but listens:  
listens with, as if, the one point of its horn which brings  
its ears to its eyes; gazes as it listens; a gentle, mild, sweet gaze;  
listens, gazes, with its whole wise, understanding presence;

and having spoken, or not spoken, all leave  
as themselves; knowing themselves to have  
the whole universe as their measure.

Michael Shepherd

# Unicorn 1

Those who've seen one, all give differing accounts;  
that's how it should be. No in-depth video. No coffee-table book.  
But the collected book of sightings –  
that's hairs on the back of the neck stuff.

One detail, though, they all agree– it came at just the right time;  
although they did not know it at the time;  
but time brought truth; as truth brought time.

The place they saw it– now that was surely a surprise;  
and so they wonder  
how their own hallowed place can not bring further sightings;  
forgetting that unicorns are not bound by the same space and time  
as we the spellbound are. Their space and time if we could see them  
would be like joy and sadness indistinguishable.

By night, they live as unicorns must live  
within this world; so that they may live among us  
while living free from us; this the law of magic  
which to them is natural; it's said they live at night  
by the light of their own horn, that glows like fireflies glow,  
light without fire; except that we cannot see that light.  
(Scientists may explain this; EM wavelengths, ultra-infra ...;  
all they, we, really need is taken care of...)

And then by day, they love the quiet places; for  
they do not seek us, or seek to show themselves;  
but we are drawn to seek their mystery.  
For mysteries are not mysteries unless they hide a truth.  
Forest glades; among the hills; white amidst the waves;  
wherever we are nearest to one in ourselves.

Michael Shepherd

## Unicorn 13

who does not wish, openly or secretly,  
to meet it, in some quiet place?  
even a secret image in the mind's dead index  
of those materialists who  
deny it a reality, calling it a  
'mythological creature' – as if  
the mind were not superior to flesh and earth?

this, the very reason for  
its longevity – who would not,  
were it material, have hunted it by now  
for a prince's ransom, its magic horn ground down, hunted to  
extinction – so that we would say  
'as dead as unicorn' and left  
the dodo forgotten and unmourned?  
and so, to be a myth is logical...

and thus, the unicorn lives, beyond  
some banal death at a hunter's hands;  
easy, peaceful in its own preserves,  
grazing in the pure air of our minds,  
free to remind us that we too are born free.

the secrets of creation  
hide in such unthought hills as paradox –  
we, yearning for a meeting  
in a place we know not where  
where in that still and silent place  
loud with silent joy,  
moving in ways beyond the movement seen,  
we meet it when the looking stops

and paradox on paradox,  
once met, we do not seek to meet and meet again –  
its tender single glance  
tells us for ever that it always lived  
inside ourselves; we ourselves  
that 'mythological creature',  
more real than our mirrored self,

grazing in the wooded groves of stillness,  
the mossy dells of silence; or,  
its wild mane wind-tossed,  
on the flying highest hills of freedom  
or bright-eyed, salt-browed, white  
between the spraying waves and curling surf:  
knowing ourselves to be, forever to have been:

unicorn

Michael Shepherd

## Unicorn 14

When you catch a glimpse of it,  
in the sunlit glade,  
among the high hills,  
among the white-crested waves,  
does it move?  
or is it unmoving,  
this graceful vision of it?

it seems unmoving, yet  
faster than the mind moves;  
ahead of all your senses;  
even roaming wild and joyful  
among the high hills,  
its white mane flying free,  
somehow it's still  
within its movement,  
within your stillness;

can you see the tracks of fish,  
or the airy passage of the birds?  
it's beyond movement, even beyond stillness;  
and yet, you love it,  
yearn for it, although it - because it  
runs faster than the mind of man.  
Is that its love?

Michael Shepherd



## Unicorn 8

In the deepening dusk of forest glade,  
in the mist of clouds rolling over the high hills,  
in the sea-fog rolling in at turn of tide,  
what feature of its form alerts us first  
that it's so present, now, and here?

That spiralled horn – why is it that we know  
that's where it should be seen,  
that place upon our forehead we can feel ourselves?

The unicorn within us knows –  
when attention spirals to a fine, fine point  
and thought is stilled; that's when  
our single-pointed horn calls presence to its purest form,  
its purest place, within ourself;  
ourself; unicorn.

Michael Shepherd

# Valedictory On A Failed Love-Affair

No sorrow  
Tomorrow

Keep grief  
Brief

Michael Shepherd

# Website, Spider Style

Do spiders think? or simply learn  
without a thought (well, lucky them)  
by observation, as great scientists?  
Does Nature do it all without a 'thought',  
the spider just some robot, programmed thus?

The spider which the other day  
built daring, acrobatic, gossamer bridge  
across the path a guy-lined full six feet  
so that to reach the gate, I had to genuflect  
as if in some most holy church's aisle,

That bridge of San Luis Rey, already doomed  
to break - the postman, paper boy, the milk -  
I watched while seated in the sun for hours;

and as I watched, grew humbler by the minute;  
myself the smaller in respect, the spider greater;  
my lunch was cooking; the spider awaited (hers?) :

and we grew closer, in some unknown place in mind.

Today, a small, great miracle  
of nature - who may be  
beyond miracles; or yet bound in a web of law:

Neatly - thoughtfully? -  
the web was now aligned  
along the hedge of neighbours and ourselves.

And I was humbled by knowing nothing  
worth a spider's web.

Michael Shepherd

# What Awaits

What awaits us after certain death,  
nor I nor you nor any here may know;

some may prefer to hold the unthinking state;  
knowing only, what shall be, shall be;

and yet, it may not harm to have a dream,  
a hope, a thought in purity;

why, it may even smoothe our latter days -  
not by some mental last narcotic drip,

but curled around the treasure of our heart;  
resting in our dearest, dearest love;

for some, it will be family:  
perhaps to know our parents as new friends;

to talk to them of all unspoken things  
we never thought to ask of them in life,

to throw aside the separateness of things;  
to love our selves in them as they loved us;

- or if it be that all was fear and hate,  
to learn a way to pass through that to love;

or, watch perhaps, in some angelic way  
over our children as they live their lives;

watch them in some wisdom quite uncritical,  
encompass all their life with eyes of love;

yes, those things would be good; and surely not  
what our Creator would not want for us?

So, noble-hearted philanthropes might wish  
above all else, to guard the institutions which

they built so generously from their rich and loving lives;  
to watch benignly as those institutions grow;

I have a passing fancy that, the relay race as run,  
some glorious gift to pass, might be to hand:

and to some soul unborn, now waiting there  
ready to run - reach out and smiling say,

here, take this I hold out in my hand -  
to you, a seeming torch, or jewel beyond price,

a flower, or keepsake of a life of love -  
take this, my treasure throughout all my life,

this is what I loved, and worked at, polished bright;  
this is the jewel of my life.. Do with it, what you will;

know that the joy is in the passing on;  
what else is there to offer, heart to heart?

\* \* \*

meanwhile, I'll treasure that high moment when  
all change became the strange; the eternal, natural.

Michael Shepherd

# Whingeing In The Wind

Suck and blow, suck and blow,  
like a pair of windy bellows -

why do you whingers wheeze on so -  
aren't poets supposed to love their fellows?

Michael Shepherd

# Whodunnit?

Providence? It's 'What the Butler Saw' -  
and ever sees, and ever shall have seen:  
the One who knows what's needed long before,  
and sees that it's delivered at the scene;

prepares it for the feast of human life;  
presents it in due style at this repast;  
then, in the festive moment, stands aloof,  
invisible to him who plays the host;

sees that new dishes come, and plates removed  
- fleet opportunities that come and go;  
unseen- unless His presence sought and proved;  
unspeaking, silent - unless spoken to.

Whodunnit? why, the butler, since you ask,  
named Providence: God's world, and Word, and task.

Michael Shepherd

# Why I Hate Poemhunter's Googly Ads

Emoticon, emoticon...

(which syllable to put the accent on?)

nasty jumpy upandown thingies

I'll like to hit you out of court with a boing..., like Martina Hinghis

and as for Fart Button,

what sort of a site is this to have that crudely put on?

Michael Shepherd



# Wimbledon's Unsung Hero

You've watched my work in your millions  
every year without fail, as  
I'm on the screen so frequently;

and yet few know my face;  
that's how I'd like it:  
do your job, go watch the game...

there's some doubt whether I do this  
just for love; or whether money  
changes hands in some offshore account;  
or indeed, whether I'm a conspiracy  
involving the better-known;

the less known, the better, is what I say;  
who wants the dread words 'product placement'  
bandied around this hallowed turf..

but yes, you've guessed it:  
I'm the guy you never see  
who turns the labels on the Robinson's bottles  
(once of barley-water fame, in the days  
before 'probiotic liquid supplements')  
to face the TV camera..

my service never faults.

Michael Shepherd

# Words Worth

'His little, nameless, unremembered acts  
of kindness and of love...': so Wordsworth sings;  
and if I may a word-play thus extract:  
HIS acts and words are worth remembering...

Michael Shepherd

# Worldwide Web Of Mind

The spider with which, with whom,  
I share the sunshine of these late summer days  
and the front garden – though in truth,  
the silver filigree denies me two-thirds of it,  
so broad the span of this ambitious engineer –

the spider which or who has grown so large  
that its claws are some rapacious hawk in miniature,  
almost scary in their taloned, threatening curve,  
and which yesterday sat immobile in the centre of its web  
either sleeping, or awaiting, or perhaps both,

is not there today; and I recall that yesterday  
it had a silvery bag attached to it, which now I guess  
could be some exquisite womb worn like a jewelled pride  
which needs no protection..the web's undamaged  
so surely no marauding bird has pecked the spider  
from the undamaged centre of this web?

Where has the spider chosen, for its special day,  
Its birthing place, its private ward –  
and does it have its huge emotions in miniature,  
its pride, its special love, around that tiny thing?  
There is no clue; the guy-ropes of its web are silent.  
Will I see it in the next few days  
teaching its baby all its circus tricks,  
abseil, swing, launch in the wind to far-off unknown lands?

Or is it true that, having borne a little brood,  
this creature, so magnificent,  
gives its life to them, to carry on the silken line?  
does it know that sacrifice it makes  
which is as noble as that of any man?  
and will its brood also carry in their blood  
a memory, inherited, that there,  
across the front garden, six feet from East to West,  
that silken line their mother made -  
their only inheritance from her, apart from life itself,  
awaits their darning needle?

I inspect carefully the web, as one might inspect  
and read the menu for some blind lunching friend;  
amused a little, embarrassed a little, solemn a little,  
as the Creation's relative dimensions  
shrink, expand, draw me into the web of universal mind;  
a filigree humility; a life not owned but shared.

Michael Shepherd

## Write Yours Now

The 'Journal of Death Studies' for April 2004  
(maybe you read it? It's in the  
hospital library, top shelf  
just out of wheelchair reach,  
on the shelf labelled 'Reference')  
observed that

nonfiction writers tend to die, factually, at sixty-eight;  
novelists tie it all up at sixty-six;  
playwrights lower the curtain at sixty-three,  
and poets close their stanzas at sixty-two.  
Well, thanks..

six years - looking on the bright side -  
for your favourite biographer to write you up;  
four years for novelists to borrow  
your untidy life and win the Booker Prize;  
a year for playwrights to emulate  
the bitter dialogue of your later,  
less romantic household years  
with less fear of being sued.

Those whom the gods love, die young,  
said the optimistic poet  
shortly before he died.

for PoHo, who gave me the damn book with the reference in.  
And yes, I wondered too..

Michael Shepherd

# Yogi Post-It To William Carlos Williams

Thanks for leaving one...

I can only say,  
that in the passing moment  
the cold perfection of that plum  
reflected my perfection  
reflecting all perfection

and the beauty of that moment  
was but my own beauty  
which must be, is, the beauty of the One

so I hope the remainder  
were as perfect, beautiful  
for you

so why not  
write a poem about this?

Michael Shepherd

# You Can Read Me Like A Book

You can't write  
much out of spite

but if you make nice you  
may find that poetry  
can surprise you

and write itself  
onto the shelf

and you'll be proud  
to be read aloud

love has a way  
to win the day

Michael Shepherd

## You Saw It Here First...

Today the front page top spot in my upmarket morning paper elbows aside war, crime, politics, famine, election bribes with a manicured hand on an elegant arm, to bring you the ultimate guide to your seduction scene or marriage-freshener - the famous ball-player's plump chicken of a girlfriend presented by Vogue, no less. Here is your Complete Jane Austen Condensed Edition, the Jilly Cooper Omnibus, the Credo from the Vatican of fashion. This is the stuff that dreams are made on.

You'll need a chaise-longue to drape yourself on; and here it's day-dress - of a sort; expensively revealing enough to press all the buttons, but informal enough to be ripped off; thus the zipped skirt, open just above the panty-line, clearly awaits His pull.

The material of the blouse (I'm told it's silk-crepe) clings as if it were but barely there; it's gathered slightly between the breasts, just where (follow the dotted line) He is invited to rip it. Or there's a loose tie below as well; some men work upwards; some work down. It's good to be prepared for that dark stranger with as yet unknown preferences. A spotted neckerchief enhances the area between neck and breast, suggesting perhaps a modest withdrawal from full-on take-me-now; (though don't knot it; it could ruin the moment) : and an arm draped languorously over the head makes your armpits charmpits, as the ads used to say, though cramp would not be helpful, so the timing's crucial.

Ah yes the timing. The chaise-longue, it would appear, is conveniently situated in the front hall, with its old and plastered wall, just showing its age, to offset fleshly beauty; a reminder of say, Blenheim, where in Her Grace's diary those immortal words, 'His Grace favoured me in his boots...' Imagine if you will - the clip of hasty hooves on gravel; He, hot and hormoned fresh from battle, or chasing fox, or polo-field, the smell of horse that stirs Her Grace's loins...



the timing's all; now in a shutter's click...

And if  
you haven't thrown the morning paper aside in  
the passion of the moment, there's  
a chiller on Page Three.

Michael Shepherd

# Your Footprints

You left your footprints across my life

I hate to see your photographs:  
passing history impossibly frozen,  
demanding out-of-date thoughts.

You left your footprints on my life

I hate it when people talk of you:  
as if they were asking for my blood  
to warm their own false memories.

You left your footprints through my life

I hate it when I find a letter from you:  
I read a richness and a loss in them  
and am torn apart by myself

You left your footprints in my life

Footprints claim nothing, offer nothing;  
they do not ask to be preserved, or to be erased;  
they are clean, yet they are there;  
where they lead, I have yet to find

You left your footprints across my life

Michael Shepherd

# Zen Haiku

japanese dove on tree

high coo

Michael Shepherd