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Poems

Jo Shapcott

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Poems

Abstract

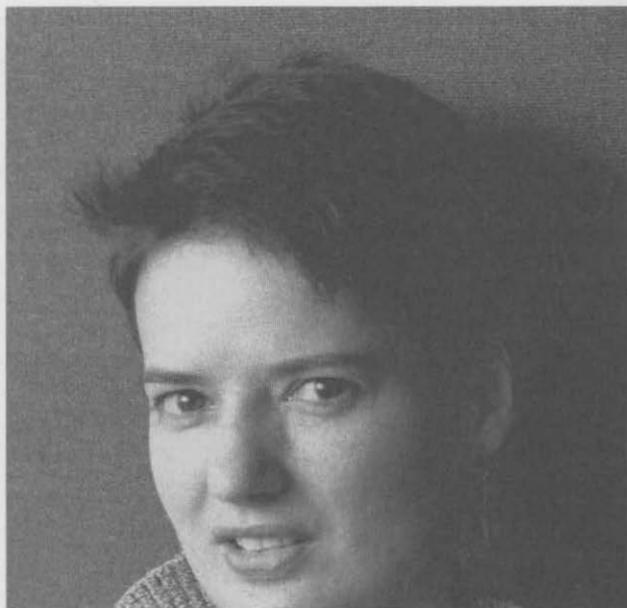
BO PEEP SAVES THE WORLD, RHINOCEROS, THE MAD COW IN SPACE, LIFE, LITTLE REQUIEM



UNITED KINGDOM

Jo Shapcott came to prominence when she won nine prizes in the National Poetry Competition in 1972. Her first collection, *Flights*, was published in 1974. In 1979 her second book, *Flights*, was awarded the Commonwealth Prize. She is the first person to have won the National Poetry Competition twice – it was awarded again in 1991 for the poetry collection *Flights*. These books, *Flights* and *Flights*, have won several other awards and prizes for her poetry including the New Statesman's Andrew Parker Award. In 1991 she was the Judith E Wilson Senior Visiting Fellow at Cambridge University. Her second volume of poems, *Flights*, published by OUP in 1991, was a Poetry Book Society Choice.

— JO SHAPCOTT —



Jo Shapcott came to prominence when she won first prize in the National Poetry Competition in 1986. Her first collection, *Electroplating the Baby*, published in 1988 by Bloodaxe Books, was awarded a Commonwealth Prize. She is the first person to have won the National Poetry Competition twice – it was awarded again in 1991 for the widely acclaimed poem, 'Phrase Book'. Shapcott has won several other awards and prizes for her poetry including the *New Statesman's* Prudence Farmer Award. In 1991 she was the Judith E Wilson Senior Visiting Fellow at Cambridge University. Her second volume of poems, *Phrase Book*, published by OUP in 1992, was a Poetry Book Society Choice.

Jo Shapcott

BO PEEP SAVES THE WORLD

Sheep are self-sacrificing,
though not many people know it.
You can set a flock to eat up
the smog, to nibble at the nitrate
slime on the field and suck
the effluent from the river.

Best of all, their farts are full of ozone
and they do their utmost as they
huddle under trees against the storms
to send enough into the atmosphere
for mending the holes in the sky
over the Antarctic and the Arctic.

They can stand a season or two
of this work, remaining strong and clean
and even lambing, though they won't have twins.
Then the heart goes out of them
and they crumble one by one over a few days,
little heaps of spoiled wool dotting the field
too dangerous to touch.

RHINOCEROS

What else to do
but nourish the rhinoceros
inside me, feed him up with good hay,

cream his rough hide
with almond oil
until it gleams,

polish the two horns
on his face with beeswax
until he gets surprising glimpses,

and let him roll, roll, roll
of mad within my heart
and the deepest pit
Once prepared, let him
in towers,
then his scaly feet

THE MAD COW IN SPACE

The alien is no planet and I write
fall over it you passed me for a year
the Earth's crust, I'm weightless
I can see them too, leaning past
billions are on the Underground
The sun stars with an atmosphere
still beautiful but ruined for me now
of heads on spikes outside the Tower, still
of crazy vision showing me a row
Dove on there is little England, London

LIFE

the world
is the bearing
My life as a bat

just where you are
I can hear
If I pinch it right

I can hear inside your body
If I pinch it right

rinse his scaly feet
in rosewater.
Once prepared let him

find the deepest pit
of mud within my heart
and let him roll, roll, roll.

THE MAD COW IN SPACE

Down there is little England, London, a flash
of crazy vision showing me a row
of heads on spikes outside the Tower. Still rotten,
still beautiful but ruined for me now
I've seen stars with no atmosphere in the way.
Millions are on the Underground, going to work.
I can see them too, teeming just under
the Earth's crust. I'm weightless. Couldn't
fall over if you pushed me for a year.
The silence is an uproar and I write
with a special pen in which the ink can flow
without gravity to drag it onto the page.
I'm trying to escape the pull myself:
don't want to look back at the Earth or send
more messages down to base about the way
it looks from here. Believe me, every smash,
every shot, every crack and blast is visible
and going right to plan but I can't stand
the Earth's screams as the blood touches her prissy skirt.

LIFE

My life as a bat
is for hearing
the world.

If I pitch it right
I can hear
just where you are.

If I pitch it right
I can hear inside your body:

the state of your health,
and more, I can hear
into your mind.

Bat death is not listening.

My life as a frog
is for touching
other things.

I'm very moist
so I don't get stuck
in the water.

I'm very moist
so I can cling
onto your back
for three days and nights.

Frog death is separation.

My life as an iguana
is for tasting
everything.

My tongue is very fast
because the flavour
of the air
is so subtle.

It's long enough
to surprise
the smallest piece of you
from extremely far away.

Iguana death is a closed mouth.

LITTLE REQUIEM

One, two.

My mother's head's so bad she isn't sure

Three, four.

That she can count to ten, so I count with her.

Five, six.

A little spasm at her eyelid, 'No.'

Seven.

An angry flap of fingers, 'I just want,'

Eight.

'To know,' Nine.

'How,' Ten.

'To take,' Ten.

'The last,' Ten.

'Breath.'

LIFE

My life as a bat
is for mooring
the world.

If I pinch it right,
I can hear
just where you are.

If I pinch it right
I can hear inside your body.