

SIX DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND POETRY

A poem cannot hold your hand
Or hug you, no matter
How many times you write the word
Kiss Kiss Kiss
You cannot feel it on your lips
No matter how vividly you conjure
The flesh of a loving caress
Or describe the smell of fresh armpits
In pen and ink, you cannot
Capture the exhilarating stink
Of your beloved's body odour
A poem has no pheromones
Its bones are only metaphors
Props writers use to give their work more substance
And if you physically fall
Off the balcony
Your poem-lover will never catch you;
To extend its simile like a male boast
The bones have osteoporosis, they're porous
As the paper they are written on
Though the ode may move you it will never say
'Move in with me'
A poem cannot hold your hand
Handle your hold-all
Or hug you, no matter
How hard you write the words, a pen is
All you hold in your hand

PHYSICAL RELATIONSHIP

Every atom of my being
He said, was formed inside a star
Which was the most romantic thing
Anyone had ever said to me, until
He explained it scientifically

Every cell in my body
He said, is made of carbon and
There's only one place carbon is made
A white hot furnace in
The centre of a star

I come from the suns of
Distant solar systems and
Every atom of my being
Has travelled across the universe to Earth
On a comet, he said

And though he meant it scientifically
It was the most romantic thing
Anyone had ever said to me

ON THE MARRIAGE OF ART AND SCIENCE (I wrote this for my actual wedding!)

There was to be a contest
Science versus Art
To see which one was cleverest
Which one was not so smart
Who had more beauty in her soul
Or more truth in his heart
And which one played, on a global stage
The most important part

The first task was the fastest
They had a race to run
Science had almost finished before
Art heard the starting gun
He ran in a straight line
She hopped and skipped and spun
I'm more aerodynamic, he said
That is why I won

The second test was hardest
When she heard the news
That they'd be doing maths next
Art cried and asked her muse
To help her solve the problem
Of the hypotenuse
I don't do numbers, it replied
That is why you'll lose

The next job was to write an ode
To the bees and birds
Science took out his microscope
But all that he inferred
Was plain facts. How I wish I had
Your pretty way with words
He said to Art, who wished she'd known
His type were not all nerds

When the umpire pointed to
The mountain they must climb
Art's imagination
Got them up there in no time
Science's apparatus
Told them it was made of lime-
Stone. He gave her the reason
And she gave him the rhyme

Then there was a wrestling match
And when the referee
Saw they were enjoying it

He made his last decree
Keep up the Ju-Jitsu you two
Fight but as one team
Add those two half-nelsons up
For total victory

There was to be a wedding
Science marries Art
Together they are cleverer
And shouldn't be apart
Two hemispheres of one great mind
Two chambers of one heart
Two feathered wings for high flying
Bullseye for Cupid's dart

(My husband is not a writer but the poem he wrote for this occasion is easily as good as mine:

'Violets boast what Alison is.
Angels host what Alison is.
Roses are close, but Alison is.')

TEA, CHOCOLATE, CIGARETTES

If there were no more tea in the world
Getting up in the morning would be
Meaningless, the first hour of the day
Dry. If there were no more tea
We'd never sit down for a minute
Or put our feet up and chat, we'd never
Get warm after a walk in the rain, or happy
After a hard day. If there were no more
Strong sweet tea, we'd never
Get over the shock.
The only possible alternative would be
To drink hot chocolate

If there were no more chocolate in the world
Popping out to the shops would be
Pointless, and petrol stations would never stay
Open all night. If there were no more chocolate
Gangs of pre-menstrual women
Would roar around like Hell's Angels, and
Everyone would forget how to
Celebrate Easter. If there were no more
Boxes of chocolates, we'd never
Fall in love.
The only possible alternative would be
To smoke more

If there were no more cigarettes in the world
Going to the pub would be boring, the evening
Uneventful. Without cigarettes we'd never
Gasp or sigh or wave our hands about
In heated conversation, we'd never get excited and
Need to calm down. If we couldn't smoke afterwards
No one would ever finish their meals
Relationships or exams. If there were
No more cigarettes, we'd all be able to breath
Deeply, slowly and evenly.
The only possible alternative would be
To have more sex

[NB. I wrote this when you could still smoke in pubs!]

WOLF-MOUTH FANNY

One full moon
The wolf-mouth in Fanny's pants
Opened wide and howled so loud
That everyone could hear it when she walked
And see it when she sat
Even with her legs crossed

Once a month
The wolf-mouth in Fanny's pants
Got hunger and anger so confused
It bit the tops of Fanny's thighs
And made her bleed
Even through a muzzle of cotton wool

Many moons ago
The wolf-mouth in Fanny's pants
Was just a pup
And boys were not afraid to pet it
But when full-grown
It whistled as men passed in the street
And shouted out obscenities

Once in a blue moon
Fanny could hardly sit still
For the wolf-mouth's snarling and snapping
So she was forced to make a kill
And feed the animal
The stiff flesh it needed

If Dick had volunteered
A length of himself
Wolf-mouth Fanny would have done no harm
Honestly, the teeth aren't real
Only her desire is incisor-sharp
And her wolf-mouth an 'O'
Edges smooth as the moon

PHILANTHROPISSSED

Behind me in the queue
Was a man who smelt of whisky
Who slept on the street
And sat in the shop doorway
Where I often hurried past him
On my way to work
First in the queue
I reached into my purse
To buy a pint of milk
And spilt money on the floor
Only small change
A tiny shiny five pence
Which rolled between the shoes
Of the man who stank of booze
And was lost at the feet
Of the ragged-trouserred piss-head
The man of the street
Who bent to pick the coin up
And put it in my hand
With a dignified bow
Though he could hardly stand
Holding up the queue
In our local shop
I finally met his eyes
And felt another penny drop
When I saw the vagrant's
Expression, I knew he
Was closer to Home than me
So I took the five pence piece
Which was never really mine
And left it on the counter
In a collection box for the blind

KISSING ON PAPER

Because I cannot kiss with real lips
The legal rosebuds of your married face
I pucker up a pair of inky nibs
And plant a literary kiss in place
As I love writing, my heart's an inkwell
As I love words, my tongue's a cheap biro
As I love you, but dare not spell it
This osculation's done in ballpoint
Kissing on paper, like the lipstick-black
Pouts I used to punctuate teen poems
Now the only marks I'll make are shadow
Butterflies, Bic-blotted on your roses
But though my kiss is stamped in virtuous ink
It has a vicious twin in flesh, I think

FOR MY MOTHER ON HER SIXTIETH BIRTHDAY

My mum knitted me
Out of pink wool
Pearl and plain for perfect skin

If she got a stitch wrong
My mum unpicked it and started again
To get me just right

My mum knitted my arms and legs
Sausages she stuffed
With pairs of torn up sheer tan tights

My mum knitted my body
Knotting the tummy button firmly
So I would never unravel

I may have been soft
But I was strong
My mum gave me knitting needles for bones

And a heart-shape cut out of
Her cosy old dressing-gown
Quilted for protection

Then she sewed my clothes
Smart things so I could be someone important
Pretty things so I could be someone special

My mum gave me golden hair
Neatly plaited yellow wool
Which, as a teenager, I tangled

My mum made my eyes
Nearly as blue as hers
The brightest beads in the trinket box

Lastly she took red silk
And embroidered my rosebud lips
So I could say this:

My mum made me
Out of her love

FOR MY MOTHER-IN-LAW ON HER BIRTHDAY

I will paint her as a rainbow
Red of the great rift valley
Deep rose-dust bassinet,
I will paint her orange
A citrus seam, crystalline
In the darkness of cake,
And yellow like the fire of a dragon
Made by grandchildren from recycled packaging
Fanned by glitter-glue wings,
I will paint her green as the garden
In a jungle, cultured lawn
Bordering on the wild,
And blue like her lapis-lit eyes
Pools of mosaic, petals of
Purple iris in Tiffany stained-glass,
I will paint her as a flute of lilac wine
Sipped, for her seventieth

ULTRA-VIOLET

Violet, as an old lady,
sucks talcum powder sweets
and waves a pale hanky
in her lace-skinned, vein-embroidered hand,
that wafts the same perfume.

Violet, menopausal,
whose underwear stains fade from red to blue
sits on a mood swing, grimly thinking
the next time someone brings her flowers
will be her funeral.

Violet, the teenager,
wears eponymous eyeshadow
and a steely skirt which shifts over her thighs,
concealing the site of her first
violent motorbike rides.

Violet, as a child,
dips her imperial paintbrush in a pot of colour
and creates another fantasy landscape
instead of making friends with her classmates.

Violet, as a child,
hides her face in a book,
and finds at the end of the rainbow
realms of colour the naked eye can't see;
ultra-violet is on a different frequency.

Violet, as an old lady,
threads the colour of her veins
through the steely needles
of her still-moving fingers
and sews a story which only
Violet, as a child, can read,
in the light of ultra-violet.

KNITTING IS A NOVEL WITHOUT WORDS

Every thought in my head
Has gone to my body
All my bright ideas
Are turning into bones
For the baby
And my creative fingers
Have turned to knitting needles
Instead of computer keys
Knitting is a novel without words
Every stitch of the
Tiny cardigan
Every row of its back and sides
Tells another line of the story
In pure white
Instead of black and white
Sentences only a pregnant lady can understand
As I finish each sleeve
And cast off
With a flourish like I used to finish each chapter
It's a bit of an anti-climax
This sense of achievement
Any mother can feel
But then
I haven't got to the part where I sew the pearly buttons on yet

THE PLOUGHMAN ON SUNDAY

I hear Earth's wordless call to prayer, and bow
To the unvoiced Mass that augers each dawn
Yoked to the mute land, through noon's stifled hour
Till dusk's silent liturgy of the sward
A mud-made man, boot soles inlaid with clay
In sackcloth shirt and ashy hair, I plough
The frowning field every livelong day
And toil the furrowed soil of hill brow
Save for the Sabbath when I tend to church
Between ploughed rows of pews I bend my knee
Yoked to the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*
A farmhand turned to the *Agnus Dei*
I hear Earth's call for six days of the seven
But soft, on the day of rest, I hear heaven

For lark's first note of morning I exchange
The choirboy's *sotto solo* at Matins
And lunchtime's hush beneath the haystack change
For cadences of silence in Latin
In the held breath of twilight, evensong
Rings out across a field all fallow
The ding of tenor and of bass the dong
As bells speechlessly praise the all-hallowed
Then do I hear monks in ox-brown cassocks
With ploughman-like devotion to the sod
Chant a path of prayer between the tussocks
Walked daily by this mud-shod country clod
But on Sunday a fieldhand turns to God
I kneel in church to sow the wheat seed for
The bread for the feast that lasts forever

THE REAL KING OF ENGLAND LIVES IN OZ

See! There's his highness, by the barbecue
But look five hundred years, you'd never guess
His genes were royal, if not for the words
decreed in sweat on the back of his vest:

This is the shocking truth Dame Cicely
Herself confessed in 1428
And Shakespeare publicised in history plays -
Edward IVth was illegitimate

While Richard of York gave battle in vain
His wife was conquered by his best archer
Who shot rainbow spunk into the bloodline
Of the monarchy. It made colourless bastard

And all the kings and queens who followed on
The endless reign of Georges in descent
Henry the Eighth, Elizabeth the First
Were not a hundred percent fair dinkum

But see, him at the barbie; silver haired
With golden beer-can an orb in his hand
Know what's so xxxing special about him?
It's writ in condensation on the can:

Edward's younger brother, Duke of Clarence
Should rightly have succeeded to the throne
Had the same fight with Richard III, then started
A proper royal family of his own

From Margaret the First to Henry the Tenth
Till Good Queen Barbara was succeeded
In our times by her eldest son, the duke
From down under, the ex-patriot regent

He rules the barbecue with sceptre-tongs
Some call him Pom, some know he was a lord
Back home, but his genetic pedigree
Is sketched as faint as frost on king-size prawns:

Micheal Hastings, by right of succession
Should sit on the British throne fair and square
Purer Plantagenet, truer Tudor
Than the current incumbent or her heir

"I'd abolish myself!" he'd laugh, if the
Historic truth were ever known, because
He's been republican since he got here

The Real King of England Lives in Oz

See! There's HRH by the BBQ
His wife, Noelene, five kids, grandchildren too
And by the law of primogeniture
The little prince Zak will be next to rule

Struth! There's more royal secrets than this on
Walkabout; sunburn, bum crack and beer gut
Mike strolls among his Australian neighbours
Better off with less English archer in his blood