

SOFT SUNDAY

A first verse by John Owen Smith

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Soft Sunday

Soft! A Sunday morning dawns,
I wake in peace and look around
Surprised to find, amid the yawns,
A strange bright light, a lack of sound.

Soft! A parted blind shows why
For, peering through a frosted pane,
I see the snow that gives a lie
To those who last night forecast rain.

Soft! Along each leaf and bough
Is drawn a highlight, white and pure,
Which gives a prominence somehow
To features yesterday obscure.

Soft! A pair of blackbirds perch,
Survey the scene in monochrome
Then, sensing movement, leave to search
In silence for a better home.

Soft! The sounds of traffic hush
As, cautiously, the few with needs
Negotiate the off-white slush
Left by the Council gritter's deeds.

Soft! I close the blind once more
And tiptoe back to rest my head,
My slippers empty on the floor,
It's Sunday – softest in my bed!

Squirrels

I sit and watch the squirrels run their impossible
courses –

High up through waving whip-like latticed branches,
Leaping thoughtlessly from tree to tree
 At frantic pace
 Two partners race.

One jumps, and instantly their ways divide as
Lightened branch springs high and loaded falls;
 Within a wink
 Their paths relink.

Oh elegant and graceful flowing creatures!
Children's books and savings banks agree
 Your image should
 Be very good.

But when you chew the casings from my cables,
Squirrel Nutkin's figure frankly galls;
 A rat you are,
 With good PR!

File it under J

In my house we have a phrase,
We use it every day –
When problems rise to mammoth size
Say, “File it under ‘J!’”

When there’s something on your mind
That just won’t go away,
Just take my tip before you flip
And file it under ‘J’.

The saying started long ago
When I was given for a jest
A heavy cast brass monogram,
And my initial’s – yes, you’ve guessed –

On the shelf it stood in style
And soon, to my dismay,
Became a home for unpaid bills,
And census forms that can’t be filled,
And letters to reply to still,
This bold and brazen ‘J’.

And now it’s true that when the muse
Eludes me come what may,
I simply say, “Another day” –
And file it under ‘J’.

Sylvie

Smile the way that Sylvie smiled,
She saw your face and went her ways,
Rejoicing in the afterglow of love,
And turning from your gaze.

Cry the way that Sylvie cried,
Although the rain had washed her face,
She couldn't stay to thank the tear-stained clouds,
But found another place.

Run the way that Sylvie ran,
Her golden tresses flying wild,
The woodland glades abound with shadow forms
And one more mystic child.

Live the way that Sylvie lives,
In bright Elysian fields of green,
Among the host of players not in play
All waiting for their scene.

See the way that Sylvie sees,
With age-wise eyes she understands
How mortal souls live on to strive anew,
And watch from hidden land.

Serried Rows

How best should *I*, whose only weapon's wit,
Confront the challenge of these changing days?
Beneath the thin veneer of culture's skin
Lie deep unyielding roots and custom'd ways.

I'll use what sense I have to understand,
Within the province of my nature's skills,
Such base dynamics bred into the bone
As manifest themselves in stubborn wills.

Though never ripe, my fruit must now be picked;
My thoughts, transferred through keyboard into prose,
Must advertise themselves for your delight
Like plums on mongers' stalls in serried rows.

And who can tell what treasures you might find
Inside such fruit, to fill the eager mind?

Daily Love

My love creeps early to my room
and wakes me with a gentle kiss.
I rise, and slowly, bit by bit,
expose my night-white body to her gaze.
Stretching, shaking off my clinging sloth
I greet her – for at night she is not there.
Ablutions done, I hurry down
to meet her now before the kitchen window,
and breakfast gladly in her cheerful sight.
What shall we do together this fine day,
my love and I?

Decision made, a picnic packed,
we take the train towards the distant shore.
Surf, shells and sand seem sympathetic
to my loved one's glance. The day moves on and,
as is natural for one with her hot passions,
she hourly now begins to lose her midday glow;
begins to dip towards the west horizon:
a quarter gone, then half, then – stately, slow,
the earth's diurnal movement
parts her from my sight;
a last brief smile,
and then my love,
Goodnight!

A Day at West Wittering

We knew they'd all arrive.
The world would populate the shore
like multicoloured ants.
So best be quick to pick
a patch of litter-covered sand
while space was there.

We left at ten to eight,
the weather bright
but not yet over-hot or humid;
made good time,
paid up our two-pound fee,
staked out our spot, and sat
beneath the shade.

We started reading books.
Then as the sun crept higher in the sky
we took the plunge,
strode through the matted throngs
now on the beach,
to meet the sea –
perchance to swim.

We stayed a few hours more.
Then, in the heat, beat our retreat
to Chichester for lunch.
Had tea for two
with rolls and jam,
enough to span the time
till heading home.

South Western Track

Four guiding rails to Waterloo,
Four more to bring us back;
From Woking through to Clapham runs
The main South Western track.

The green domain of Sandown Park
And Brooklands old banked curve
Recede at speed, as train and crew
Pass through the land they serve.

Seasoned folk cocoon themselves,
Immersed in print and news,
Only daily tickets see
The picture window's views.

Through Surbiton and Wimbledon,
The Telegraphs and Times
Move swiftly on to Clapham
With its doleful Dopplered chimes.

Then, like articulated worms
Converging on their nest,
The trains arrive at Waterloo,
To stand in line abreast.

Moving grimly to their chores
The crowds disperse without a sound,
To banks or to Department Stores
By foot or bus or Underground.

Eight hours of toil at beck and call,
Eight hours to entertain,
Then, in a rush, return to play
Familiar trains again.

Four guiding rails from Waterloo,
Four more to take us back;
A true white collar artery,
The main South Western track.

To Sheffield

City of Steel, your Master Cutler,
Steam-hauled out of Marylebone,
Shared the tracks of London Transport
Over which I've merrily flown.

Standing awed on Chalfont's platform
As the brute came thundering through,
I'd await the Chesham shunter,
Saddle-backed with tapering flue.

Since that time, although I've often
Travelled north, I'd never quite
Got round to Sheffield, but today
I'm here to stay for just one night.

Not by railway locomotive,
(Though I should have, heaven knows!),
In the end I drove my motor,
Up the M1's contraflows.

Getting there was quite a doddle,
Midday midweek isn't frantic;
Coming back on Friday evening,
That's a very different antic.

South of Loughboro', north of Leicester,
Fourteen vehicles in a pile;
Further back we queued for ages,
Fuming mile on fuming mile.

City of Steel and Master Cutler,
May your commerce thrive again,
May your charms once more allure me –
But next time I'll come by train!

Prang!

There was a lass named Laura Cass
who drove a Ford Fiesta;
The rain today made puddles
and these made her skid. It messed her
front bumper as she ricocheted
and bounced along my car's side,
and then she hit head on
a BMW on the far side.

This pretty well wrote both cars off
and, though no-one was harmed,
it left them feeling shaken
and a little bit alarmed.

My car escaped with doors well scraped
and one back wheel gone flat,
though when looking at the others
I was quite content at that.

So we took down all the details
that we'd need to claim insurance,
then waited for the police to come
to ascertain the law man's
opinion of the whole affair.
But after that, for me,
I just simply had to change my wheel
and drive back home for tea!

I was lucky, wasn't I?

Young Moon – Cold Car

Tonight I see the young moon
with the old moon in her arms –
She's flat on her back,
An ungainly pose;
Her earth-lit burden
Barely shows –
A dusky disc indeed.

Tonight I see Orion
Shining clear as landing lights –
His very distinctive
Four-cornered spread;
His three-starred belt
Askew, a dread
Galactic giant, agreed.

Tonight I see my Mazda
With a glazed veneer of ice –
It's stood in the car park
For just an hour;
Already white
As Homepride flour –
A frosty frisky steed.

Picnic

In the Mini, heavy load,
To the common down the road,
Dogs and children, dad and mum,
Bags and boxes, here they come.

Doors burst open, legs fly out,
Dogs are barking, children shout,
All resolved to have some fun
At a picnic in the sun.

Parents sitting read the news,
Try the crossword, curse the clues,
Summer sunshine, azure sky,
Relaxation, hours fly.

Hungry children, picnic spread,
Eat the cake and leave the bread,
Some go this way, some go that,
Hide and seeking, tit-for-tat.

Shadows lengthen, fresh breeze cools,
Pick up litter, pack up stools,
In the Mini, weary load,
Home to bed just up the road.

The Tooth Fairy

Today has been special, I just had to shout,
I was eating an apple, my first tooth came out!
It's under my pillow as safe as can be
And the Tooth Fairy's coming to leave me 10p.

Shall I spend it on choc'late or sweets or a lolly?
Or save it for later to pay for a dolly?

But what if my sister is telling me right?
She says all the fairies are on strike tonight!
And she thinks that I'm silly and making a fuss,
And she says that I'm doing it so that I just
get attention from Mummy – but I think she's jealous,
And she's got more money than me now, as well as
the pound that she got for her birthday last week,
And there's Auntie's book token, 'cause I had a peek
in the box in her bedroom. But really I think
that she's fibbing, 'cause Mummy just gave me a wink
and she says that she's sure that the fairy will come
if I clean my teeth nicely and don't suck my thumb.

So I'm going to bed now, and straight off to sleep.
I think my Mum's nice, but my sister's a creep!

Santa's (Temporary) Solution

Santa claws at windows, doors,
And lots of other places,
He can't get in, the gap's too thin,
What disappointed faces
Will greet the dawn as, all forlorn,
They find their empty stockings
Still hanging there, untouched and bare,
The very thought was shocking!

But our St. Nick is not so thick,
He cracked this one, by Jiminy,
For since that night he's found it's right
To come in down the chimney.

P.S. – Since then he's stumped again,
He's taken quite a beating
Since mankind tired of open fires
And took to central heating!

Roller Skating

Today we're going roller skating
Never mind the weather,
If it rains we'll all get wet,
We'll all get wet together.

Oh!

Mabel's mum's just rung to say
That Mabel won't be coming;
She says it's raining cats and dogs
And Mabel's nose is running.

Huh!

Never liked her anyway,
Let's all go on without her.
Why not? You cow! I heard you
Telling tales last week about her.

Look,

I don't want to go now,
Not with you and your kid sister,
And anyway it's raining hard
And my foot's got a blister.

Ah!

Mark's just rung to say he'll come
And bring his cousin Bill –
You know, the one you fancied
When he stayed last spring with Jill.

Oh,

Really? Well, that's different –
S'pose we mustn't let them down –
I'll just ring mum and tell her
We'll be longer down in town.

So,

We're all going roller skating,
Never mind the weather,
Let it rain, we'll all get wet,
We'll all get wet together.

A Gristly Tail

JAWS	Just A White Shark,
GNAW	Gliding Near A Woman
THROUGH	Taking Her Regular Outing. Ugly Great Hulk:
THE	To Him, Exhilaration;
THIN	To Her, Instant Nausea.
SKIN	Suddenly Keen Icy Numbness
TO EAT	Takes Over. Eventually All Thought
SWEET	Subsides When Everything's Eaten, Tastily
MEAT	Munching Ears And Toes.

Maximillian

Maximillian, three weeks old,
Fits inside my hand

Maximillian, three weeks old,
Learns to use his sand

Maximillian, three weeks old,
Laps his milk, well just

Maximillian, three weeks old,
Always overfussed

Maximillian, three weeks old,
Tiny pink-tipped paws

Maximillian, three weeks old,
Shows the dogs his claws

Maximillian, three weeks old,
Clambers up my leg

Maximillian, three weeks old,
Still eats milk and egg

Maximillian, three weeks old,
With his big blue eyes

Maximillian, three weeks old,
Takes us by surprise

Maximillian, three weeks old,
Starts to scratch and bite

Maximillian, three weeks old,
With me as I write

Maximillian, three weeks old,
Like some clockwork toy
But Maximillian, three weeks old's
An ever-growing boy!

Cats-22

Cats may come and cats may go,
we've got a puss-flap now you know;
Inserted in the kitchen door
about six inches from the floor,

So when they want to dig a hole,
or hunger after short-tailed vole,
they push it with their furry noses
(jump out quick before it closes

like the clappers on their tail),
then saunter off to find the trail
that takes them to their favoured spot;
But here's the problem – We have got

two Labradors who sit inside
and watch the flap all eagle-eyed,
ears pricked to catch the faintest sound
of interest to an active hound.

A footfall, or an opening gate,
is quite enough – one doesn't wait
to find out if it's friend or foe;
straight for the kitchen door we go,

First dog to get there seeks the trap,
thrusts noble features through the gap,
surveys the outside world with pride
then, with the one who's left inside,

sets up a sonic barrage fit
to raise the dead. Now, this is it –

Imagine you're a little cat
returning from a tiring trot
and suddenly confronting that.
How would you like it? Not a lot!

Wheelie Bins

So humping's had its day!

And Householders (or Occupiers)
must henceforth
disgorge their garbage only in
the wheelèd bin provided.

You'll use it come what may.

For only if it's in those bins
will operators cart away
your garden waste
and all domestic rubbish.

So wheel them out, turn them about,
leave them with handles pointing out.

We'll benefit they say.

But spare a thought for local hounds
who can no longer supplement
their meagre diet
with a weekly forage.

They're only Human after all!

I'd only gone a minute,
Well maybe three or four,
I'd shut him in the room there
When a knock came at the door.

I'd just served up the dinner,
Roast chicken on a plate;
I'd called the family several times –
As usual they were late.

I'd only gone a minute,
Well p'raps a little more,
The man was selling mops and things
And, goodness, could he jaw!

I bought three useless gadgets
Just to send him on his way,
Then went back to the dining room
And – well, what can you say?

The table was immaculate,
No napkin out of place,
The dog was where I'd left him –
But with that look on his face.

And in the middle of the set,
Just where I'd left the bird,
My eyes espied an empty plate –
The silence could be heard.

I'd only gone a minute,
Well perhaps a little longer,
But that's enough when you're a hound
With instincts which are stronger.

And when I rang my mother up
Next day to spill my woes,
She said, "They're only human
After all – that's how it goes!"

I'd only gone a minute,
But a minute lost my dinner –
And now the dog gets left outside
He's looking so much thinner!

Double Dactyl

Flippity-flappity,
Two pterodactyls
Soared up in the air
Where they wheeled and they jinked;

Whether their antics were
Extemporaneous
We'll never find out,
'Cause now they're extinct!

Noble Hound (a Villanelle)

The hound is such a noble beast,
 He dogs your footsteps all the time
And doesn't worry in the least.

The meanest scraps become a feast,
 He eats them if they're caked with grime,
The hound is such a noble beast.

If you should find his muzzle greased,
 Your dinner's gone – for he can climb,
And doesn't worry in the least.

Unleavened bread or made with yeast,
 It's all the same – it seems a crime –
The hound is such a noble beast.

He lives to see his girth increased,
 He'll eat it sweet, or sour as lime,
And doesn't worry in the least.

And if you think one day he's ceased,
Beware – it's just a pantomime!
The hound is such a noble beast
And doesn't worry in the least.

Wild Dogs

(a cautionary Pantoum)

A hound as you know can run wild in a pack,
Whenever you slip off the lead you should care,
And once he's away he may never come back,
It just takes a small thing to make him go spare.

Whenever you slip off the lead you should care,
He could be in sheep and he could be in trouble,
It just takes a small thing to make him go spare,
And he'll be away in a trice at the double.

He could be in sheep and he could be in trouble,
Once out of your sight he'll be out of control,
And he'll be away in a trice at the double
On seeing a rabbit run into its hole.

Once out of your sight he'll be out of control,
There's no way for you to speed up his return,
On seeing a rabbit run into its hole,
He'll take off like Concorde with full afterburn.

There's no way for you to speed up his return,
A hound as you know can run wild in a pack,
He'll take off like Concorde with full afterburn,
And once he's away he may never come back.

Canny Canine (a Sestina)

There's nothing quite as canny as a hound –
He'll give you a performance fit to tease,
Arriving at your side when any sound
That might mean extra food wafts on the breeze –
And then he'll salivate and paw the ground
And act in ways that by and large displease.

And when I say that certain acts displease
I'm thinking of the habits of the hound
That can, from time to time, pollute the breeze
And give a very rude and common sound –
There's times when one can laugh and take a tease,
And others when you'd best fall through the ground.

And talking of the business of the ground,
One more of those occasions that displease
Is stepping in the motions of a hound
And spreading its aroma in the breeze –
The reasons for not liking this are sound;
You have to take your shoes off quick and tease

The thick brown slurry from your arches, tease
It from the rubber tread that grips the ground,
A high event that's destined to displease
And turn the rage of ages on the hound;
Who, sensing something iffy on the breeze,
Will slink off, tail held low, without a sound.

This strategy of his is justly sound –
Of knowing when to start and stop the tease,
There's nothing in the nature of the hound
That really makes him eager to displease;
It's just that, being forced to use the ground,
It leaves him at the mercy of the breeze.

And many hound-made signs ride on the breeze,
His nose more sensible than ears, a sound
May signal dinner, but to really tease
The canine species, spread along the ground
A smelly trail: that's now you can displease
And get your own back on your errant hound.

For when your hound is following the breeze,
You tease him with a countermanding sound –
Nose to the ground, ears show how you displease!

Sunday Play

God has turned the light out,
The sun has gone away,
A cloud has come to cover it
And rain is on the way

I feel the air grow colder
I see the sky go grey,
And all because it's Sunday
And I've just come out to play!

Sweet Fanny Adams

From Hampshire, rising up through underlying beds
In verdant meadows west of Alton town,
The River Wey begins its double-headed path,
To Tilford first then, fortified, runs down
In tribute to the Thames's peaceful flow
At Weybridge, rolling onwards, stately, slow.

Around the fields and hillsides near its rural source
Grow hops, in gardens crossed with poles and wire;
Those hops which give full flavour to the Alton beer;
The hops which every year bring forth for hire
Whole families, who claim to find delights
In plucking dry green fruit from twining heights.

The stranger to these parts might view a simple scene
Of peace between bucolic squires and madams,
But in tranquil settings evil passions lurk,
As seen by what befell poor Fanny Adams –
Playing with her sister and a friend
One August afternoon she met her end.

Young Fanny, only eight in eighteen sixty-seven,
And with full life to live one might expect,
Was taken, so the court was told, by Frederick Baker,
Local clerk, whose gruesome actions wrecked
The peace of Alton causing all to grieve,
And for his sins was hanged on Christmas eve.

No need to detail how the dismal deed was done,
Enough to say her body was dismembered,
Spread about the fields, or some say in the river,
Either way, an incident remembered
Not just locally, for through the Press
The nation heard of Fanny's grim distress.

At just that time, as chance would seemingly dictate,
The Navy changed its issue to the tars
From salted tack to low-grade tins of chopped up mutton,
Giving rise to rumours in the bars
That Fanny's end and their unwelcome ration
Were juxtaposed in some unpleasant fashion.

And so the English language found a new expression
From this sorry tale of local pain,
And far beyond the confines of the Royal Navy
Folk would use poor Fanny's name in vain;
And even here in Alton I would say
Not many now would give a sweet FA!

The Headley Chestnut Tree

Oh stately pole that yet more grandly grows
Amid the green and pleasant heart of Headley,
Your wrought iron ankle bracelet freshly black,
Your footloose finger post restored most readily.

Palmately compound are your verdant leaves
Emerging from the sticky buds of spring,
White stately blooms your candled clusters rise,
Full succour to the local bees on wing.

And in the autumn, as your full nuts fall,
The passing children shrill with sheer delight,
Select the best, string up the sturdy fruit
To see who conquers who in swinging fight.

Upon the ancient site of stocks and shame
Your seed was sown by Headley men, whose boast
With pomp and pride a hundred years ago
May once again become our present toast –

Oh *aesculus hippocastanum*, may
You stand here yet five score years from today!

Written in 1991

Index of Titles

Soft Sunday	1
Squirrels.....	2
File it under 'J'	3
Sylvie.....	4
Serried Rows.....	5
Daily Love	6
A Day at West Wittering.....	7
South Western Track	8
To Sheffield	9
Prang!	10
Young Moon – Cold Car	11
Picnic.....	12
The Tooth Fairy	13
Santa's (Temporary) Solution.....	14
Roller Skating	15
A Gristly Tail	16
Maximillian	17
Cats-22	18
Wheelie Bins	19
They're only Human after all!	20
Double Dactyl.....	21
Noble Hound	22
Wild Dogs.....	23
Canny Canine	24
Sunday Play	25
Sweet Fanny Adams	26
The Headley Chestnut Tree.....	28