

A Snakeskin e-chapbook

The Gothic Poems

A selection of narrative versicles
generated by the *GothikVerse* computer program.

The program designed and created by

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This is a small selection from the thousands of poems created by the *GothikVerse* computer program.

Each poem re-tells, in its own way, the story of a desperate and fatal expedition. Details of things seen and heard may vary, but in each poem the cold sky darkens, and snow falls. Sir John sickens, and then dies.

The program works by selecting appropriate words and phrases from a data bank, and making them dance to an iambic rhythm. (This is achieved by awarding each syllable a numerical value, as in the Trager-Smith system of prosodic notation.)

The work owes intellectual debts to Roland Barthes and to Robert Browning. *S/Z* gave invaluable hints about the low-level structuring of narrative; 'Childe Roland' inspired the poems' paranoia.

1.

We, angry with ourselves, saw, as we'd feared,
Rough scratchings on the rock. We stopped before
Black caves. The way led nowhere; John, that fraud,
Groaned. Moaning echoed. All became ice-cold.
The cruel sky grew murky, and we few
Had stumbled on our road, if road it was.
The death-filled air was poisonous; times past
Disturbed our thoughts. White snow came down. Sir John
At last was dead. Because of this we all
Reached hopelessness. Our task was done. We thought.

2.

Don't laugh. The man we knew as John was sick.
The dreary world grew murkier, and, yes,
The usual memories disturbed us all.
Much loved but foolish old Sir John was dead.

The forest track became more hard. It was
Ice-cold. Our grimy band cleared our hard road.
The breathing of the Beast was closer now.
A million million snowflakes danced. We all
Discovered black smoke. What was left of us
Delayed in front of dark hills. Finally
We found a velvet darkness. Our crusade
Must now be at its end. And I was there.

3.
It haunts me still... Malodorous Sir John
Was feeling pain. The heavy air was bad,
And so times past disturbed us all. We few
Saw, but uncomprehendingly, fools' gold.
That sound again forlornly called for help.
The day was freezing. A horn worried us.
The snow fell softly. We all stopped in fear
Before a corpse, whose boots we stole. The way
Was nightmare-bad. Our grimy band abhorred
The path the priest had pointed out. At last
We, plagued by leprosy and piles, had reached
A tree. The thing we had to do was done,
And silver-tongued Sir John expired. Don't laugh.

4.
That awful scream forlornly called for help.
It was stone-cold. Our half-mad crew observed
A brilliant shining. We stopped as we saw
A velvet darkness. After everything
We came to spoor of snouted beasts (alas).

Old John was sick. Remembrance of times past
Hurt what remained of us. Our fated path
Seemed more than ever futile. Poor Sir John
Was dead at last. The remnants of our group
Kept to the stony path. It neared its end.
A leper's scream seemed close. Cold snow came down.

5.
Oh listen... Our path forked; we glimpsed a tree
Like something from a children's tale. We few
Stopped, flummoxed, seeing hopelessness, and so
The day was frozen. Dear Sir John was sick.
The expedition slumped along the way.
The task must now be at its end. At last
We, like the fools we were, were halted by
Black caves (alas). The air grew murkier;
A twinge of memory disturbed our thoughts.
We heard a pain-racked scream. Our ancient friend
Collapsed in death. Another scream was close.
White snow began to fall. And that was that.

6.
It seems like yesterday. Sir John was sick.
We cursed the sight of something strange. The way
Was changed past recognition; we, like fools,
Walked with abhorrence down the path. It was
Ice-cold. The eight - or was it twelve? - of us
Stopped, seeing hopelessness; the dirty air
Seemed not our natural element. Times past
Returned to haunt us. I and all the rest

Could hear, continually, pain. The world
Grew sombre; finally we stumbled on
A blue-grey jelly (so old...). Our crusade
Must surely now be nearly done. A scream
Seemed further than before. A cloud of snow
Fell wintrily. John died, without goodbyes.

7.
The drone of prayers re-echoed. All became
Ice-cold. Much loved but foolish old Sir John
Was jabbering with pain. Air choked our lungs,
And unerotic memories depressed
Us all. The expedition saw close by
The dog-faced woman. The world greyed, and, yes,
A million million snowflakes danced. The way
Became a maze; our ancient friend expired.
Our gallant band - I'm joking - slumped half dead
Before grey ash that told a sorry tale.
We few trudged down our hard road. Our crusade
Must now be at its end. Because of this
We heroes (so-called) paused before dark hills.

8.
Now silver-tongued Sir John was sick. We few
Saw something brutish. All became ice-cold.
The remnant of our group delayed before
A corpse, whose boots we stole. Because of this
Our sad brigade passed near some egg-shaped thing
Reminding us of mothers. Our hard road
Became more hard; the remnant of our group

Felt hate for England's vilest road. Our task
Was now accomplished. Deathly snow came down.
Air filled our lungs with hate, and then times past
Returned to haunt us all. Our ancient friend
Died, but his curse lived on. And that was that.

9.
In those days I was just a girl. It was
The worst of times. The way became a maze.
The expedition glimpsed an emptiness.
John, whom I cannot bring myself to blame,
Shook. Snowflakes bleached the world. We, once such friends,
Cursed what we called our road. The cloying air
Was poisonous. Bad memories disturbed
Myself and all the others. We delayed
At snouted beasts. At last we found black caves.
John, very much his father's son, was dead.
The thing we had to do was done. Don't laugh.

10.
As I remember, poor Sir John was sick.
The fetid air was thick. Bad memories
Returned to haunt our company. A scream
Forlornly called for help. John breathed his last.
The cruel sky grew sombre, and cold snow
Fell randomly. We saw with sinking hearts
One living something. We delayed before
Rough scratchings on the rock, and then at last
The remnant of our group passed near a shrine
(Alas). The forest track was hard as teeth.

The sorry gang of us pushed on along
Our fated path. The thing we had to do
Was now accomplished. That's the living truth.

11.
Our silver-haired companion groaned. We all
Observed a glowing crystal. Air was foul,
And therefore dirty thoughts disturbed our minds.
The afternoon was cold as hate. Our path
Led nowhere. We had stumbled on the way.
Our gallant band - I'm joking - had to pause
Before a corpse, whose boots we stole. Sir John
Was dead, we all decided. Finally
We stopped at something brutish. Our crusade
Had reached its pointless end. The godless sky
Grew dark, and bitter snow fell silently.

12.
John, who began it all, groaned. We, like fools,
Saw, distantly, a knot of worms (so old...).
We had to pause near black caves. Pain was close.
The world was frosty. England's vilest road
Was nightmare-bad; the stinking air was foul,
And, in addition, heavy snow came down.
We limped down what we called our road. Old John
Died (yes, I saw it). It was done. At last
We rested near a dead horse. Let me stop.

13.
Then, after many miles, the way was hard.

The man I've called Sir John was feeling pain.
Times past returned to haunt us. We trudged down
The path that seemed to mock us. It was done.
The world was icier than most. Sir John
Died. I and all my treacherous friends could see
Fools' gold. We all stopped sullenly before
A pile of sacred coprolites. At last
We few passed close to some reptilian thing
(Primeval, threatening). The world grew dark;
A grunt seemed far too close. Snow danced. We thought.

14.
You've heard it all before. We recognised
A stagnant pool. Our road, if road it was,
Grew muddy; what was left of us abhorred
The way. The day was colder than our hearts.
John, son of traitorous Cuthbert, shook. We all
Stood saying nothing, knowing that we saw
A sky filled with unwinking eyes. At last
We, plagued by leprosy and piles, passed near
A pile of teeth (so old...). Our task was done,
And, as you've guessed, the world grew dark; a moan
Returned. Sad snow danced. Air grew filthier;
The usual thoughts depressed our thoughts. Old John
Expired. Or so says Doctor Sigmund Freud.

15.
To cut a long tale short, our ancient friend
Was trembling now. The ugly sound was close.
We saw close by the utter dark. The way

Was every step more hard; we also heard
That odd inhuman laugh. The godless sky
Dimmed, and so I and those I called my friends
Could not abandon what we called our road.
The past afflicted us all. Poor Sir John
Collapsed in death. Sad snow fell randomly.
Our task must now be at its end. But then
Our gallant band - I'm joking - stopped before
A broken mirror. At last we, like fools,
Were facing black caves. That's the living truth.

16.

My memory insists Sir John was sick.
It had become a freezing day. The air
Seemed not our natural element, and so
The past stirred each and every one. The way
Was worse than ever. Sir John died. We few
Heard women's weeping. Heaven dimmed, and so
We, like the fools we were, abhorred the way.
We, all and separately, saw black caves.
Our sad brigade stopped, flummoxed, when we saw
A something, and because of this we few
Arrived at piles of bones too old to love.
The task was done. A moan was there again.
Sad snow proclaimed that winter had arrived.

17.

Don't laugh. Sir John, now thin and pale, was sick.
The path that seemed to mock us sickened us;
We, angry with ourselves, observed dark hills.

We, like the fools we were, had stumbled on
The stony path. Our journey neared its end,
And, yes, we gazed uncertainly before
A something. After everything we few
Reached hopelessness (so old...). The past depressed
The minds of our damned crew. Sir John was dead.
The hum of some vile engine could be heard.
The day had now become the worst of days.
The nasty sky greyed; old men's cackling
Was there again. Snow fell delightfully.

18.

Now here's my story: we, oppressed by fear,
Became aware of spoor of snouted beasts.
John, son of Cuthbert, retched and vomited.
The fetid air lacked any hope; the past
Disturbed each sorry one of us. We all
Paused silently near oak trees. John, that fraud,
Collapsed in death. Pain lacerated us.
We could hear pain. The uncaring sky grew dark,
And soft snow danced. Because of this we all
Discovered oak trees. Rat Road forked; we few
Pushed on along the way. The task was done.

19.

Oh listen... That scream reached us from the North.
The day was stone-cold. Poor Sir John was sick.
Our grimy band discovered some fool's grave.
The atmosphere lacked any hope, and, yes,
A jab of memory stirred us. Old John

Eventually died. The way was hard.
We, once such friends, stopped in obtuse despair
At spoor of snouted beasts. We had to face
The narrow path. Because of this we all
Passed near strange varicoloured flowers. The world
Grew grimy; snow fell wintrily. The task
Was now accomplished. That's the living truth.

20.

All this was long before your time. A roar
Re-echoed. Everywhere was barren ice.
The snow began to tumble. Our hard road
Was overgrown. John shook. We, once such friends,
Saw black smoke old as hate itself. The air
Lacked any hope, and then times past depressed
Our troubled minds. We had to clear our path.
Our grimy band stopped, flummoxed, when we saw
One living something. Poor Sir John was dead.
You won't believe this, but we paused before
A blue-grey jelly. What we had to do
Was now accomplished. There were heroes once.

21.

This liar tells you John the epicene
Began to shiver. The way sickened us;
A yelp of pain re-echoed. All became
Ice-cold. We, like the fools we were, saw just
A brilliant shining. We all also heard
A bestial grunting. Downy snow came down.
We few cursed what we called our road. And, oh,

We, angry with ourselves, stopped as we saw
A golden octahedron. Dirty air
Was poisonous, and, yes, times past depressed
Us, each and every one. At last we all
Fell down exhausted near an emptiness
(Primeval, threatening). Old John was dead.
Our mission seemed to mock us. Now you know.

22.

As I remember, our hard road was hard;
Sir John was shaking. We, oppressed by fear,
Glimpsed something brutish. Dirty air was foul.
The past returned to haunt us all. Old John
Collapsed in death. We wished we were not on
The way we had to go. It neared its end.
The day had now become ice-cold. We few
Paused in instinctive prayer at snouted beasts.
Because of this we, once such friends, had reached
An awful dawning like a childhood friend.
The howl of wolves seemed closer now. Cold snow
Began to tumble. That's the living truth.

23.

The way was every step more hard; we few
Could see an ancient tree. It was ice-cold.
The man I've called Sir John shook. Dirty air
Lacked any hope. The worst of memories
Hurt what remained of us. We had to face
Our path. We also heard a fading cry.
The overbearing sky dimmed; it was done,

And eager panting was close. Heavy snow
Descended. John, that fraud, died, lucky man.
We, angry with ourselves, stopped sullenly
Near something brutish. After everything
The expedition stopped just by fools' gold
(Alas). Or so says Doctor Sigmund Freud.

24.

We cursed the sight of some fool's grave. We few
Stopped, knowing that we saw a stagnant pool.
A moan said 'Do not hope'. It was ice-cold.
At last we found a corpse too old to love.
Our grimy band heard moaning. All the world
Became funereal; old John was sick.
The way grew muddy; thoughts of former days
Depressed the minds of our damned crew. Sad snow
Began to fall. We carried on along
The way we had to go. The task was done.
Sir John, that ancient fake, collapsed in death.

25.

Soon after that our road, if road it was,
Was changed past recognition; poor Sir John
Was jabbering with pain. Our grimy band
Walked with abhorrence down the way. The air
Was thick, and then the usual memories
Stirred us. Our prophet died. It neared its end,
And, yes, the world was stone-cold. Snow came down.
We saw an ugly god. We tried to speak
At piles of bones. You won't believe this, but

We stumbled on a dead horse. Let me stop.

26.

The barking of an angry dog was close.
The day was frozen solid. John, that fraud,
Was sick. We, like the fools we were, saw just
A sky filled with unwinking eyes. And, yes,
We, like the fools we were, stopped near a tree.
Because of this our grimy band passed near
Some human bones. Our road, if road it was,
Could lead to nowhere; we could hear a moan.
The cruel sky grew sombre; memories
Stirred us. The man we knew as John lay dead.
Snow sifted down. The remnants of our group
Walked with abhorrence down the narrow path.
Our task was done. Well, that's what I tell you.

27.

Don't laugh. We saw close by a shrine. The way
Grew muddy; we, so tired, so ill, abhorred
The path that seemed to mock us. Poor Sir John
Was trembling now. The air, like Death's own breath,
Lacked any hope. The usual memories
Returned to haunt our troubled minds. It was
Ice-cold. We, once such friends, stopped sullenly
In front of piles of bones. The task was done.
Sir John expired. We, once such friends, could hear
A throbbing sound. The whole world turned to black.
At last our half-mad crew reached some fool's grave
(So old...). A leper's scream was close. The snow

Fell softly. So it started, and went on.

28.

Long, long ago... The remnant of our group
Saw black smoke. Our hard road became a maze.
The man you knew as John shook. Pain was close.
The afternoon was cold as death. We all
Cursed what we called our road. The choking air
Was foul, and, in addition, memories
Afflicted what remained of us. We heard
A fading cry. Soft snow began to fall.
Our gallant band - I'm joking - stopped before
The glow of dawn. My eyes glimpsed something small.
The task had reached its pointless end. Sir John
Died, lucky man. Because of this we all
Passed near a blood-stained altar. Let me stop.

29.

I told my therapist, our path was hard.
The day was cold as Satan's heart. We few
Pushed on along the way. We, once such friends,
Could see gold coins. Our grimy band delayed
Before the stare of hungry eyes. At last
We few arrived at sacred coprolites.
The task had reached its pointless end. The world
Grew dark; malodorous Sir John was sick.
The past returned to haunt our company.
Cold snow descended. Silver-tongued Sir John
Died. Old Sir Montague began to weep.

30.

We saw, dismayed, a knot of worms. Sir John
Was sick. The ugly sound was faintly heard.
The day was colder than our hearts. The air
Was poisonous, and so times past disturbed
Myself and all the others. We delayed
In front of some fool's grave. At last we few
Fell down exhausted near some furry beast.
Our path was hard as teeth. The uncaring sky
Grew grimy; snowflakes bleached the world. We all
Detested Rat Road. Silver-haired Sir John
Collapsed in death. It must, we thought, be done.

31.

Our ancient friend was jabbering with pain.
It was a freezing day. The forest track
Became a maze. We, once such friends, saw just
A vision of the truth. We also heard
A dullish pulse. The worst of memories
Stirred us. We tried to laugh as we kept on
The way we had to go. A cloud of snow
Fell wintrily. Our ancient friend was dead.
Then I and those I called my friends delayed
Near hopelessness. The thing we had to do
Was done. Because of this we stopped beside
Some whitened bones (so old...). And I was there.

32.

So, long before you poor young fools were born,
Our gallant band - I'm joking - saw close by

A half-chewed boot. Another voice was close.
The afternoon was freezing. All the world
Grew murky; we stopped sullenly before
Gawain, or what the rats had left of him.
John retched and vomited. The air was foul,
And, later, painfully sweet memories
Disturbed us. What we called our road was hard.
Because of this our sad brigade had reached
An awful dawning. Ancient much-loved John
Died. Snow fell softly. We, like fools, abhorred
The path the priest had pointed out. The task
Was nearly over. That's how it began.

33.

Soon after that John, whom we loved and loathed,
Groaned. What we called our road forked; we, like fools,
Saw some fool's grave. We few paused silently
At snouted beasts. A flash from former days
Returned to haunt our minds. Because of this
We reached a half-chewed boot. We slumped along
Our road, if road it was. It had become
Stone-cold. Sir John died, lucky man. We all
Could hear continually pain. The sky
Grew grimy, and a cloud of snow came down.
Our mission must, we thought, be done. Don't laugh.

34.

The books won't tell you this. Old John was sick.
Our sad brigade saw spoor of snouted beasts
That we had seen too many times before.

The worst of memories stirred us. Old John
Was dead, Bill told us. We, so tired, so ill,
Delayed before the end of hope. A scream
Denied us hope. The day had now become
A freezing day. The atmosphere grew dark;
At last the sorry gang of us passed near
Rough scratchings on the rock. Our fated path
Became a maze; the drone of prayers returned.
Cold snow descended. We limped slowly down
The path that seemed to mock us. Our crusade
Had reached its pointless end. Predictably.

Much of the programming of this work was completed late at night while
the author was danseuse in residence at Gonville and Caius College,
Cambridge. To Jeremy and the boys – big hugs.

No animals were harmed in the creation of these poems.

