Poems

Jo Shapcott
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 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.
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,
rinse his scaley 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.'