

## Contemporary Poets and Utopia

To launch the May 2016 season and the May Bristol800 Weekender – two days debating the practical aspects of creating utopia – the Festival of Ideas commissioned 15 leading poets to each write a new poem on the utopian theme. You can read them here along with the introduction to the event by David Olusoga. Some were revised after the event. Copyright of the poems is held by the individual poet and no work may be reproduced without prior permission.

### David Olusoga

Given that we now have a mayor from the African diaspora, and that this city has incredibly important – and tragic – links to that continent I thought I'd talk about utopias on that continent - one that few people think of as utopian today.

The attempt to create an African Utopia was not just theorised it was actually attempted, though it is largely forgotten today.

I only have five minutes so I will rush through.

From Thomas more onwards utopia have been defined in part by exclusivity. Part of what makes a utopia is the people who are there with you - Moore imagined daily lectures from nice clever people. But a utopia also depends on the people who are not there.

Think about the word that we often attached to our modern temporary utopias - the Beach resort, the expensive restaurant or the spa – we describe them as 'exclusive'. The root of that word 'exclusive' is the word exclude. What makes something exclusive is the exclusion of others.

If we imagine a utopia is some sort of permanent beach resort, in which good people do good things in a good environment, then the exclusion of the bad people, or unwanted, marginalised people – the poor, the criminally minded, those deemed inferior, their exclusion seems essential.

But there has long been a strand of utopian thinking specially designed for the unwanted. Utopia of betterment - in which the unwanted were to be remade. This is sort of utopia that people imagined creating in Africa – and that was due to a crisis.

So here's the history

In the last years of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Britain suddenly had a real and pressing problem. Thousands of former slaves who had fought for Britain in the American revolutionary War, and been evacuated afterwards, had been dumped on the streets of London. They were poor, destitute and by 1786 starving and freezing to death.

Public opinion was shocked at how they were being treated and a scheme emerged to send them back to Africa- although very few of them had ever set foot on Africa. This was not simply to get rid of them – this is the 18<sup>th</sup> Century – age of reason and new morality. The idea was far more imaginative and utopian.

They were to go 'back' to Africa – these former slaves - and there create perfect utopian society based upon what the man behind the scheme - an English idealists, Abolitionists and religious fanatic called Granville Sharpe - imagined was the perfect systems of government.

The social structure that Sharp proposed for the black settlers was based upon his own interpretation the 'Frankpledge', a long defunct Anglo-Saxon communal social structure that had existed in England and Denmark in the early Middle Ages.

What he called The Province of Freedom was actually created – it did come into being. The settlers were sent to in what is now the nation of Sierra Leone. The government paid huge sums to make it happen and the royal navy carried the 500 settlers who signed up.

There they were to be forged into a society in which each household was responsible collectively for order and justice. Citizens were organised into groups of households, each 10 persons strong and were bound to one another and obliged to, '*the protection and preservation of their common freedom.*' There was to be a '*publick Exchequer*' who was to administer the economy of the settlement and all unoccupied land was to be common land.

Overlaid onto this social structure was a regime of ceaseless prayer and Christian worship. To ensure the settlement was the true realisation of this sacred mission, Granville Sharp provided the settlers with a book, which he had entitled, *A Short Sketch of Temporary Regulations (until better shall be proposed) for the Intended Settlement on the Grain Coast of Africa, near Sierra Leona*'. At 226 pages it was the longest short sketch in history.

Everything was to be steeped in the traditions of English Common Law. There was much in Sharp's *Temporary Regulations* that was commendable; this, after all, was a blueprint for self-rule and equality drafted at a time when millions of Africans in the New World occupied a chattel status akin to that of livestock.

However that settlement had itself been established just 20 miles from a slave trading fortress that sat in a river that was one of the super highways of the slave trade. The settlers in this utopia were able to stand on their allotted plots of land, within the *Province of Freedom*, and watch slave ships slip up and down the Sierra Leone River, carrying trade goods upstream to the chiefs and traders inland, and returning with hundreds of fellow Africans, chained and terrified, on their lower decks.

Yet on their little peninsular the settlers - a few hundred refugees from British slavery in North America - were tasked with recreate the social structures of Northern Europe in the Middle Ages.

There is almost no trace of them left today. No one is even exactly sure where their settlement was, they were obliterated by disease and the climate. Yet that is not the end of the story. A new settlement was created for freed slaves – called Freetown – and that is still there – the capital of Sierra Leone – that has just emerged from the Ebola epidemic.

### **Fleur Adcock**

Utopia strikes me as one of those stretchy, slithery concepts you can interpret however you wish. I tend to see it as an aspiration, rather than an achieved condition.

My poem is about someone who spent her life battling for a just society: Ellen Wilkinson, 'Red Ellen', Labour MP for Jarrow and finally Minister of Education in the Attlee government of 1945. She died in office in 1947, aged 56, worn out.

In 1936 she led the Jarrow Crusade – the march of unemployed men from Jarrow to London; she was not its instigator, but she was its figurehead and she put all her passionate energy into it.

It didn't work, of course, but such is the nature of crusades for utopia.

## The March

### *The Baths Hall*

Ellen Wilkinson, in the foam bath at Barnsley,  
sees only the road – which, at the moment,  
is all I can see myself, being uncertain  
as to what exactly the women's foam bath was,

except that she had it all to herself  
while two hundred aching men from Jarrow  
wallowed and soothed their feet in the men's pool,  
also specially heated for their arrival –

the road from Wakefield to Barnsley, that is:  
nearly ten miles of it, and she walking in front  
until they arrived at Barnsley Town Hall  
for a meal of hot potato pie, and the Mayor proclaiming

'Everything that Barnsley can do for you will be done'.  
But before too long Ellen's puny shoulders  
emerge from the foam, anadyomene.  
She may have been a legend; she was not a myth.

### *Ellen and the Bishops*

A two-faced lot, in her experience.  
Leicester and his wife were hospitable,  
but he was low down in the hierarchy.  
Jarrow, that 'saintly man', had blessed the march

as it set out but then had to recant  
and call it 'undesirable'. He'd been  
got at by Durham, who wrote to *The Times*  
of 'revolutionary mob pressure'.

'When the class struggle comes to the surface,'  
said Ellen, 'progress is a thin veneer.'  
Just as well she wasn't there in person,  
to contaminate Durham cathedral

and waken the misogynistic bones  
of St Cuthbert behind the high altar  
to a tantrum. A campaigning woman!  
He might have kicked the lid right off his tomb.

### *The Mascot*

Then there was the dog: a labrador, they thought,  
or a mongrel, or, someone said, a terrier  
(does that look like a terrier to you?)

But certainly a gift to the reporters.

Paddy, its name was, or Jarrow – a stray  
that tagged on to the march; or it was called Peter  
and belonged to a woman in Hebburn.  
Once it nearly pulled Ellen off her feet.

Oh, they liked that, the journalists:  
petite Miss Wilkinson, trying to keep up,  
tittuping along on her little tootsies,  
taking three steps to every stride of the men,

hanging on grimly to the mascot's leash  
as they formed up to march into a town.  
A labrador will do for the sculpture  
posterity is going to erect.

### **Dean Atta**

#### It Can Be Found in a Cup of Tea

Mother has hers with soy  
I have mine with almond  
I have given up soy milk  
I enjoy giving things up  
I take mine to my bedroom  
Though we are in separate rooms  
We are both drinking tea  
This is utopia to me.

He sent a soiled jockstrap  
My name and address capital letters  
On the brown envelope  
A single pubic hair caught  
In the elastic of the waistband  
I text him two of the 32  
Pictures I take wearing it  
This is utopia to me.

There is a day in my calendar  
With his name on it  
Just this makes me smile  
Depression is not invited  
I imagine a day without it  
Just being able to imagine  
This is utopia to me.

Sitting on a dick  
Wanting him  
Not feeling ashamed  
Not in love but pleased

To be here, to be gay  
In touch with my desire  
This is utopia to me.

James Blake sings on repeat  
We need a forest fire  
I think of Amy, long distance  
Friendship is far easier  
Than long distance romance  
I have given up on romance  
I am in love with my friends  
This is utopia to me.

I am resting in child's pose  
In yoga class  
I almost didn't make it  
Out of bed this morning  
It may look like surrender  
It may look like a prayer  
It is a small miracle  
This is utopia to me.

My niece asleep in my arms  
My sister and her partner  
Upstairs in her bedroom  
Packing, preparing to nest  
They have their own home  
To move into. I feel proud of her  
And enamoured by it all  
This is utopia to me.

The people I have never met  
And have never heard of me  
Have no idea I even exist  
These are my favourite people  
I cannot disappoint them  
There are so many of them  
Expecting nothing from me  
This is utopia to me.

The ten-day silent meditation  
Retreat I went to after Toby  
And Buddy recommended it  
No contact with the outside  
And no talking to each other  
Not looking for love  
Or recognition from anyone  
This is utopia to me.

Sitting with my grandfather  
In front of the house at night

A pleasant silence around us  
Warm as Larnaca's night air  
Whenever we sit like this  
In silence, it doesn't matter  
That I gave up on Greek class  
This is utopia to me.

Utopia from the Greek  
Ou-topos meaning 'no place'  
Or 'nowhere'. All imaginary  
Utopias are possible  
But giving up on the fantasy  
Of another life or self  
Finding peace in the reality  
This is utopia to me.

### **Helen Dunmore**

Utopia may be nearer than we think. Inside a large blue and yellow retail shed close to the M32, there is a doorway to the IKEA one-bedroom model apartment. All we have to do is step through it...

#### Nightfall in the IKEA Kitchen

Nightfall in the IKEA kitchen.  
Even though the lights are left on  
I feel the push of the wind's deconstruction  
Take the hull of the shed by storm.

Creak and strain of test and fault-finding  
But here in the glow I am alone  
Expected and consoled. Here is the notice board  
Riddled with reminders and invitations,

Here are picture ledges and high cabinets  
Kitchen trolley, drying racks  
A sly shoe cabinet, fabric pocket-ties:  
A life so sweetly cupboarded

I barely believe it is mine. Open  
And another light comes on.  
Here is the place where I begin again  
As a twenty-three year old Finn

Taking the keys of her first home.  
I use space well here. I waste nothing.  
The floor clock has shelves, the bed lifts up  
And if I yield and sleep

I will become part of the storage system  
Harbouring dreams and heat.  
Everything is a little below scale

And therefore ample. Stuva, Dröma

Expedit, Tromsø, Isfjorden ...  
I rock in the peace of their names  
Even as I mispronounce them  
For this is nightfall in the one-bedroom

Model apartment's kitchen  
When everyone has gone home  
And there is nothing left  
But the Marketplace itself.

And say a child is born, no problem.  
With a simple room-divider  
I can create not only child storage  
But also a home office

From which I will provide for us both.  
Look, here is his football on the floor  
And here a shelf where it may be stored.  
His whole life is in these drawers.

Call him Billy and see him run.  
When he grows up and moves out  
Just take down the partition  
To have, at last, my own space again.

Ten thousand times the wind has pushed the doors  
But they have not opened yet.  
Those cupboards. Stockholm. Yes, that green  
Nature can never quite get.

### **Anna Houghton**

Initially, I struggled with this theme. There were lots of guides on how to find Utopia from various authorities, but the problem was that these guides seemed to always be based on the idea, ingrained in the etymology of Moore's term, that the 'good place' was 'no place' here. Utopia was always somewhere other, somewhere unreachable, perhaps graspable, but firmly not where we are.

I recently saw the NASA speculative space tourism posters, which I'd recommend if you haven't seen them. One poster shows two astronauts sitting on a log admiring a view of mountains and a lake. Underneath it reads: 'Earth, Your Oasis In Space.'

I love this reminder - from imagined space travellers of the future - that our Earth is paradise. Often we get too distracted by the narratives of our daily lives; too fixated on the places we think we need to get to, that we forget how amazing where we are right now is.

Our obsessions with Utopias are destroying the good place we already have here. With species disappearing and habitats shrinking, this poem is a reminder to us all to look up from our guidebooks and see the wonder around us clearly. Before it is too late.

## How to know the place

It is a place,  
sometimes known -  
and then not.

One, which as soon  
as it exists -  
is forgot.

There are two words for most states.  
When does solitude become loneliness?  
When does full become crowded?  
Busy become hurried?  
Mature become old?

You call it no place here,  
yet here you know a place  
of hummingbirds, jaguars,  
of coral reefs, cloud forests and glaciers.  
Of northern lights and southern jazz.  
Where the seas hold starfish  
and glittering luminescence.  
Where lovers dance under city lights  
and kiss on streets at night.

You say it is not here yet,  
yet here you know a place  
where rain has been made  
pure enough to drink.  
Ocean in a cup, a bath, a sink.  
Where you've grown lives inside your bellies.  
Swam on your backs in ocean tides.  
Where you have seen a sun fall,  
and a moon rise.

A place that is not map flat,  
but full of chance and contour,  
Caves without end,  
Oceans to explore,  
A sky that extends,  
Further than it's possible to comprehend.

Open your eyes.  
Forget the vicissitudes of your daily lives  
Stop thinking you know it all already.  
Learn to see the wonder clearly.  
And moment by moment,

you'll find



you'll know the place.  
Exist within it.  
Then be forgot.

### **Matthew Hollis**

#### The Island

Some other day I will reach our only island.  
Some day not today, when the ferry  
won't take me into rain, and I've no child  
to drown. That day, on a falling swell,  
I will cross the Burn at Gun Hill, some day  
not today. Not for me the Plover Marsh,  
the Long Hills over Cockle Bight.  
No brink beyond the ternery.  
Some other day, I will reach Far Point,  
where the wind sweeps up at the old wreck,  
and the sea swings for all that is enemy,  
like someone lost to a ball of bees.

### **Sarah Howe**

This poem is stitched together from language found in two sources: Poems by Mao Zedong (trans. [Open Source Socialist Publishing](#), 2008) and the Chinese viral pop sensation 'My Skating Shoes' by Pang Mailang (trans. [ChinaSmack](#), 2014). The poem's title comes from Mao's 'Little Red Book'. Often indicating the tune to which they should be sung, Mao's poems are songs for the march to Communist Utopia, but composed in an archaic, Classical Chinese vein that sits oddly with their political radicalism. The well-known translator from Chinese, Arthur Waley, once described them as 'not as bad as Hitler's paintings, but not as good as Churchill's'. Pang's 2014 song, 'My Skating Shoes', tells the tale of one young man's quest for the perfect pair of specialty trainers. Despite its frequently out-of-tune vocals and low budget video, the song proliferated on the Chinese internet, becoming a sort of anthem for Chinese youth drawn to the 'bright lights'. One of the contemporary results of capitalism 'with Chinese characteristics' are the waves of vulnerable, migrant workers moving from city to city in search of opportunity. Something about Pang's song seemed to capture that life's mix of aspiration and despair. In this anniversary year, marking fifty years since the start of the Cultural Revolution, I wanted to write a poem that would juxtapose these two very different versions of the 'Chinese Dream.'

#### If you don't hit it, it won't fall

Young we were, schoolmates, at life's  
full flowering. Do not say

the waters of Kunming Lake  
are too shallow, rolling back

the enemy like a mat.  
My mother asked, Why are you

so upset? I told her I  
fancied a pair of skating

shoes. The ants on the locust  
tree assume a great-nation

swagger. Away with all pests!  
Sparrow replies, Look, the world

is being turned upside down.  
A pair of skating shoes will

shore up the falling heaven.  
O, I want to flit away

to a jewelled palace: beef-filled  
goulash, potatoes piping

hot. There'll be plenty to eat.  
I've searched every street and still

can't find them. The world rolls on.  
Time presses. I felt a force

moving my feet. People here  
call it the city of lights –

the universe is glowing  
red. Where are we bound? Some things

I've already forgotten.  
I remember how gunfire

licks at the heavens, awesome  
for dancing. Stop your windy  
nonsense! Even now the red  
flag of revolution swells

with the skateboard shoes I want.  
Wild bears never daunt the brave.

She said one day I will find  
them. She said only heroes

can quell tigers and leopards.  
She said time will tell. Just as

I was about to give up  
I saw a specialty store:

nothing is hard in this world  
if you dare to scale the heights.

Plum blossom welcomes my new  
skate shoes, so fashionable

under the bright autumn moon.  
I tell myself this is not

a dream. Six hundred million  
people rub it on this smooth

dancefloor. With my skateboard shoes  
I'm not afraid of the night.

### **Nick Laird**

I was thinking about utopia as a place of refuge, as a place of the imagination - and NYC has served as the place where generations of people - particularly Irish people, including my own progenitors - emigrated to. It was never a shining city on a hill, though, like Boston was. It wasn't started by fanatics or evangelists. It began as a trading post for furs, and in a way that's what feeds into it, it seems to me, its welcoming nature. However, any society predicated on money will, by its very nature, exclude. New York doesn't matter where you're from, so long as you've cash in your pocket.

### New York Elasticity

All of the grazing animals stare  
from deep pools of distrust,  
and that Latino pre-op passing

in the leather skirt  
lopes fast through the grass  
haze the boys on the stoop

make – Blackberry Kush, is it,  
or Northern Lights  
or Girl Scout Cookies.

\*

When the hand is red,  
some of the walkers pause  
and others continue,

some of the vehicles pause  
and others continue,  
and I am no longer that

clerk to the heir of etc.,  
but who was it put this  
shining circle in my head?

\*

My right-angled valley of glass

and concrete has softer,  
smaller forces pushing through it

with their bodies, their bags  
like pollen sacs. Happiness is only  
the state of absorption,

so why not take an island,  
not large, and see all the people  
of the world live together there?

\*

I notice first they put the black  
people in brown shirts  
and made them stand behind

the counter in Starbucks.  
All the customers are white or east asian.  
The air conditioning's still broken

and each consciousness enacts its own  
drama in the silence of their mind  
until Ahmed the barista calls them.

\*

On Mercer the jackhammers answer  
the aria of a distant siren.  
What I'd like to hear is rain, no?

The plainness of its thinking,  
the fat splatter of the first droplets  
on the hot sidewalk, then its hiss,

its consistence, its soft-shoe shuffle –  
the streets clearing and darkening  
as the whole Atlantic rolls in.

### **Tim Liardet**

My utopia is extinction. As Aquinas would have it, in the epigraph to this poem *...and the final perfection consists of obtaining its final end*. That state where nothing can deteriorate, be changed, die or be corrupted. Purity through transfiguration. The Swamp Wolf, or the Mississippi Valley red wolf, was declared extinct in the wild by 1970. But in my poem it becomes a mythological beast, or a mythological being, the *tabula rasa* screen upon which four versions of utopia are projected.

### The Four Utopias of the Swamp Wolf

*...and the final perfection consists of obtaining its final end*  
Thomas Aquinas

### *1 The Swamp Wolf as Bertrand Russell*

Extinct sleeper, say you are the dog which draws  
all razory speaking of crud into its skin. Say you are

the signature scent given off by the gland, which is  
as encoded, as true, as a fingerprint. Though old,

your hearing is good: you can hear from ten miles away  
a sham like a misfired shot. You sleep for years and years.

You dream a lie is a cat's cradle in the old man's fingers;  
you mistake every perjure, every fakery, for bones,

for a want that might suck at your milk-glands, might nip  
at your snout like miniatures of your own mouth.

Say every tooth in your head is a tooth. Every hair a hair.  
Say even when extinct, though reportedly sighted everywhere,

you survive in your body of fractals that argues in its blood  
the earths of truth and falsehood cannot be mulched.

### *2 The Swamp Wolf as a Young Girl*

Say it was the black disks at the back of her eyes. Say it was  
the pupil's eclipse, the self that flared behind. The skin

that flared like the self. Say it was the wild in which she thrived,  
smirches on her cheek, bare feet, the wild that thrived in her.

Say it was a diet of gobbet and leaf, shack in tree, the lack  
of letters sent home. Say it was the wing mirrors ripped off

half a lifetime back with the ghost of her grin in each.  
Say it was a floor of stinkhorns. The yes. The ruin she could make.

Like a shrine. Like a wreck. Say it was the wreck, the chopper  
buckled in the boughs. Say it was the man who gifted her

lies like a basket of sick cubs, the mother's mouth  
that moved when his did not. Say it was the fear of lies

raddled on her heart. The animal it was. Say it was the jack-rabbit  
hooked through the mouth, brought down from the hook alive.

### *3 The Swamp Wolf as the Reverse Metamorphosis*

Say your pupil-slit, coiled in sleep of extinction, dreams  
the giant insect woke one morning and found that it had turned

into a travelling salesman. Say it, the salesman, arose at last  
on its day of begetting. Say once bony as a ball gown,  
  
now it donned its hat and trousers hoisted up too far  
from shoes. One black, one purple sock. Say its high-pitched walk,  
  
its sway, its foot-drag of voice, say the dream in its head  
of standing on its feet upside down on the floor,  
  
the norm, the exemplar, of seeing. Say all the killed bits of it  
tucked back in its vest. Say its compound brain,  
  
fading to blindness through all its eight lenses, focusing  
as the anthropoid eye. Say the straight road of its walk  
  
shaken by the shock footfall of the giant insects  
by which the travelling salesman is dwarfed.

#### *4 The Swamp Wolf as the Utopian No*

No to your crouches kept low, to your head swaying side to side  
at the wire, to pacing a cage that shrinks as you pace.  
  
No to the nervous footage, which makes you pace like a ghost.  
No to the high-strung nerve. To the assassin, the single shot,  
  
though you spring up in the bright bespecklement of wire.  
No to the falsehood, the petty wink, the frigid mouth,  
  
the flimsy alibi. No to the tactic pause, before the answer's out.  
No to the polygraph scratch, quickening in panic, to clouds  
  
of ink squirted in defence, no to the lie the ink defends.  
No to lie, on its way from fear, to fear on its way from the blood.  
  
No to the hidden dip which ruins the straight road.  
No to the shaky wrist. The tremor. No to the tamping,  
  
the sanctity of I. No to the graffiti'd tin, which shuts out the self  
from the self. No to the no. To. No to the Oh. O, no to the no.

#### **Andrew McMillan**

Whilst its commonly referred to as no-place, the two Greek routes that led to the word Utopia are 'not' and 'place'; there's something about that I like a lot better— the idea of no place feels somehow ephemeral, not place is somewhere more solid, at least in my imagination; during this poem I was thinking of the idea of first love, of that perfect place which we can never quite return to in our lives, however much it often feels like a quest to do so. Malinowski, the ethnographer, makes an appearance; and throughout it, when I read it again, I see this idea of constant change- a constant attempt to change the present in order to return to that perfect past.

## not place

coming to it now we see how unmade  
it has become how your mind each morning  
reorders itself into a new state  
of confusion a puddle freezing thawing  
nightly and it seemed given the rocky  
pebbleweighted path that lay ahead we should  
try to get back to our unspoilt idea  
of how it was at first everything unmapped  
and without name at least to us who were  
as strangers to the place both our first loves

\*

since the breakdown my thoughts have been unconnected  
islands the silence of unfurnished flats  
how discovering a new poet  
who is already dead is like coming to  
the limits of a field and only being  
able to walk backwards how the word *breakdown*  
was first used for machines how Malinowski  
discovered Paradise is only found  
when someone sets fire to the other half of the world  
*breakdown* to mean a collapse *collapse* from the past  
participle of the Latin *collabi* to mean 'fall together'

\*

arriving home we find the copse dismantled  
the squat houses of the next village  
visible for the first time in decades  
and coming again a few months later  
a tree cemetery thin plastic tubes  
marking new saplings planted where old ones  
were uprooted as if to say here was one  
and here and here is where we might sprout again  
from this furrowed naked land

## **Hollie McNish**

### Paddling

When did we start sketching shells onto mermaids  
or force their hair forwards, long to cover their breasts?  
Did we ask if the barnacles scratched at their skin  
as they swam side by side, their mermen friends' chests  
still allowed to be touched by the water?

When did we start selling toddler bikini tops  
for one year old daughters to cover child flesh?

When did we start drawing Eve with three fig leaves  
as Venus de Milo waits, nervous she's next?

When did we start causing women to stress  
babies fed under adult modesty bibs?  
When did we move from statues of mothers  
spilling milk into fountains for paddling kids  
into faulty comparisons to spitting and piss?

I imagine my grandkids on trips to museums  
peering through glass at the way that I lived

I imagine them begging me - show them again -  
the tshirts with peek holes, the joke nipple hats  
I see them in stitches, disbelieving we did that  
I'll tell them the tales of how I sat with their mother  
in toilets and corners as she fed in the dark

and they'll try on the bibs and they'll laugh  
and they'll prance round the room and they'll laugh  
as if displaying the jokes of some alien culture  
as they mimic and mock at my past

baffled by us  
no longer forced in disgust  
at their own flesh and bones  
at their own love and lust  
at their own mothers' chests  
at their own fathers' chests  
at babies on breast  
at nipples freed up  
on hot sweaty days

because they don't share our shame  
because they won't share our shaming  
and the statues will flow  
into town squares again  
bodies as bodies  
kids out paddling  
in knickers and skin  
mermaids breasts left alone  
as they swim.

### **Daljit Nagra**

#### He do the Foreign Voices

...ah *Weilalaah*. you say to yourself in the car  
that quivers your soul for this sojourn  
you perform every season. Your soul spread  
though the jacked-up shadows across the African girls



in their dark or bosky robes. Your soul swooned  
in the dreamt odours of lotus  
so you're launched on the still point.

You're launched cause you play the tracks  
with their primal nuance for *Mistah Kurtz* –  
*he dead*, for stranded Tiresias and Lil, for Krishna,  
for the Wasteland of *Datta*  
and *Da Da Da*.

Cause it's Sunday morning. You're aloof and headed  
for the rubbish dump and TS Eliot is the grief  
who stocked his mind on a year of Harvard  
Sanskrit. A master of tongues who chucked up  
a mess of free rhythms.  
It's now you feel most akin to Kamau Braithwaite  
and his ilk, who, back in the day, implied it wasn't his words.  
But his voice set-free, Eliot's twang,  
astir between the debris of human solace  
that persuaded the empire's embrace  
for English verse.

With the windows down, the roof evaporates...  
You're swayed by the lazy turns but end up goaded.  
What is your edgy calling?  
Would you slick your facility for verse while strapped  
to this or that topical issue to nectar another man's snarled  
eloquence of dearth? Perhaps you feel guilt  
now you're subject to the woods  
that replete your boot. Yet you'd lie again on the heap.

Your friends regard the expense of time  
after meter  
a waste. They by-passed your elitism to placard  
their forces with a Bhabha, Spivak or Zizek.

Out the car, you're aside the other men now  
hurling down toward each labelled container  
as you land on the usual thought.  
Can poetry cause a stink at the dawn of catastrophe?  
For the valleys headed with blood where somewhere  
just now a poet will be pulped,  
in a state of terror, verse seems redundant.  
Verse becomes orison or epitaph.  
A surplice song-and-dance act  
that pays the bills.

Yet when you drive away you recall the German palette.  
After all that Nazi vile, how it turned to Keats,  
to Dylan Thomas, to their verse that made no call  
for protest. It was their freedom to breathe in a space

that riled the walled Berliners,  
that showed them how verse that speaks of love  
can cleanse the word.

**Ruth Padel**

Sunset on the Coast near Naples  
(for Joseph Wright of Derby)

*We try to give some kind of order and design to the past, the present and the future*  
Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis*

That dream of being cut off, alone in paradise -  
or what passed for paradise in 1788 -  
with your family and your art, late  
in the evening as the light is going away:  
you are painting, as we do in our day, a fine escape

from the fragility of, say, civilization.  
I've been there. I've raised a glass  
to that sky of dissolving gold, that fishing boat  
returning, goats click-clicking over rocks to graze  
the sea-weed. And a horizon, where all clear  
light is coming from and sinking back down into,  
flat as oil. Everything calm, remote and well, yes,  
perfect. A hiding-place from recesses of prison  
which transfigures, for a moment, any discipline of fear.

You are master of *chiaroscuro*. You love  
the effects of artificial light in darkened space.  
But here you do real sun, the crisis gleam  
which gave the moon its tilt; the cloud embrace  
which can loan us, for a second, all we know of glory.

This is the landscape and the art of cornucopia:  
exultant sulphur yellows, sable shadows,  
creamy lace of lapping surf, a vision  
where plague and syphilis, the Jacobin Republic,  
the Kingdom of Two Sicilies and coming ravages  
of Napoleon, have no place. The angels of earth  
at one with angels of the sea. Fine. This is Utopia  
through a jeweller's eye, a Tarot pack  
of hierarchy and pattern, light and dark, and half-dark,

through which we see the glow of dying sun.  
Somewhere in there, surely, a white dove  
is flying from the Ace of Cups,  
the Fool is teasing his tambourine in a dark wood  
and the Emperor dreaming on his throne  
with a wide-eyed lion beside him on the rug.  
Turn the crystal and the other face

of Utopia, the no-place-perfect-place,  
has to be apocalypse. The end of the world  
is near, it is always near, and all the forerunners  
of Armageddon, like the Astronomer Royal  
in his Centre for the Study of Existential Risk,  
are having a field day with the Doomsday Clock  
and its countdown to catastrophe. We hear *tick tick*

and say *tick tock*. We require that sense  
of ending, the Revelation which will finish  
a story begun in Genesis. We cherish -  
how we cherish – our *zeitgeist* wish  
for some cybernetic pure elsewhere

to get out from under *tock*. Some split-off  
floating island, Emerald City or intergalactic  
rocket will appear, and carry us away  
from thoughts of Planet Wildfire, degrading seas  
and forests, warring tribes, a global population  
which depends on energy we are shrivelling  
the earth to make, the difference between ruin,  
which we can rebuild, and rubble which we can't,  
and the almost-certainty that one day

the wrong finger, attached to the wrong brain  
at the wrong time, will press the button.  
There's a lot of ruin in a nation, the perfect  
is no place; and yet we dream. Come,  
hold the rind of this satsuma in a candle.

The smoke is sweet. The torn edge smoulders,  
red on black, like lava of Vesuvius  
(which you will also paint) seen at night from far away.  
Remember the incense-smell of tangerine  
and hold fast your esurient fable  
of retreat: from limit or injustice, and from pain.  
Rest, a moment, in *perfect* and *unattainable*.  
Give us again (we need it) that radiant ghost  
you saw, of sunset on the coast, near Naples.

### **Jo Shapcott**

#### Utopia

##### 1. The Ship of Teeth

*After Ambrosius Holbein's Map of Utopia in the third edition, 1518*

It keeps us afloat, this curvy ship,  
on planks of bony prominences,  
topped by two stories of fine, square incisors.

It's a ship for nibbling away at the ocean  
while the main mast sniffs out the route.  
I appear to be on deck, staring out  
at the narrator ashore, who is pointing -  
at us? At the horns in my skull?  
The little chapel in my left eye?  
The city in my forehead? O  
you are right to point and debate  
my meaning, you nattily engraved men,  
my authors, the ones who want to tell  
a tale of all the nonsense in my brain.

## 2. Translation from the Utopian: a fragment

Weighed down by jewels, my  
little ones sit playing pokamon.  
Not unwillingly I accept whatever is better.

## 3. A Truly Golden Little Book

Our language has shapes and silences.  
Square, circle, triangle: each letter tells  
a new emotion of curve or angle  
so, in the end, we translate  
best into dance. Our vocabulary  
is small because we agree.  
Sometimes new words creep down  
from the hills where rebels meet  
at night, coining new language  
into the air. Footfall, reversal,  
person, shabby, winberry: all these  
were shushed off an island cliff  
into the waves. I memorised them  
in my limbs before they were lost.

## **Michael Simmons Roberts**

### Bliss

New Year's Eve. We gather to give thanks.  
Ten years to the day our people gave up words.  
I miss some: pet-names, songs with lyrics,  
jokes that aren't just slapstick.  
Now *voice* is a pocket-book of symbols.  
Give me a flick through yours and I can read you  
from the icons you rub faint with use,  
the countless times you point to *liquor, terror, sick,*  
distinctive as a lisp or smoker's growl.

No *Auld Lang Syne*, just cheers and claps,  
ten thousand pocket-books fluttering like fans.  
Electronic billboards flash above us,  
brand-names gone, just picture after picture.  
Even before the peace-law we lost faith in letters.  
Midnight. I point to *wine*, I point to *want*,  
I point across the square to my hotel.  
You point to *cold*, you point to *home*.  
I kiss you on the cheek and all but utter.

Back in my room, I hit the mini-bar,  
lip-read old romances on the Pay TV,  
thumb through my pocket-book to take stock  
of another year in this, our silent paradise.  
I notice how pristine my lists of VALUES are,  
each tagged in red with an inverted cone  
to warn the user this is neither act nor matter.  
I point to signs for *joyful*, *love*, *sincere*.  
It feels like firing blanks to me.

At times when a line from a nursery rhyme  
starts to swell in my throat,  
it pays to recall how words failed us  
- war graves, massacres, neighbour on neighbour -  
how the lag between speech and object  
let in propaganda, slant reads, mistranslations.  
So the price of hope is wordlessness. Needless to say,  
some nights I ache to shout the house down.  
All this is spoken only in my head.

### **Jane Yeh**

My version of utopia is personal, rather than societal, so I wrote a kind of love sonnet for this commission. A bit of the mediaeval idea of the Land of Cockaigne went into it as well.

#### Utopia Villas

In our utopia, the oysters always sing.  
There is a metronome the colour of Sacré-Coeur.  
There is a messenger opening a secret scroll (good news).  
In our lazy maisonette, we count the days until summer.

Pizza will come in two sizes: snack and preposteroso.  
Poetic cockapoos will serenade us with their thoughts  
While beseeching looks shoot out of their eyes like lasers.  
In the strongholds of the North, a Cumberland sausage will rise

While a slain avocado comes back to life as guacamole (good karma).  
We will spread out everywhere and chill like a floppy omelette.  
We will be meticulous in love, ornithology, and dance.  
Long avenues of deer will part like magic

In the sentimental sunlight. When we kiss,  
Magpies will fly to our side like granted wishes.