Assisi

The dwarf with his hands on backwards

sat, slumped like a half-filled sack

on tiny twisted legs from which

sawdust might run,

5 outside the three tiers of churches built

in honour of St Francis, brother

of the poor, talker with birds, over whom

he had the advantage

of not being dead yet.

10 A priest explained

how clever it was of Giotto

to make his frescoes tell stories

that would reveal to the illiterate the goodness

of God and the suffering

15 of His Son. I understood

the explanation and

the cleverness.

A rush of tourists, clucking contentedly,

fluttered after him as he scattered

20 the grain of the Word. It was they who had passed

the ruined temple outside, whose eyes

wept pus, whose back was higher

than his head, whose lopsided mouth

said Grazie in a voice as sweet

25 as a child's when she speaks to her mother

or a bird's when it spoke

to St Francis.

by Norman MacCaig