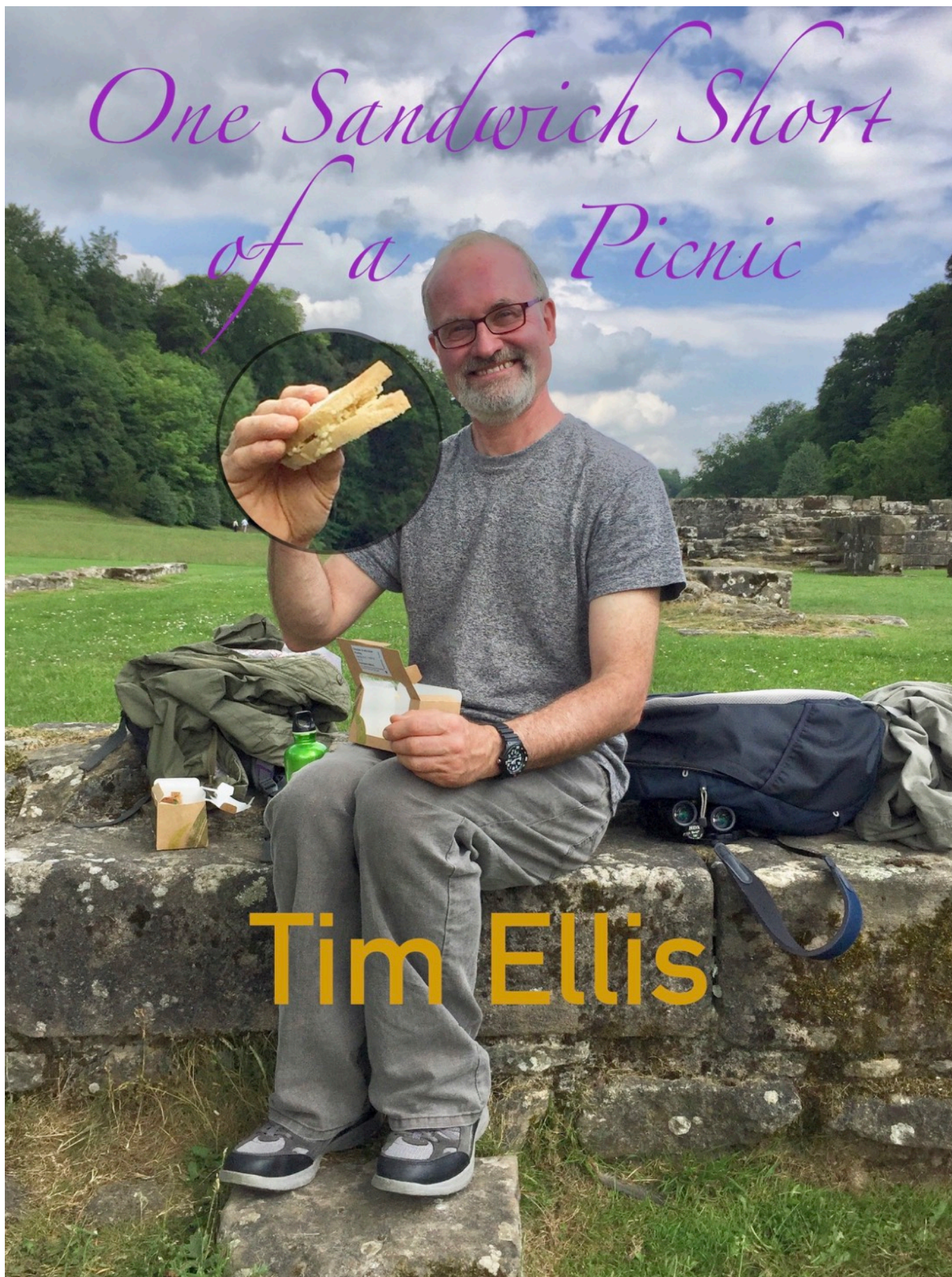


*One Sandwich Short
of a Picnic*



Tim Ellis

Introduction

My partner Robbie is responsible for the sandwiches. It was her idea. Or maybe I'm being unfair since it was me who decided to go with it. I'd thrown the question out to friends on Facebook and I could've used one of their suggestions, or I could have been creative and thought up my own idea. I claim to be a creative writer after all. But she made the suggestion because I was at the time making sandwiches for my next day's packed lunch and sandwiches seemed as daft an idea as any, so sandwiches it was.

You may be wondering what I'm on about. Let me explain:

I'd rashly decided to spend the month of April taking part in NaPoWriMo, an annual online writing challenge for poets. This frankly inept acronym stands for National Poetry Writing Month. On each of the 30 days of April the NaPoWriMo website posts a prompt. Participating poets write a poem responding to the prompt and post it online by the end of the day, using social media or their own website. Many poets within my circle of friends have taken part in past years and some do it every time, but I had always resisted due partly to the cringe inducing awfulness of the acronym, and also because it generally takes me at least 30 days to write one poem, so 30 in one month seemed beyond my capability. But early this year I found my normally brimful vat of inspiration drained dry, so I thought I'd give it a go.

I rarely come out with anything worthwhile unless I challenge myself. Prose is too straightforward so I write poetry. Free verse is far too bloody easy so I scan my lines, but blank verse is also a doddle so I have to end-rhyme too. Not just occasional pairs of lines but every line must have a rhyming partner, and if possible not just one partner but several. Soon a full blown orgy of end-rhyming is going on and my free verse puritan friends are covering their eyes in embarrassment. So I decided a mere poem a day following a prompt wouldn't be enough, and I would have a theme as well.

There's a precedent: I must give credit to a wonderful poet and illustrator called Kirsten Luckins who wrote one of the best poetry books I read in 2017 called "Utterly Otterly". I went to York one evening to hear Kirsten read from the book as guest at an open mic, because I am a fan of both otters and illustrated poetry books. I learnt that Utterly Otterly had come out of NaPoWriMo, and I was impressed by Kirsten's determination not only to follow the prompt but to make every poem about otters. So I followed her lead. I wanted a theme that was slightly silly and unrelated to the political, environmental and natural history subjects I normally write about.

Several days I almost gave up when I didn't have much time or when the prompts were unworkable but somehow I ended up with 30 poems, each with some tenuous connection to a sandwich. You can find the poems in their original form on my Facebook page "BirdBard", but the poems in this book have since been edited and a few I considered too bad I have re-written entirely. At the end of the book you will find an appendix telling you the prompt for the day, and a note or two that may be of interest about how I decided to interpret (or not) that prompt.

1 My secret shame

The first prompt of the project's
to divulge my secret shame.

But how could it be secret
once lit up with a name?

It would be shame most surely
to fail on the first day,
but NaPoWriMo's public
so "secret"? No way!

Besides that, what's to mention?

Everybody knows
I'm perfectly clean living;
my healthy body glows

with rosy pink vitality;
an organic agrarian
who lives off his allotment;
I'm a virtual vegetarian.

So sorry, NaPoWriMo
my ideas all taste stale.
I'll mull on this thing later
though my bet is, I'll fail.

OK, I'll chew it over
at lunchtime as I graze
my buttered roast beef sandwich
with full-fat mayonnaise.

2 Left on the shelf

It's always us left on the shelf!
You'd think we're threatening their health.
They look at us like we got fleas.
For goodness sake, what's wrong with cheese?

*My Dear you only have yourself to blame:
your filling's spilling, your crusts are all agape.
I don't dispute it's right for you, that name,
but please don't call me "cheese". I'm "Brie and Grape".*

You're cheese as well, don't put on airs
because you're French and thinly smeared
with "Ruby Port"! They know it's chutney.
What fool would shell out two pound eighty?

*A fine remark from you, who's one pound fifty!
I'll have you know I'm bedded on soft oatmeal
and frankly Dear...my chutney's not so whiffy
as your raw onions. I have upmarket appeal.*

I'm on oatmeal too! Traditional!
Cheese and onion's just as nutritional
as poncy Brie, and they prefer...

Hey, Mister! Me! Don't go with her!

3 Sandwich counter

Double Gloucester cheese and piccalilli.
Brie and grape with chutney, served on rye.
Anchovy with clams and herring roe.
Quesadilla with Jalapeño chilli.

Chives with free-range egg from our own farm.
Grass-fed local beef with English mustard.
Cucumber and salmon squares, de-crusted.
Fries in a bap: a Manchester “chip barm”.

Cheese and tuna served on cracked wheat cob.
Ham and artichoke on ciabatta.
Strawberry jelly spread, with peanut butter.
Bacon bloomer, warmed up on the hob.

Pork with apple sauce on spelt flour bap.
Walnut mayonnaise with macaroni.
Burrito stuffed with beef and guacamole.
Couscous and sultanas in a wrap.

White with Cheddar cheese and Branston pickle.
Vegan feast with pinto beans and Quorn.
Transport cafe “Breakfast in a Bun”.
Sauerkraut and wurst on pumpernickel.

Wakame and edamame bean.
Battered, pan-fried Gruyere Monte Cristo.
Tomato and Mozzarella roll with pesto.
Octopus and lobster submarine.

Turkey, thyme and sage, with cranberry jam.
Chicken Tikka balti, wrapped in roti.
Pease pudding and bacon Geordie stottie.
Spam, spam, spam, spam, spam, spam, egg, and spam.

Parma ham on artisan bakery bread.
Organic BLT with vine tomatoes.
Guinea fowl with dill and avocado.
Stork on Mother’s Pride with sandwich spread.

4 Sustainability

The compost stacked in layers like a sandwich;
the sweat beads on the gardener at his toil;
the robin singing in his secret language;
the fork that blends the compost with the soil;
the vegetable seedlings flecked with dewdrops;
the swelling jackets of the peas and beans;
the keen edged kitchen knife that in a few chops
prepares a healthy feast of home-grown greens;
the parents watching children grow and feeling
the pride of those who know a job's well done;
the backdoor compost pail brimful with peelings;
the family life that's wholesome and homespun
- the gleam from every item here revealing
the throughput of the world's magnanimous sun.

5 Ode to a tuna sandwich

With apologies to Pablo Neruda

With chaste heart, and pure
eyes
I celebrate you, my beauty,
restraining my blood
so that the line
surges and follows
the contour of your crust,
and you bed yourself in my sandwich box,
as in woodland, or wave-spume:
earth's perfume,
sea's music.

Nākd bar beside you,
whether it is your chutney, arching
at a primal touch
of sound or breeze,
or your tuna flakes,
tiny spiral shells
from the splendour of America's oceans.
Your crusts also,
of equal fullness, overflowing
with filling
and, yes,
winged
your granary seeds of silken corn
that disclose
or enclose
the deep twin landscapes of your slices.

The line of your back
separating you
falls away into paler regions
then surges
to the smooth hemispheres
of an orange,
and goes splitting
your loveliness
into two slices
of burnt gold, pure alabaster,
to be lost in the twin clusters of your crusts,
from which, once more, lifts and
takes fire
the double tree of your symmetry:
flower of fire, open circle of candles,
swollen fruit raised
over the meeting of earth and ocean.

Your body – from what substances
flour, yeast, assorted seeds,
did it flow, was it gathered,
rising like bread
in the warmth of Sainsbury's in-store bakery,
and signalling hills
silvered,
valleys of a single petal, sweetnesses
of velvet depth,
until the pure, fine, form of sandwich
thickened
and rested there?

It is not so much light that falls
over the world
extended by your body
its suffocating snow,
as chutney, pouring itself out of you,
as if you were
burning inside.

Under your bread the tub of salad is alive.



6 Sandwich stanzas

Today the napowrimo prompt's to "stretch your comfort zone for breaks of line:
write

them either short or long." I've opted for iambic feet in groups of nine

for two long lines, between whose cumbersome immensities I shall invite
one

syllabic mono beat, an isolated word. Thus far, it's sounding shite

but daily readers of my NaPoWriMo poems will see what I have done
here:

I've made it like a stack of sandwiches for you to feast your eyes upon.

It isn't really poetry at all from my standpoint, I'll make that clear
but

my fellows who compose "free verse" are fine with poems which ignore the ear,

lacking scansion, lacking rhyme, but nonetheless irrationally cut
up

mid-statement into lines to make it look nice on the page, so why then tut

if I arrange my words like what you had for lunch? You've not been sold a pup,
they

will have a reason for their breaks while there's yet inspiration in my cup.

This bottom sandwich in my buffet lacks a filling so I have to say,
"Apologies, with Terza Rima there's no choice but end it in this way."

7 Talking man to man

Poet to gardener:

Soiled suburban tradesman you're a sight
forking stinking compost in the rain,
paring down that hedge to shoulder height,
arthritic knee-joints crunching as you strain
up and down a lawn behind your mower.
Your mud-bespattered jeans embarrass me,
my scholarly intent sheared ever lower
by your deficient wit and repartee.
Your stooping back bespeaks subordination,
weeding around your wealthy clients' geraniums,
granite faced. The only intimation
of synapses connecting in your cranium
is rot you post on Facebook from your van
with cheese and chutney sandwiches in hand.

Gardener to poet:

Mr Lah-di-dah, do you forget
that you and I are intimately threaded?
That when you eat a meal or pay a debt
it's my hard graft that comes up with the readies?
All these years you've tried to sell your books
but did you ever earn a single penny?
Which hedges did you lay with your billhook?
Don't know? I'll tell you mate: Not any!
Though possibly we're not so far removed
as you presume: our work is mired in pathos
but both attempt to see the world improved
by coaxing Wonder out of nature's chaos.
We prune the deadwood, keep the pathways clear
and rake the soil till lovely things appear.

8 Annual magic

The waters of the River Nidd are bouncing,
lathered with fairies, ebulliently spring-leaping stones
along the Knaresborough Gorge, our best route home.
A sandwich stop, we watch a dipper jouncing
on a boulder then Blip! Our eyes
whip-zipped, flip of turquoise flashing,
vanished. An inaptly named grey wagtail's flouncing
garish yellow plumage. As we rise
from gorge to field, the sky's blue dome enlarging,
we're captured by a two-note motif, pouncing
on our hearts. The sunlit woodland margin
is ringing out with chiff-chaffs bringing song
from Africa, their chipper calls announcing
the leap to Spring for which we've yearned so long.

9 Olive of Earth

The olive from my sandwich glisters
soused in salt
sweet and bitter
charged with sunshine
spawned of soil.

The planet in its orbit smiles.

10 Back garden drama

Underneath the bird feeder
sandwich crumbs and bread crusts
are fretted at by blackbirds.

A single robin hangs back
in readiness to grab what
the lungeing yellow beaks miss.

Assembled in the pear tree
a flock of starlings look on
and chatter in their strange tongue.

A pair of dunnocks, half hid
among the stalks of dead flowers
also wait their big chance

and overhead a red kite
contorts its direct flight path
bedevilled by a black crow.

Some goldfinches make bee-lines
with flashing yellow wing bars
towards the lavish seed-tube

where several lively blue tits
are clustered on the wire perches
feasting on some seed mix.

A solitary greenfinch
alert to all around it
transmits a warning, too late.

The sparrowhawk with slick briskness
grasps a blue tit, locks lethal
talons in a split second.

11 The future

Those environmentalists are always complaining about
utilising the most efficient energy. We don't need fuels
that are renewable,
we must use whatever resources there are,
and to build a perfect future planet
need oil and gas as raw materials.
There's many everyday essentials that never
can be made of things other than plastic:
the packaging that keeps your sandwich protected,
fabrics, hospital equipment, refrigerators...
How could we get by without these things?
Fresh water, clean air and affordable food
rely on continuous
economic growth. For the sake of growth we carry on as we have always done, but
there is hope if we resist
change that will devastate everything.
We're bringing about a climate
in which commerce may flourish.
If your only concern is a world
where biological diversity is the object, you're misguided -
hungry people can't eat that.
It's all about money.
Who cares if seabirds choke on plastic, if polar bears go extinct?
What I say to a person
with such unrealistic ideas is
"Stop now, we will ruin
the future!" If we don't
keep on extracting oil, coal and gas
we're all doomed.

We're all doomed!
Keep on extracting oil, coal and gas?
"The future, if we don't
stop now, we will ruin
with such unrealistic ideas," is
what I say to a person
who cares if seabirds choke on plastic, if polar bears go extinct.
It's all about money -
hungry people can't eat that.
Where biological diversity is the object, you're misguided
if your only concern is a world
in which commerce may flourish.
We're bringing about a climate
change that will devastate everything.
There is hope if we resist
economic growth. For the sake of growth we carry on as we have always done, but
rely on continuous
fresh water, clean air and affordable food.
How could we get by without these things?
Fabrics, hospital equipment, refrigerators,
the packaging that keeps your sandwich protected
can be made of things other than plastic.
There's many everyday essentials that never
need oil and gas as raw materials
and to build a perfect future planet,
we must use whatever resources there are
that are renewable,
utilising the most efficient energy. We don't need fuels
those environmentalists are always complaining about.

12 Scarcroft village

A team of four-wheel-drives are cooling off, sandwiched together on damp block paving. Bare black twigs beside the disused railway are text keyed onto the blank white screen of the sky. A soft misty drizzle ripples red roof tiles across the barn, and grey slates on the square stone house shine like metal. A forsythia burns yellow in the border. Blackbirds sing arias, a wood pigeon hums, a chaffinche's rattled song resists the rumble of trucks bound for Leeds and the roar of jet engines in the clouds. The lawn is soft like soup from six clear months of rain.

Buds are poised to burst
in the springtime of the year,
autumn of the world.

13 A hippo hiding underneath the floor

We tiptoe in and quietly close the door.
The hide's a wooden hut
on stilts above a bush-pool where.
the animals come to drink. We scan the shore
and tune our ears for any movement but
for several minutes we don't notice there's
a hippo hiding underneath the floor.

We should've guessed it from the foetid smell
but we are so absorbed
hoping we might see a lion,
we overlook it, lurking in the well
of lapping darkness down below the boards,
bulging eyes and hairy nostrils, sighing
guffs of sulphur from the depths of Hell.

We delve into our laden sandwich box
because there's nothing happening.
The single moving shape we spot's
a black backed jackal (somewhat like a fox).
Across the waterhole some Blacksmith Lapwings
are dainty birds but not much more than dots;
the things that float like logs are logs, not crocs.

The bushveldt sleeps with nothing to be seen
but then, inside the shack,
we're startled by a baritone croak.
Abandoning our spotting scopes we lean
on hands and knees to squint down through a crack.
The eyes glint up. The hippo breath evokes
the aura you emit by eating beans.

You know that phrase for something you ignore:
"The elephant in the room"?
It once seemed apposite because
you think you'd know, but now I'm not so sure.
Despite the dreadful waft of eggy fumes,
but for the burp we'd not have sussed there was
a hippo hiding underneath the floor.

14 Dream dictionary

Dream about a sandwich: it means there's people hungry.

Dream about a teacup: a country's smashed to shards.

Dream about a hammer: bombs are pounding, angry.

Dream about a seagull: a child is crying, scarred.

Dream of ballet slippers: cruise missiles pirouette.

Dream about a shark: blood will tint the seas.

Dream a wobbly table: a toppled minaret.

Dream about a dentist: toothless refugees
are dreaming of a rowboat to find a safer shore.

Dream of anything: wake up to a war.

15 Jasper Shillingsworth

Jasper Shillingsworth
is terror of the High Street.
He never lets a tenant
get behind on rent.
He's at them like a ferret,
abetted by the bailiffs,
rancorous of every penny spent.

The seedy row of shops
he lets to small traders
have leaks in the roof
and rotting window frames.
His rat-infested flats
with uninspected boilers
are lacking fire alarms, and reek of drains.

He lives far out of town,
big house with twenty acres,
wife festooned in diamonds,
overweening kids.
He still recalls his struggle:
the sandwich van, the fawning.
He spoils them all with things he never had.

16 Kitchen jinks

When I was 21, I earned a bob
or so by filling bread rolls in a kitchen
below a conference centre, halving cobs
and spreading butter. Hygiene was a fiction
way back then: my shift were local yobs,
probation lads or yet to be convicted.
All they did was lark. They loved to lob
tomatoes at each other, play for victory
at pickled onion ping-pong on the hobs
with chicken drumstick bats, daft games to shirk their
low-wage slog, a beetroot football mob.
Storming in, the chefs would go berserk, swear
blue bloody murder but no one lost their job
'cause no one else was strapped enough to work there.

17 The family treasure

The side of pork my gran bought in the war
hush-hush, in case of Nazi occupation,
lay asleep for 30 years or more
wrapped in blankets in the loft, untasted
until dear Gran passed on. Preserved in salt
the huge half-pig appeared quite unaffected
by time nor flies: a treasure in our vault.
My mother's thrifty nature seemed conflicted.
Uncle Les pronounced it safe to eat:
"Slice it into rashers, fry the portions
and put them in a bap!" Mum barred this treat
and when we had a bonfire, plumped for caution.
Bronzed, it spat and sizzled, then a sweet
bacon aroma tormented all the street.

18 The Scholars

What do they teach, these academics
who run creative writing courses?
Unrhymed, unscanned and esoteric
poems procure their students passes.
They push the canon but fail to grasp
basic technique from poets past.

Me y'see, I am a man
who meters lines whilst mowing lawns
or eating sandwiches in a van
immersed in nature, spraying my scorn
on classroom poets who couldn't tell
a wild goose from a nightingale.

19 Parked on Kent Road

The leafy street is lined with glinting cars.
I munch my sarnies in the van,
window down, first T-shirt of the year
but still some sweat begins

to stipple a ribbon of moisture on my brow.
A pickup and a car swoosh by
and then no sound but blackbirds and the coo
of pigeons far away.

Along the wall tops, ragged privet hedges
look in need of realigning.
Ahead of me a beech tree spreads bare branches,
amber bud beads straining.

Leaning across a hedge the dark green bulk
of an untamed berberis bush
provocatively hints she will not balk
to bare her blossomed flesh.

A streak of bright white rump attracts my gaze:
swooping down on chestnut wings
and settling in a cherry tree, a jay
sits garlanded in pink.

A cyclist sheathed in Lycra speeds for sport.
A white-bloused woman on her own
saunters by, head bowed, her gaze absorbed
by a mobile phone.

20 Rebel rebel!

The prompt today's "a poem that shows rebellion."
I think they've challenged poets such as I
whose rhymes can sound Byronic - even Shelleyan -
to give some less constricting form a try.
So why do I declare myself a rebel
with a sonnet? Anyone can see
the meter's polished smooth as ocean pebbles,
I've sandwiched all my rhymes: A-B-A-B.
But jettisoning these, would I rebel?
My love of complex forms has been my curse:
since trendy poets craft their words to sell
to journals which print nothing but free-verse,
to change my style would be but to obey
that vogue and not rebel in any way.

21 *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*

The gardener's eating sandwiches
on a bench beside the pond.
His autumn planted bulbs stand proud
this April as he anguishes
on a poem. He taps his phone,
waxes on daffodils, rendering
them as perfections brandishing
golden locks, in a grandiose tone.
Now he's enraptured having seen
how beautiful his language is
reflected back at him from the screen.
But while he muses, overawed,
a wild narcissus languishes
at his feet, her charms ignored.

22 Sunrise in the West

When the spin of the earth reversed
the sun went down in the East.
The first became last and the last was first
and the world was all at peace.

Elephants thrived, rhinos were saved
and turtles got salvation.
Forests flourished and deserts were paved
with solar installations.

The President tweeted that he would yield
to whatever Greenpeace demanded.
Coal mines closed, oil wells were sealed
and the Arctic ice expanded.

The homeless were housed in luxury mansions.
All curable ailments were cured.
The elderly prospered on index-linked pensions.
The rich sustained the poor.

Men behaved as gentlemen should
and women broke the glass ceiling.
My lunchtime sandwiches tasted good.
We respected each other's feelings.

I wake with the thought it was all a dream
summoned at my behest,
but reality deems to continue the theme:
the sun rises in the West.

23 One sandwich short

he's one sandwich short of a picnic
he's two cards shy of a deck
he's lost in the woods
he'll never come good
he's burnt out, a gibbering wreck

he's mostly away with the fairies
his ship is on the rocks
his nerves are shot
the man is not
the sharpest tool in the box

they say that he's not the full shilling
and he's got no gas in the tank
he's no flipping use
he's got a screw loose
he's thick as two short planks

I reckon he's having a meltdown
he's constantly losing his rag
he's turned off the light
unable to fight
his way out of a paper bag

he's one tinny short of a six-pack
two citizens shy of a jury
he's an "also ran"
wouldn't trust him to plan
a piss-up in a brewery

he can't tell his arse from his elbow
can't find that same part with both hands
his reason's gone missing
his mind has gone fishing
he's living in Cloud Cuckoo Land

he needs to be put in the nuthouse
he's barking, he's hare-brained, he's challenged
a dingbat, a loon
he hooooooooowls at the moon
a fruitcake, unhinged and unbalanced

he's ga-ga, he's toys in the attic
there's cotton-wool under the dome
he's Bungalow Bill
he's The Fool on the Hill
you knock but there's nobody home

he's a jackass, a dope, he's a head-case
he's bananas, he's gone round the bend
he's out for lunch
and it's my hunch
he talks to invisible friends

his brain cell is getting lonely
he's cracked, he's not all there
he's off his trolley
he's building a folly
he didn't pack a spare

he's wacko, he's bats in the belfry
a numpty, a nutter, a dork
he's full of rot
he's lost the plot
he can't tell butter from Stork

he's up shit creek with no paddle
he's leading us down a blind alley
he's dazed and confused
his wiring has fused
he's bonkers, he's gone doolally

it's rumoured he's losing his marbles
so humour him, he's not too bright
the reason the town
must keep talking him down
is fear

that

he's probably...

24 Elegy

The rivers of the world are thronged with swans.
The lakes resound with loons.
Contented lions shake their manes
and jiggling moths forget there ever shone
lights at night more blinding than the moon.
Herds of herbivores claim grassland plains
and everything is right when we are gone.

Do animals stand beside our graves and weep?
Not domestic cattle
restoring customs long deferred,
nor the battery chickens, nor the sheep
retiring to their mountains where the rattle
of slaughterhouse machines is never heard
now the human species lies asleep.

The woods pulsate with joyful woodpecker tappings
on happy hollow trees.
Pristine beaches sigh in bliss.
With no ship-engine din, just wavelet lappings,
whales regain their sovereignty of the seas.
Vast bales of hawksbill turtles do not miss
choking on our plastic sandwich wrappings.

Past ruined towns the swan graced floods course clear.
The glaciers reach out more
as no new climate crisis lurks.
Wild wolves resume the husbandry of deer.
Green shoots envelope trucks and power saws
while time and rust bite deep into our works
erasing every trace that we were here.

25 Label

47% Polyester

29% Nylon

18% Spandex

6% other man made fibres

Binding Agent: polythene sandwich wrappers

Choking Hazard!

Danger Of Strangulation!

May contain plastic drinking straws

Made in Yorkshire by Seabird Manufacturing

All materials locally sourced from the North Sea

90% Chick Mortality

26 Home grown

What music ever moves you quite so much
as birdsong from the hedge beside your plot?
What sweet caress is tender as the touch
of weeds teased from the fine tilth when you squat
working round the wigwams of the beans?
Do carrots smell as carrotty when bought
in plastic wrapping? Have you ever seen
a ballerina lithe as sweetcorn caught
in a gentle zephyr as it ripens?
And can a piece of Cheddar taste so scrumptious
as when it's in a sandwich, flavour heightened
by crunchy lettuce leaves and your presumptuous
expectation of augmented health
because you know you grew those leaves yourself?

27 Seven of Cups

Seven golden goblets hover in a swirling cloud.

A man is glowing in the centre, hidden by a shroud.

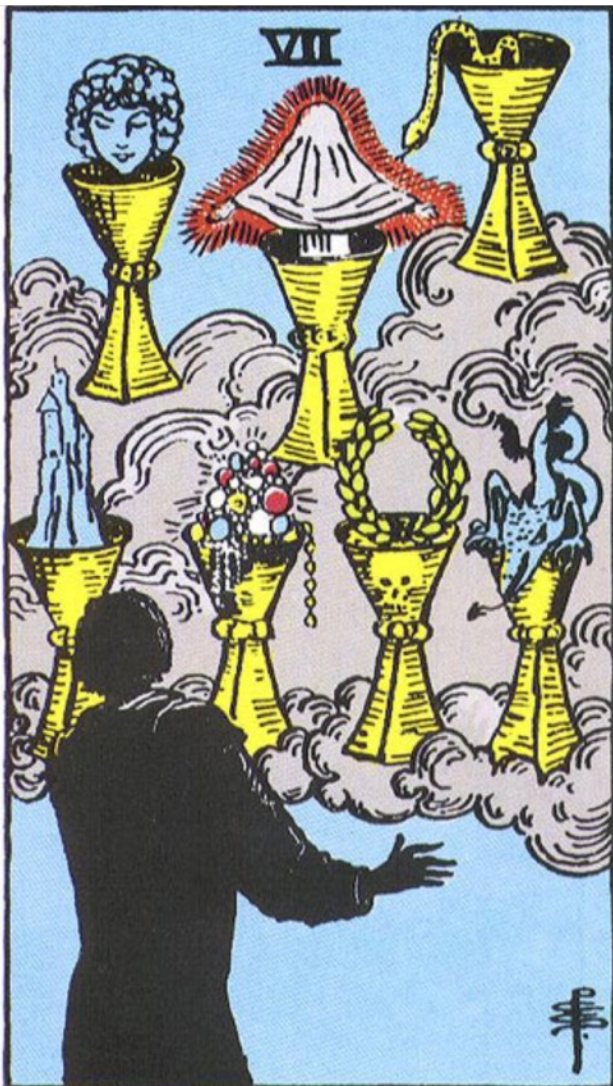
From top right, anti-clockwise, rests an object in each flagon:

a snake, a woman's head, a castle, gems, a wreath, a dragon.

A man stands, back to us. That skull...to what does it pertain?

I picked this card at random but lack time to read the portent.

It's lunchtime, I've got sandwiches and they are more important.



28 Postcard from Tenerife

Yesterday we hiked the Ruta Almendros en Flor, the Almond Blossom Walk from Arguayo. Underfoot, dark sharp shards of lava clinker clinked. The mountainside was riven, ravaged by the earth's hot blood, raven winged and shattered. Drifts of mist clung ribbons over limbs of friendless pines. A charred black hand was reaching from the rubble, a gnarled protrusion carved of coal, twisted, skeletal fingers. The mountain's fiery mantle pulsed up through the dismal charcoal skin. The fingernails shone white, then flushed, then florid. Torrid plumes of blossom steamed against blue sky. We sat eating our sandwiches in awe.



29 Dutch elm

The first of the trees I learned to recognise
when I was a child
was the mighty English Elm.
The way its twigs meshed bare against blue skies
was unmistakable. Although reviled
by nature lovers, their skeletons called up a realm
of thrills where dreamworld spooks materialise.

On family picnics down beside the river,
sandwiches consumed,
I'd find a dead elm newly felled
and with my toe tip, peel a rotten sliver
of bark to see the maze of roads that doomed
the tree with deadly fungus, my hand compelled
to trace the street plan with a ghoulsh shiver.

"Leave that dirty stuff! You'll catch something!"
my mum would shout. "C'mon,"
I'd think, "don't mothers make a fuss!"
The elms dissolved, left hedgerows gapped and thin
but summer family picnics carried on
with Gran and Gramps, then Gran, and then just us,
the beetles boring towns beneath our skins.

"It's such a shame!" This was the shibboleth
about Dutch Elm Disease
from former tree-oblivious folk
who noted a giant's last expiring breath.
I was young and lacked the expertise
to sort them into sycamore, ash, or oak
but from the very start I knew of death.

30 The invention of the sandwich

John Montagu,
the Fourth Earl of Sandwich
should've been a man
who had a lot to do.
Postmaster General,
First Lord of the Admiralty
and Secretary of State
was John Montagu.

His mistress bore nine children,
his wife bore him a son,
George Washington rebelled
but Montagu, despite
his many obligations
found time to play at cards
gambling his money
all day and most the night.

So keen was his attachment
to frittering his fortune,
the Fourth Earl of Sandwich
wouldn't leave the table
but called to his servants
to bring him bread and beef
arranged for him to wolf down
quick as he was able.

His influential friends
observed this strange habit,
how it left him free to gamble,
and they wanted one too.
They called to their own servants
"Bring me a Sandwich!"
for such was the title
of John Montagu.

Soon his name was blandished
all over London:
"The Fourth Earl of Sandwich
has invented something new!"
But even the simplest sandwich
requires a certain know-how:
I reckon such a dandy
would not've had a clue.

If Montagu's sandwich
was assembled in a kitchen
the cook should be the one
to whom the honour's due.

The myth that Montagu
invented the sandwich
like most such stories
is probably untrue.

Appendix

1. "Write a poem that is based on a secret shame, or a secret pleasure."

Straightforward enough - what's for tomorrow?

2. "Write a poem that plays with voice. For example, you might try writing a stanza that recounts something in the first-person, followed by a stanza recounting the same incident in the second-person, followed by a stanza that treats the incident from a third-person point of view. Or you might try a poem in the form of a dialogue, which necessarily has two "I" speakers, addressing two "you"s."

I went for the dialogue which is always a challenge to write in rhyme and meter. I've tried it in all my books and most have been better than this attempt. Formal verse geeks will have noticed that Cheese & Onion is speaking in common tetrameter couplets while Brie & Grape with Ruby Port Chutney speaks in the more refined iambic pentameter ABABs. She makes a second appearance in the next poem which is far more successful, so I'd move on quickly to that if I were you.

3. "Write a list poem in which all the items are made-up names."

They suggested made-up band names but my self-imposed complication required me to do sandwiches. Although some of these are made-up, most are things that people have actually eaten. Or maybe it's only me...

4. "Write a poem that is about something abstract – perhaps an ideal like "beauty" or "justice," but which discusses or describes that abstraction in the form of relentlessly concrete nouns. Adjectives are fine too!"

That all sounds a bit literary but I think this is the sort of thing they were looking for.

5. "Write a poem that reacts both to photography and to words in a language not your own. Begin with a photograph. Now find a poem in a language you don't know. Ignore any accompanying English translation. Now start translating the poem into English, with the idea that the poem is actually "about" your photograph. Use the look and feel of the words in the original to guide you along as you write, while trying to describe your photograph."

Complete gibberish to me. You can't translate into your own language if you've no idea what the original says. Words have no "look and feel" if they are foreign to you and on the page, because you can't know how they should sound. This day was the closest I came to giving up on the NaPoWriMo project. In despair I went for sarcasm. Spanish is the only language other than my native one I have any faint acquaintance with, and I've had an interest in Pablo Neruda since visiting Chile in 2007 (see my book "Gringo on the Chickenbus" for more about Chile). So I took a photo of my own lunch box and adapted the Neruda poem "Ode to a Naked Beauty" to fit. I took this translation from the website Poemhunter.com and I should also credit the translator, but since the website doesn't I've no idea who it was.

6. "Write a poem that stretches your comfort zone with line breaks. That could be a poem with very long lines, or very short lines. Or a poem that blends the two."

What I've written should be self-explanatory unless the device you're reading from has rearranged the line breaks for me, in which case it will be nonsense.

7. "Write out a list of all of your different layers of identity. For example, you might be a wife, a grandmother, a Philadelphian, a dental assistant, a rabid Phillies fan, a seamstress, retiree, agnostic, cancer survivor, etc.. These are all ways you could be described or lenses you could be viewed through. Now divide all of those things into lists of what makes you feel powerful and what makes you feel vulnerable. Now write a poem in which one of the identities from the first list contends or talks with an identity from the second list."

I'm not too comfortable with public self-analysis of this sort, but NaPoWriMo is about trying new things so I followed the prompt to the letter. If people ask me what I do, I reply either "gardener" or "poet" depending on who I'm talking to. Make up your own mind which makes me feel powerful and which vulnerable.

8. "Write poems in which mysterious and magical things occur."

I'm a militant rationalist so my poems don't often feature magic unless I'm being sarcastic (see the verse-novel "God The Banana" if you'd like to witness my bile at its greenest). The very first draft of this poem mentioned the legendary prophesier Mother Shipton who lived in a cave in the mediaeval town of Knaresborough, at the far end of a beautiful wooded gorge from my home town of Harrogate. The old witch got edited out of the poem before I even made the daily post of it on my Facebook page, but metaphorically speaking there's few events more magical for me than the return of migrant birds in April so I've followed the prompt (sort of).

9. "Write a poem in which something big and something small come together."

Easy. Next!

10. "Write a poem of simultaneity – in which multiple things are happening at once."

It was becoming a doddle now, so I challenged myself to write it in trimeter lines of iamb-amphibrach-spondee. If you have the faintest idea what I'm on about you are welcome to be critical.

11. "Write a poem that addresses the future, answering the questions "What does y(our) future provide? What is your future state of mind? If you are a citizen of the "union" that is your body, what is your future "state of the union" address?"

I label myself an environmentalist so "the future" is my primary consideration in everything. Therefore it's a pity I provided such a shit response to this prompt! I've never discovered the name of this type of mirror image poem but I come across them occasionally and they fascinate me. I have tried it once before: "Birdwatchers Can Also Be Snorkelers" is a mirror image sonnet in my book Gringo on the Chickenbus, although probably the least successful poem in the book. Come on...it's difficult! There was a superb example getting shared around on Facebook last year about contrasting attitudes to refugees. I don't know who wrote it but they are a genius and this is my paltry effort to emulate it. If you think it's a bit crap I'm not going to argue. Let's move swiftly on...

12. "Write a haibun that takes in the natural landscape of the place you live."

A haibun is a traditional Japanese form consisting of a block of prose followed by a haiku that summarises the prose. I wrote mine very quickly, collecting impressions of the garden I was maintaining one damp April morning.

13. "Write a poem in which the words or meaning of a familiar phrase get up-ended."

I was feeling uninspired this day so I cheated. I already had a poem that plays with the phrase "the elephant in the room" which will be a part of my forthcoming collection "Birder in the Bushveldt" if I ever find a sufficiently adventurous publisher for it. All I've done is to add a sandwich break as a middle stanza.

14. "Write entries for an imaginary dream dictionary. Pick one (or more) of the following words, and write about what it means to dream of these things: teacup, hammer, seagull, ballet slipper, shark, wobbly table, dentist, rowboat."

Well done if you've stuck with me thus far, and here's your reward: this and the next three poems are quite good. I think so anyway; you are permitted to disagree. This one was written on April 14th 2018, when my nation awoke to discover our ineffectual Prime Minister had bypassed Parliament, ordering British forces to collaborate with President Trump in an overnight bombing raid on Syria. I was in a foul mood, so I simply took the list NaPoWriMo gave me and used it in that order, with the addition of a sandwich at the beginning.

15. "Write a poem in which a villain faces an unfortunate situation, and is revealed to be human (but still evil)."

I invented Jasper Shillingsworth but I'm sure anyone who's ever been tenant to a private landlord will recognise him.

16. "Write a poem that prominently features the idea of play."

Partly true.

17. "Write a poem re-telling a family anecdote that has stuck with you over time."

Mostly true.

18. "Find a poem in a book or magazine (ideally one you are not familiar with). Use a piece of paper to cover over everything but the last line. Now write a line of your own that completes the thought of that single line you can see, or otherwise responds to it. Now move your piece of paper up to uncover the second-to-last line of your source poem, and write the second line of your new poem to complete/respond to this second-to-last line. Keep going, uncovering and writing, until you get to the first line of your source poem, which you will complete/respond to as the last line of your new poem."

Absolute codswallop of a prompt! I did exactly what they said and I produced a roll of gobbledegook. So I deleted that entirely in the editing of this book, and I wrote a fresh poem that duplicates the form and responds to the message of my source poem: "The Scholars" by W.B. Yeats.

19. "Write a paragraph that briefly recounts a story, describes the scene outside your window, or even gives directions from your house to the grocery store. Now try erasing words from this paragraph to create a poem or, alternatively, use the words of your paragraph to build a new poem."

I wrote the paragraph very quickly while eating sandwiches parked in my van on Kent Road, one of the leafiest suburban streets of Harrogate. The first version I posted on my BirdBard Facebook page was free verse and absolutely terrible so I've abandoned it entirely, gone back to the original prose and made a proper poem out of it. It's not brilliant but it's better than it was.

20. "Write a poem that involves rebellion in some way."

Self-explanatory, with a nod to David Bowie in the title.

21. "Write a poem that plays with the myth of Narcissus in some way."

I don't know what possessed me to attempt a sonnet in tetrameters rather than pentameters since even the Immortal Bard came a cropper when he tried that (look up the deplorable Sonnet 145 if you don't know). I think my effort could be made into a presentable poem if I would put my narcissistic ego aside and add another metric foot to each line, but NaPoWriMo is about encouraging us to try new things so I have stubbornly kept it as it is.

22. "Take one of the following statements of something impossible, and then write a poem in which the impossible thing happens:"

The first statement on the list was "the sun can't rise in the west", so I took that.

23. "Write a poem based in sound. The poem, for example, could incorporate overheard language. Perhaps it could incorporate a song lyric in some way, or language from something often heard spoken aloud (a prayer, a pledge, the Girl Scout motto). Or you could use a regional or local phrase from your hometown that you don't hear elsewhere, e.g. "that boy won't amount to a pinch."

All my poems are based in sound anyway, but I took the idea of overheard language and made a list of every colloquial, witty or downright rude expression I ever remember hearing, to suggest someone is under-endowed in the brain department. OK, I might have made up a few new ones too. This poem is proving to be the most popular performance poem of this collection, so I've made it the title poem.

24. "Write an elegy – a poem typically written in honor or memory of someone dead. But we'd like to challenge you to write an elegy that has a hopefulness to it."

I'm not sure if the death of the entire human race qualifies as hopefulness in most people's reckoning, but to many other species it would. I've never been keen on elegies - there's enough grief in the world already without poets adding to it.

25. "Write a poem that takes the form of a warning label . . . for yourself!"

I didn't follow the prompt this day beyond taking the idea of a label. This piece does not conform to my rigid and narrow-minded definition of what a poem is, but it's something that's been drifting around half formed in my mind for several years so I decided to give it life. The marine plastic problem was an obsession of mine for a good two decades before it became a fashionable cause. Several people have told me the piece is effective.

26. "Write a poem that includes images that engage all five senses. Try to be as concrete and exact as possible with the "feel" of what the poem invites the reader to see, smell, touch, taste and hear."

What they asked.

27. "Pick a card (any card) from this online guide to the tarot, and then to write a poem inspired either by the card or by the images or ideas that are associated with it."

I have sparse tolerance for any variety of mystical bollocks, but I went with the prompt and picked Seven of Cups at random. If you have nothing better to worry about you can make what you like of seven heptameter lines (spooky sound effect...)

28. "Draft a prose poem in the form/style of a postcard."

My most recent holiday was in Tenerife so that's what I wrote about. A poem has line breaks and a reason for them whereas prose does not, so there is no such entity as a "prose poem" in my opinion but I did what they said.

29. "Write a poem based on the Plath Poetry Project's calendar. Simply pick a poem from the calendar, and then write a poem that responds or engages with your chosen Plath poem in some way."

Disagree if you like but I think this is the star poem of this collection. I picked a Sylvia Plath poem called "Elm" for inspiration because it was closest to the day's date on the calendar. It brought back memories of the Dutch Elm Disease epidemic and my 1970s childhood. It doesn't respond nor engage much at all with Sylvia's manical, piercingly introspective poem, but I think she might have approved its sense of morbid resignation.

30. "Write a poem that engages with a strange and fascinating fact."

It was inevitable that the 4th Earl of Sandwich would find his way into this collection, but he only made it in the very last poem. All historical facts are accurate and the result of painstaking research over a period of many minutes on Wikipedia.

About the author

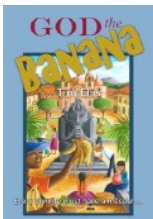
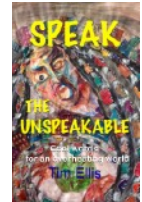


Tim Ellis is a poetry writer and performer, based in Harrogate, North Yorkshire. His day job is a self-employed gardener, and other interests include wildlife watching, nature conservation and travel. More information is available on his website www.birdbard.weebly.com where his other books may also be purchased:

Speak The Unspeakable is a short collection of poems on a theme of climate change, published to coincide with the signing of the COP21 Paris Climate Agreement in 2015.

“...fiery and unapologetic, and represents the sort of bottled anger which Tim Ellis can write powerfully.”

- Sabotage Reviews



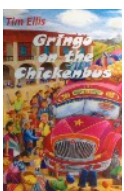
God The Banana is a novel written as 437 sonnets. When the bright young graduate Benjamin Bremmer arrives in the mysterious tropical island republic of Amanga, he is seeking some purpose to his life. Unbeknownst to him, the evil local deity Imti Mentoo has already decided Ben's purpose.

“In Tim Ellis' hands the sonnet becomes an elastic form which he uses to sustain an outrageous and sometimes offensive narrative: this is not for the fainthearted or prudish.”

- Hannah Stone

On The Verge is a verse-novel telling the incredible story of a young hitch-hiker who is given a ride by Arno, a bad tempered trucker driving a gigantic juggernaut. “...a rip-roaring picaresque journey, a mini novel in verse, that provides any fan of poetry a wealth of imagery and musicality.”

– Mark Connors



Gringo on the Chickenbus is the remarkable poetic record of a number of journeys that Tim made with his partner Robbie Burns to Central and South America. It is beautifully illustrated by Robbie. Gringo on the Chickenbus is also available direct from the publisher www.stairwellbooks.co.uk

“...thought-provoking and an enjoyable read.”

– Joanna Ezekiel

Birds of the World in Colour is a fascinating yet fun collection of 40 sonnets on a bird theme. Published by Flarestack in 2004.

