

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.

