

## FROM THE CHELLEW ROOM

POEMS - FALMOUTH POETRY GROUP'S  
MONTHLY WORKSHOPS

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### CIRCUS

While they scattered fresh sand over the blood  
from the last fight – a perfunctory affair,  
a mere warm-up for the main event –  
rumour swept through the overcrowded stands  
like restless waves washing a pebbled beach.  
Even the sellers of almonds and dried figs  
left off their incessant cries and turned to watch.

Many had seen them come two days ago,  
Roped and goaded along the Via Sacra  
by Gnaeus Pompeius's strutting troops  
to a brassy din of horns and beating drums,  
but their reports were widely disbelieved  
by those with other business that day.  
In truth, until you've seen one for yourself  
you can hardly picture monsters such as this:  
towering mounds of grey clay into which  
some savage god has blown the breath of life.  
Legs thick and sturdy as temple pillars,  
noses that writhe and coil like the snakes  
that crushed Laocoön and his sons,  
curved white fangs longer than your arm,  
jutting out like spears of polished bone.  
Imagine, if you can, the iron grille  
of the gladiators' tunnel lifting to admit  
twenty of these creatures. In the crowd's roar  
a distinct undertone of unease –  
hard to think that the perimeter walls  
could hold their power, or any mortal  
stand against them and live. And sure enough,  
the first group of men shoved out at spear-point  
after them – condemned criminals more used  
to tavern brawls with drunks – turned and fled,  
pressing themselves flat against the walls,  
as if that could save them. The elephants,

trained for war, it's said, in Africa,  
made short work of these, pummelled them  
with their feet like anchovies under a pestle.  
One bolder wretch who somehow found the guts  
to turn and raise his sword was promptly seized  
by the biggest bull, tossed like a kitten  
high into the air, then trampled as he fell.  
Another, gored clean through his fat midriff,  
lifted and shaken like a twitching doll.  
This was soon over. Pompeius in his box  
gave an impresario's wave. A roll of drums,  
then another band of men came through  
the tunnel. But these were different –  
lithe, dark-skinned barbarians, Getuli,  
loping in their gait like hunting dogs,  
with slender spears and long shields of furred hide.  
Soon we could see they knew these creatures well,  
knew how to weave and dodge around their bulk,  
how to tire them out and then to strike.  
They went for the big bull first. As it charged  
they feinted flight, but one man stepped aside  
and hurled his spear, unerring, at its eye.  
It went down like a falling house. A cloud  
of white dust exploded from the ground,  
drifted a few, stunned seconds till the crowd  
thundered their delight like a breaking storm.

They were wise, these beasts. They knew  
their nemesis, yet still did all they could  
to fend it off. Like oxen stalked by wolves  
they made a circle, spear-teeth pointed out,  
a phalanx of ivory. But the smallest  
was slow to reach the fold, and he was next.  
Swift as a shrike's beak, a spear spiked down  
into his rear foot, another at the front

and he was floored, with more blades ripping  
into his grey belly. They left him  
with his innards spilling out, but not yet dead.  
What happened next was strange, though not perhaps  
to those who know the habits of such beasts.  
Seeing him lying there, mired in blood,  
one of the circled herd cried out – a sound  
of such piercing agony and despair,  
we knew she was his mother. Out she rushed,  
heedless of all except her dying son.  
Her blood soon mixed with his upon the sand.

At this, the elephants that still remained  
seemed to lose all reason. As one they ran  
full-force into the fence that rims the stands.  
Panic in the crowd, spectators clambering higher  
as the iron buckled inwards from the weight.  
But the Getuli kept cool, darting in behind  
to hamstring several beasts in that mad crush.

The barrier held. With all escape cut off,  
the creatures regrouped at the arena's centre,  
watching as their crippled brothers tried  
to drag themselves away from those cruel blades.  
And, seeming now to know that they must die,  
these beasts began to wail and keen, a sound  
that none who heard will easily forget.

The crowd's mood now had changed. Bloodlust mixed  
with terror, but over that was added  
something else – a swell of fellow-feeling  
for these beasts. A man next to me cried out:  
Enough now! Let them live! And this same cry  
was taken up by hundreds in the stands.  
Others were no less keen to see them die.  
Pompeius set his face, as if to show  
mercy a useless hope for foes of Rome,  
man or beast, and so the show went on.  
It took another hour to kill them all,  
or so I'm told. Like many in that crowd,  
I found I lacked the heart to stay and watch.