

*Ship of Fools**for my fellow poets*

Of how our nation lost its appetite
 for music, learning, culture, I must write
 condemning all the loutish bourgeoisie
 who drowned our flower of poets in the sea
 and, showing no remorse, claimed boys and girls
 slept safer now that certain eyes were pearls.
 To help investigate this strange offence,
 its criminals and causes, I'll condense
 our long campaign above- and Underground
 which made the Orphic lute once more resound:
 so Pluto heard that song; and, rueful, he
 submitted and released Eurydice.

But when war came, as come it always must,
 we hurried in *vers libre* to show disgust
 (for rhymes take slightly longer to compose
 than free verse or, in rivals, chopped-up prose)
 and tell the world that violence won't pay;
 inspired, the leaders stopped no guns, but they—
 confessing that we'd caught the public's mood—
 declared how sensitive we were, and shrewd.
 We were adored: though no one bought our stuff
 or came to hear us read, it was enough
 to triumph in the high regard of those
 who saw us dressed in emperors' new clothes
 and knowing they should disbelieve their eyes
 applauded with the tasteful and the wise.
 Small wonder that the nation should discuss

how best they might exalt our genius,
and after hot debates across the land
reveal by proclamation what they planned:
“Bards, Poets, Makers, you who never reach
the right-hand margin, know how much you each
deserve reward. This golden age of yours
has heaped distinction on our narrow shores
and well you merit such unending praise.
But yet you are obliged to fill your days
with festivals, friends’ launches, sex and booze
and have no time to muse upon the Muse
(or so those few believe who read your verse);
we now propose to free you from that curse
and have prepared, at serious expense,
because your powers are like the sea—intense,
tempestuous and bold—the Royal Yacht
with gifts so lavish you’d suspect a plot
to stop you ever wanting to return!
Please, take your time; the cost is no concern”.

It was a carnival, with party-hats,
masks, music, fancy dress, clowns, acrobats,
and smiles on every face. The reason why:
to see us off, to cheer and wave goodbye.
We asked for silence, and explained that we’d
brought, by way of thanks, some poems to read,
but just as we began, a band cut in
and nobody could hear above the din.
And so we sailed away, stunned that our fame
should stimulate this boisterous acclaim.

Imagine, if you can, how it must be
to live among such intellects at sea
without the limits of a normal mind.
Knowledge was our drug; later, we’d unwind
by dashing off short lyrics with a drink
of something spirited to help us think.
One small clique, homesick, managed to devise

a clever scheme where each received a prize
by taking it in turns to win and judge.
It seemed a bit cold-hearted to begrudge
their innocent pursuits, but soon there came
a group of hecklers who denounced the game
as tacky, crooked, shameful and inbred
and pointed out they should have played instead.
The rest of us had serious concerns:
should poems sit around like well-wrought urns
or socially engage, redress, offend?
For hours we'd argue, then, exhausted, end
with *bon mots* which united everyone:
however weighty, POEMS MUST BE FUN!!!

The months sailed by. One night we reminisced
of all the homely luxuries we missed:
percipient reviews, Arts Council cheques,
the favours of the appropriate sex—
offerings to the mystery of our art.
The time had come, we understood, to chart
a course through colder seas, and sacrifice
indulgence for a better paradise
of honour and prestige. We were at most
a dozen miles from that inviting coast
when on the radio an anxious voice
asked our intent. "We've made", we said, "the choice
to come home quickly for our nation's sake.
There's always only so much one can take
of temperance; how deeply you must long
to be aroused by our impassioned song.
We've cheered each other's work, inventing blurbs
of lofty adjectives and thrusting verbs,
but all this affluence begins to cloy
without a public here to overjoy.
We're not the sort who'd usually complain
of hot-tubs, hampers, caviar, champagne—
but our abiding duty is to please:
the adulation of our devotees

still pulls us like a magnet back to port.
You won't be disappointed, as we've brought
bookfuls of new verse, sinewy, first-rate—
our most profound, reflective work to date”.

“A shame”, the voice replied, “it's come to this.
We wanted to avoid unpleasantness,
despite your need that people should admire
those puerile word-games. They'd begun to tire
long before your hint of Odes to Neptune.
We hinted you should come back no time soon;
but here you are, obtuse, so we must bend
our consciences in order to defend
the greater good. Let's drop this masquerade:
we *pity* you, for you were born not made
(it's obvious hard work can't be to blame).
The likely culprit, our researchers claim,
lurks in your DNA: we plan to screen
in utero to find the mutant gene
which causes suffering throughout these shores
by turning the afflicted into bores”.

“You'll argue we need poems to survive.
We must admit that some poor souls derive
a sallow pleasure from the sounds words make
and say they feel its absence like toothache
(the worst convulse, groan, vomit and emote).
At last we've found the perfect antidote:
now they, when that curious urge defeats
their continence, read Shakespeare, Milton, Keats—
the real thing, not your self-important clack.
The harsh truth is, we won't allow you back.
We were so hoping the affinity
between your chronic ailment and the sea—
because the sea's disordered, witless, proud,
unlistening, incessant, windy, loud,
vindictive, riotous, cold, unrefined
and self-absorbed—might make you of a mind

to live in oceanic opulence.
We're sorry that you haven't got the sense".

A sigh, and then the radio went dead. We all got drunk and stumbled into bed, lamenting so-called cultures who demean the richest crop of poets ever seen—when suddenly a crash, fire everywhere, and poets screaming in their underwear, “They’re sinking us, the bastards! Every man and woman for him- or her- self!” I ran aflame, and falling, plunged towards the night. The rest is silence—

that is, 'til the light
chiselled my eyelids open and I saw
the tide receding swiftly down the shore.
Sweet mother sea, protectress of the frail,
you showed me mercy so I might prevail
against the monstrous killers of my friends!
Already thinking how to make amends
I wept some briny tears into the brine
and swore aloud that vengeance would be mine:
I will repay, and drag their names through hell
in sonnet, haiku, rondeau, villanelle.
Hear me, you guilty sleepers, wake and hear!
My savage verse will teach you how to fear
the wrath of poets: blessed are the meek
for politicians tremble when we speak.

The Wake

The hills rise blackly,
charred tree by tree.

Where no squirrel forages
or bird nests, where

no leaf absorbs
the noon light,

the silence refuses
peace to the traveller,

who feels at once
guilty to pass and

guilty to pause.