Travels in the Middle Land

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Poems 1993-2011

AJAHN SUCITTO

DHAMMA MOON

Travels in the Middle Land Poems by Ajahn Sucitto

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Cover image: Stones and Japanese maple leaves, Cittaviveka by Ajahn Sucitto Cover design and book: Nicholas Halliday.

'All exists': Kaccāna, this is one extreme.'All does not exist': this is the second extreme.Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma by the middle...

Samyutta Nikāya 12 :15

Preface

The Middle Land, other than being the area of the Ganges Valley that the Buddha frequented in the course of his forty years of wandering, is that present awareness that stands between impressions and their designation. But it's dynamic, it's not purely internal, and it keeps shifting. Travelling this fluid country is the theme of Dhamma practice. As meditators know, the nature of this Land depends as much on the mode of travelling as on any innate geography. Yet it's not that place and time are irrelevant – many times they are the essential catalyst for the arising of the causes and conditions of the Middle Land. It's also the case that we can't separate our eventful lives from our awareness of them and stay on workable ground.So partly these poems are a tribute to the potency of time and place.

In a territory that is dependently arising a moment at a time, and that lies between existence and non-existence, a straight road is the least realistic path to follow.Maps are notional,instructions more about how to travel rather than where to go. Mostly we learn to move with respect for where we find ourself; perhaps this is why the language becomes poetic and attentive. Goals (and statements) are to be held lightly.

What follows are some of the twisting tracks, dead-end trails and voices that have moved through me (in approximately chronological order) on their way to the silence. If they encourage some of yours to do the same, then my country is enriched.

Many thanks for encouragement and advice to Ajahn Abhinando, Graham Brown, Linda France, Efrat Gal-Ed and Tamara Ralis.

Ajahn Sucitto

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Walk into Morning

No, I'm not looking to meet anyone; I've just taken to walking in the early light – mist over the grass, the dark mass of oaks; somewhere a rooster stirring the day. This familiar piece of restless ground, where everything matters; and nothing matters.

I know I think too much, too loud; grinding against the play of things while another dawn rolls through me. Another pilgrim's forgiving dawn, when a rambling world comes stumbling in – and shelters. It's pressed against the wall of light, listening for a door that'll creak a greeting.

Green Lanes and Desert Spaces

Summer Road

Let it be: the mind flutters in the heart's warm breeze. The road rests on the blue hills like a bow on a fiddle.

And we can walk forever.

Heart-reach

Winter sunset: fire flowers within the frost. The air warms itself in my throat like some small mammal; burrowing down... to expire, be shaped, and sent out as smoke – as far as my breath-tide, as far as the outreach of naked branches, as far as the stars and their self-abandonment – and into a darkness that eats the boundaries.

But at the living edge – things feel for themselves. The owl's floating call, how it wakes an old trembling..! A hovering that widens its arc, and finds its poise...as my mind stretches, lifts – and slips out of image. Here, the night. It holds us in a quietly turning eye. In that black pupil is pure celebration: without precedent, free of consequence.

Wintering in the Forest

It must have been the restless stars shuddering in their nests a thousand years up that crowed and cast me loose from sleep.

Sandals stuck to the frozen step. Mind's sprawl spins under a glaring moon as the warm dream shatters in the absolute jaws

of winter. Cold, black, it bites off choice – a wild sense explodes, hacks the cursed logs – fumbles numb matches – the yes! miracle spurts

...onto girls, last year's war and sport... Old newspaper sails, billowing with flame, bring me back home. The smoky world.

The stove croons, guts full of wood. I suck a skinned knuckle, chew a handful of thoughts, letting things melt with the rippling hours.

I must have gone soft wintering here. A gaunt man dives through me, scouring the depths for pearls to remind him of a distant sun.

Early Spring

this raw fullness

salt-white sun, crows in its wake trawling the early mist

snowdrops rising to the blades of rain heads bowed

singing out into the morning releases the blackbird

soot-black buds, swelling, leaf-packed, on ecstatic pilgrimage –

the tip of a magnificence that pries my head from the grip of what should be

(still, after all these years) and into the melt – faltering and wordy –

into the flood of happening.

The Bridge

The stars are too old now. Night's cool simplicity drifts off, into distance. The gleam of water, chatterchortle; mist's chill embrace; razzle of birdsong.Tugged and onrushing comes dawn.

The contrasts harden. I'm leaned on a bridge, fingers in stone.

The grit and the grain of it; how it's stood, worked and set, arching the floods. How it carries this lane – which worms downtrodden, gnawing the heels of what's pacing inside me.

Compulsions and duties. The sun claws the morning: a cat toying with yarn. The stream of non-endings rolls in and rolls over. But for a while I can lean here. My reflection just hangs in the stream, looking up: a cluster of flakes, dark in the laughter of light.

The bridge squats, absorbed: the keeper of mantras, humpbacked, flowing in true.

Wesak: Night vigil

Under the yew tree, rapture pales into reason. A moth sputters in a candle.

The moon's silver dulls. Shadows are crawling into shapes out of the dark gestation.

Rocked in the earth's lap, our circle warms, chanting. Dimensions wake slowly –

to the nerve-endings of birth. In their trilling resurgence, there's no truth but attention.

And nothing can poise like dawn.

Who we were creeps back and stumbles into speech: like swimmers on a shoreline

when it's time to go home; shaking out sand-strewn clothes for the keys, the watch, the wallet... But now is for drowning.

An infant sun walks off the edge of night,

his cry the first in the wildflow of landscapes.

Out in the Rain

Distances that loom more powerfully than grief: this sky rejects focus.

Horizons staring into the dumb tumult of greys: oblivion's rain.

But somewhere in there, in the cage of sensed space, there's a fox-scented earth,

where my shivering knows the rain sounds the rhythm of a world with no edge –

whose axis is prayer: a finger of chaos holding me steady.

Summer Solstice

The woodland murmurs its warmth through the cloudy visions of summer. Misty washes – English, almost shadowless. A modulation of trees and hills.

Then sudden sunbeams scan the pines. Radiance clusters into shafts. Gnats, picked out, dodge and weave. The bracken fidgets with small events

as, through my window, light downpours – and candle, hands and page rise up, glowing like fallen angels. Radiant, urgent; become solid things...

while this flow of mind hangs in its haze, without a basis in seen or seeing: an openness that can't be known, nor expressed through any effort –

or even aim. It's only streaming on. I try to focus. Then give up, let drift – can't sleep, but not awake. I'm always turning over. The long day churns. Eventually I can live in it: the light playing on through dreams and rainbows; the candle ready yet to praise the night; the woodland whispering its fables.

Summer night

The warm night gives all the time to speak quarter-truths and quarter-lies about things that are not here.

Daubenton's bats flick the lake's full moon with sudden dark kisses. Most of us is madness.

Forest Hut

my door is open – hills and trees that stream on in make themselves at home

*

late September sun shadows shimmer on my floor – birch leaves'final fling

*

one long ear swivelling as our gaze meets and fixes – rabbit crouching

*

the first fat raindrops lean pines thrash the wailing wind – 'out there'has begun *

night-storm's over – among drowned alder branches two mallards quacking

*

after the heart's rage with'no matter, no matter'– hands pour the tea

*

beyond the warm world one hand gropes, hits the alarm – awake in the dark

Old Crow's Advice

When your rock gets heavy, snuggle under it. When you're down in the hole, let it deepen. Bottoming out, you'll feel the turn; then follow the stir of the desert wind.

The world will tail you day after day, yowling and yapping – especially at sunset. Build a fire out of what should have lasted. Stay upright, chanting your real name slowly.

Let the dead rise up. They'll speak through you, they'll rattle your bones. No way to explain, and no way to get round them. Relax in the hold of their healing hands.

They'll take you out, out to the horizon; out where the desert begins to sing. This is where fools stand still, like birds who won't open their wings.

If you're going to act that dumb you'll just turn into stone and sand. No, there are eyes in this desert: take in their question. Roll into its heat; burn off your weight, croaking and crowing to yourself. The desert will draw close, very close. Let go, and let that song go to the desert.

Let your last deep song feed the desert.

Forget all the echoes. Here, nothing ever comes back.

Mojave Desert

dusk on the mesa – dirt road aims for distant hills one lamp lights the shack

*

moonblaze starsweep night – so much sky above my head so much perfect sky

*

desert flower – spikes and blooms against the rock belongs to nothing

*

crows don't even croak broke-down shack has no message no tracks in the sand

*

desert's sundown glow the crunch of sand and grit – walk to the world's end *

the radio alarm oozes Country and Western – four in the morning

*

moon on the mountain clear yellow as it lies down – night's silent music

Tough Love

In the desert schooling, there's nothing to be learnt. In the season of the snake, nothing will be gathered. Kangaroo rat, lizard, hawk, coyote: creatures here are not for stroking. The heat bristles. The wind has spines. Night's icy stare does not invite comment, let alone ballads. Here we are celibate.

Yet your embraces are repelled, not with distaste but because they are inadequate; not with venom, but to turn them to reach and respect your own intimate roots. Grasping won't go there, only this emptying.

Tough love: stay in your centre – outside of that, you're a madman's forgotten dream. Even there, nothing will enter your presence except presence itself.Your subtle skies. Your consecrated dust.Your tumbling breeze.

Desert Silence

Two jets unzipped the sky: the Great Blue came out roaring and burst into silence.

Abandoned shack gaped into it uncomprehending

three crows pedalling cheap jokes went ad-libbing across the sky

grey afternoon rain pinging in the flue desert zither

like a hawk over a distant lake mind swoops into stillness comes out gasping

pickup truck with places to go bounced and squeaked a long way to beyond

dusk opens homeward grit crunches, soft sand hushes: who is that listening? cottontail rabbit tensed in it

rounds of barks lunged out to defend it it called them home snuffling

coyotes took it dancing

sunset promised it full moon celebrated it mountains held it.

It swallowed them all.

Desert Wind

It's thrumming, deep in the flue. Outlaw wind rams, batters the tin-sheet fencing. Chaos moans. Every built thing shakes; the windows panic in their frames. The world's too wild for seeing.

Sagebrush goes mad, raging against its roots. Birds get tossed away, twisted like promises. Everyone stays indoors. Safe for a while, in small white cabins where nothing's happening.

Outside the walls, earth and sky explode. I've got to be there. Grabbed by a fury whose lashes and kicks cut to the bone, I find my place, ground down to one point.

The Awakener punches landscapes into tears. It's howling.And there's no such thing as distance.

Nomads

I'm in the desert of America, out West: L.A.'s a few hours away, feasting on humans. The desert tribes have long since moved on; gathered mesquite beans, piñon kernels, left a few petroglyphs. Their meaning lingers. History chews us into statistics, but there's an immediate spring, a welling sense that turns the trails back to source. To what has to be, behind place and bloodlines; to a bareness within which truth can breathe.

Pinto River dived under the sand when he heard that whiteman was coming, with his cattle. Ol'river got out. Joshua Tree, Twenty Nine Palms: average family drains off 892 gallons per day from the web of everything's life... And his ranches and his goldlust: broken glass, hoops of rusted steel, tyres, splintered shacks, fences – Keep Out! – military huts; and the jet-ripped sky like a wide-eyed madonna howling at the lacerations of Christ her Earth.

Desert has no veil, no canopies, no grass to hide the sores. Rawness is part of its dignity; and the deep calm that holds rare greens stored up within thick skin and spines. But in the rain! White and yellow jump up, and the creosote bush gives out resinous tangs, dark, like a damp wood fire as it smoulders, then rank – like the fur of something wild. Then the desert's passion blooms like a soul, opening, always, through its pain. Rain-stirred, the trackless dirt is remembered as soil, and a flash flood rampages through me.

Maybe that's why I've wandered here out of the death-march of endless freeways: to taste an empty fullness, a hard fruit that can only ripen in a desert heart... because in its beat there's an intelligence like that of the embracing tides through which tribes of seals and dolphins roll. Here the eagle we love soars and wheels – rarely seen, wings like outspread arms. This is the land he doesn't forget.

Fearless Mountain

Bearing so much shape against the smelting sun – while the sky disdains all form, and barely yields a mouthful of rain to the wind's fisted demands: earth-sprung titans, locked up as mountains. Mothers of streams, fathers of horizons.

Day will wrap every hue and tone across their backs – but leave them empty. Blackest. Darker than the dizzied night – which still holds its spray of stars, its swagger of independence.

Their roots are hot. Like humans. And the world beats over them. Their peaks are saints – dead ones – named by whatever hope Old Dread allows. Those who named them knew: the uplifted heart is not for glory, but an utter exposure to the daily grind of minor grief; sacred not because of what it becomes, but what it gets broken down into. They knew this, those weathered elders.

Yes.

But I've been there when old time gets dethroned; when the implacable day slides into eternal night, shyly – or when the awful dark softens, goes grey and has to face, again, the exuberant blaze. I have been there in that other time, feeling for balance. Then distances hover: the air is supple, fragrant, questioning; the old scarred crags are green as the ocean, their land is waving and rolling. In such presence, they rebuff the sky.

And when night's wheel dips the stars westwards, who else toys with them – Betelgeuse,Aldebaran – like grapes, and swallows them one by one? Or lazily chews the melon moon, and takes her in calmly, gently ? Up who else's back climbs the infant sun?

Write it out anew.

Prometheus laughs at the gods: he finds their pettiness amusing. He lets their groundless pomp, their fear of death and pain, wash over him. Maybe they can learn...if he takes the human part, to be just this earth, wrinkling through a maze of forms. Until day and night shall see him.

South Island Refuge

Back groans to the wall; bashed feet crawl out of my boots – hut in the mountains, north of Starvation Ridge.

Beanstew steams out clouds warming my hands on the bowl. One day's supply burns: I melt around its glowing.

White light sluicing down through beech bearded with lichen. Then the rain returns: the soft rain, the wild rain.

Here past the storm's gates this cloud-world is unshaping all green within green.

Joy goes no further than this.

Driftwards

That track has ended. Adrift in the body's ebb, muscle throb softens. Then the incoming tide.

Red beech and totara, waka, blue duck and fantail: ripples of memory shimmer with their brightness.

Between the wavefalls of this mindscape's unfolding the old trail opens – cloud-longing, cloud-swallowed.

I'm held in its stream like a rock that the river speaks of its flow with –

no journey no ending.

Falling like a Mountain

The moon-eye opens. Mount Cook, splintered and sharp, summons cosmos to witness. The sky-bell is ringing.

I'm alone on the ridge. From a distant hut, voices. Crumbling, an avalanche roars. Dies. Then slowly – another.

In the tense hold of mountains my body goes foetal: pink blob in a down bag, under the stars'stare.

Out-breath... Then in-breath... while a mind like a glacier carves through purpose and being as it grinds towards melt-down.

And a silence pregnant with falling.

Cloud-island

trek in the mountains – to learn the old ways of earth take eight days'dried food

*

paddle drips sun-drops warm glints lick the quiet lagoon – only the rippling

*

old Fox Glacier sprawled across the ground-down rocks dribbles at my feet

*

Lake Glenn's utter cool thirsty, I dip my mug – green mountains shiver

*

flash of flung droplets paradise duck climb the sky – white-black white-black blue *

snow peaks, cloud-rooted over Lake Pukaki afloat in milk-blue

*

collie-dog statue stares across open hillsides – McKenzie Country

*

night ferry, onwards black water black sky black hills – moon-sheen on the wake

Aotearoa

Under a roof's skin, under the lashed tin's weight of Pacific drumming rain and wind, the world-dissolving roar deafens me into an eye: lidless, behind this hut's glass door, tranced in its socket. Under the stone-grey rain's polyrhythmic pounding, thinking crumbles. Mind is a smashed claw, grappling for focus as out pours in.Valleys swirl...the prolific shaggy hills tumble and caper to the cloud-cloaked Tararuas, groundless in the flow...Cloud, white, rises from the depths before earth and sky into supple forms...luminous, beatific... as its rain-bird's wiping wing unsilvers mind's mirror to let all things bob and nuzzle in an over-rolling billow... A female god! Mountains drop their weight; dimensions soar, blessed in the radiant play of shifting auras that surf the sky's surge.And I can only hang, in awe, where the many things ring clearer than their naming.

But the rung rain's song is praise; the green earth's morphic whirl is praise, dancing. Through the crystal of the thankful hour, this howling spin invokes a cloud-breathing rapture – and through me its under-thought shines, tingling through pores and toned with presence. Here is earth's body, shared, empathic. Bones hum; the skin wakes like a seer, tuned to the rain's mystic drumming – I can barely stand; yet here, in the flooding power of the blue-green planet, rolled around the mouth of years, is my gathering up – into form, into being: as the water-born, a fleck of squirming, a sperm-like pilgrim into the terrific death's-end of god's blindly weeping womb.And so I must pour through this fructifying space, this seed-welcoming core, as an offering; to feel, to think rightly, to be the specific action precipitated out of the hazing hours – in this crumpled hut, through this endless rain of untouched

hills and forests.

A Touch of Snow

Mothered by winter. The hard sky her body like a door made for closing. I'm born on the doorstep.

The house is stone-faced. The dull light gathers – and a slow infiltration: flakes drift and settle.

Their touch traces my edge with textures of presence – like the words of cool angels from the far circle of silence.

Cheek, nose and forehead defined by their old speech. Skin tingles, and knows it: I'm pricked out by melting.

Cool spies of Awakening, uncover such presence as will stand in the white-out when convictions break up. Snow through me the lightness to receive my time's bones – the pang and the fragments. Snow through me our melt-down.

Being here shivers. Through the cracks in the mindscape the blue pathways open. Wild wings are beating.

Buddha Image

1

wood worn naked round the chest the gold leaf flaking the splintered foot with its wormholes

such blossoms

2 two hands open softly raised

the forefingers cocked over touching each thumb-tip

between them a thread of silence

of how I don't know being held in the nothing he knows

3 My need swells up, swallows its howl, stands like a rock.

Shape it, rub the rough surface bare-handed. Polish it with the tattered skin of all these years. As he arises, strides out of the roar that was once a howl,

all that mass, faces peeling off, heaving with cries, sees its strange beauty.

4 On the other side of solitude the broad harbour

small boats perch on their reflections an egret unfolds into its white

in the misty town we'll talk again

King Jove

Among us Wanderers, Jupiter is King. His great Red Eye.

Behind him, father Saturn. Ringed by chains.

And behind him, the sky-lord: castrated – exiled, in the shadows.

Neptune and Pluto, their raving, their visions – gagged and blinded into madness.

Their glimpses at transfiguration – we don't talk about them.

Instead we choose and know our king. Good King Jove.

But the vast fields of night are sprouting fruit; behind Jove's garden.

Asteroids and broken ones, they can smell it. In here somewhere.

Old Sol knows, consumed and consuming. But he can't say. Yet Sol will shine through the fragments: make them play and spark.

Kindle doubt and wild imagination. Creator-destroyer.

Light the fires, inspire the shadows – until the fragments roar.

Give them madness, sorrow and death; yes, give us mind.

So we can behold our worlds cool and ungrieving.

Then let the orbit of attention go. The wild hunt for Jove:

strip off the imperial gaseous mantle, and its storms a lifetime wide;

name his sterile crushing presence – hear frozen demons weep;

pierce the billowing fear of revelation – There, his groundless core!

He draws us into the sacrifice, the communion. We celebrate his blood. Unlike a planet, a star, or even space, a man can shift outside of his gravity, and no longer feel alone.

Leavetaking

Evening wraps us in departure.

If our friendship had a destiny, it would be to descend deeply like this cold October night into a universal season.

I'm gathering fallen wood for warmth while eternity gives itself away in the flickering blaze of lifetimes.

Dialogue

It's a long way past midnight.

Your words, my words, barely meet. We gnaw with orphaned voices bones of a shared numbness.

Leave expression for our faces – they'll welcome the moment, garland it with folds and creases.

Presence flutters in that embrace, wafted on the strophes and stresses of some drifting drunken ballad.

It's getting too late for reasons.

Red Ritual

I will gather round my flesh-pink pulsing life my rosy springtime life my desert duststorm life.

I will gather round my drifting carmine moods my tattered scarlet flags my wine-dark under-thought.

I will gather round my rusty tin-can words my bricked-up attempts to please my smouldering shut-down core.

I will gather round every cracked scab's bloody howl that wrenches silence out of its socket to claw at the scarred moon's crimson heart

until the coming into light with hands sea-green and flowing hands dripping purple berries hands now warm and sacred

gathering us around.

Tracking the Centre

For a traveller hanging off the railcar of the year, arrival means thankfulness.

And an emptying out.

A fistful of dishonesties let go into the unglazed bowl of evening.

One tall black pine bars the horizon. A star holds the future's vanishing-point.

Geese on the wing sound and resound skies where beingness softens,

skies of endless release.

I follow a blue that turns – and returns each brittle heart-beat to a dark like the wild deer's eye.

Maps of Earth and Sky

Mapmaker

Like a dead moon lit up as queen of the night; like an autumn tree when its groping leaves are blazing –I get all fired up by insights.

It's just a thing – creation's rich with thieves like me.We suck and chew the given light, and through words and forms, and the will-to-be, our ardent truths get forged. So, born of fire, sprung from the spark, I'm bound to its duty: to cook for a mind, to fulfil the desire whose titan's hunger wants warm reality –

yet needs the cool.

I serve, mapping the heat: trace what races between head and chest, pinpoint 'who is this?' Then the foggy heart lights up: the sacred. Its fire does the rest.

Mother

The roof that listened over my mind's bare head, a screen between me and the impassive stars.

Under that was'we': the sense that spreads out, like a temple. Graced with gods, its kitchen swelled with warmth, its garden grew marvels. Out of this ground, my life rose up through miraculous struggles, with its streaming, its smells and its sap, forming a mutual body.

Along these nerves and veins runs a river, a Nile that flows through birth's long season.

And that flow-spirit is a possessor, indifferent to the channel of one small woman. A goddess, she flooded your earth with a life that ripened her fruit. Here a son took form, found his own core in the swell of summer, and grew needs that no longer evoked her.

Arms reached out, but we never met. Some skin had sealed, and the channel closed.

You're the first I recall without a thought or choice: the string on which the learning of my life hung like the sensible beads of an abacus. Now it is broken; there are no more accounts. I can't calculate who I am. That's dead and scattered. The place where she buried us is growing wild.

Remembrance of '74

Heading East. Hitch-hiking through the snow across the Alps. I was tramping my choices – out of the humdrum. Nirvana via Goa!

Maybe transcendence is always seeded in felt earth. It has to grow strong roots – maps in space won't do. From on high the voices can scoff, but a living ground is needed: to bear the break-down, so that self transmutes – and its shells yield humus to feed our core.

So keep the journey human! Let incarnation have its say, and, however stammering and raw, be hatched under the heartbeat of compassion. Remember: Keep the wings wide. Not just to soar out of birth, but to warm this fledgling season.

Abandoned Railway Line

Destination and departure – have blown away. Highgate, Fortis Green...are running late. White petals scatter, patterning the wind's whirl; sycamore shoots thrust up; foxes sniff out gardens, alleys with bins ripe for the forage, trot-skip through the tangle.What laws? Out of a railway arch a Green Man grows,

through Victorian brickwork. His vulpine smile: it's pure London – where, more lucky than blessed, I'm strolling along a gone-green scar; heading nowhere via this old railway line; tracking the empty vein through spiky graffiti and delinquent blooms: lime, purple, lemon, and rose – a jungle bursts out of the cracked greys of sealed-up ground –

ah Shiva! Ah japa that threads earth and sky, running souls down a track, birth-death-birth-death... His cosmologies unfold, yawn and roll out the morning rituals: commuters on their wheels, joggers, walkers pulled by dogs – faster, go faster – while, perched on a bridge, I muse over the traffic: Who's stuck? Why stick? What's sticky?

A feral canal, broken pram in her lap,

contemplates the rites of passage.All hail her patient flows! Locked and sluiced, they ooze with time and profit, judgement and dumping; while the onwards momentum swells into a world that's all rumble and spin. Unknowing's pilgrimage: pull and couple, then shudder and halt –

without start or end. Just the vanishing point, while a nervous certainty contracts the mind – and the heart of all-constructing things beats its wild drum: step up, no stopping! Homes rise out of entranced convictions, but cities reveal us, our pride and our crumbling: they tune in to our spawn-song better.

Pub, warehouse, gardens, cemetery – the travelling on uproots all stations, driving through the clatter and smoke – to derail into an ever-opening now: a brief given breath, the rapture of hawthorn blossoms, a lost football and figures waving – signs that flash and point, moving through the unmoving, straight ahead.

Logs for the Retreat

It's time for retreat.Winter's iron-hard winds hack the leaf-canopy. Get back to the roots: it's time to circle the rambling mind and gather it in; thresh the year's moods. A cool loving light will winnow the rest.

Wood will warm us, hauled in from the forest: chestnut logs, each as tall as a boy and a handspan across, to be stacked in cords. We work with a few words, and grubby joy, held in the balance of vigour and order. The wood clunks and rings; its rhythm inspires and firms up purpose. Forged in that trance, we're men. Then, softening into a wider sense, there's us – heartwood moist, awaiting our fire.

The Fire of My Father

The first fire against winter: the stove prepared like an altar, for an exorcism of the English damp. I began with the old letters;

the gone voices, snatched and crumpled. So I didn't hear the soft blue bird, didn't see till the paper rolled over, the aerogramme kept twenty years

since he died. Father. Then his voice calling out of the fire's mouth. And again gone past my reach. Dad, it's me out here, and I'm burning.

Tongue after flickering tongue scoop up his chuckle, easy strength, and safe, work-blunted hands. And what we didn't, couldn't, say.

Running behind the watchful glass – bright through this bone-cold dwelling, his flames are free now, under my skin. Father, here's your legacy:

this flare in the heart's crucible, gusting and raging like a prayer

that's embodied; an eagle, sacred, lifting, exultant,

that roof-bursts to ring the sky's bell. Then let my history be smoke, but its bent smudged finger proclaims – among skies and earth,

and all that is bound in between, shivering and burning: Welcome. Because here is our home on this pyre of lived days –

which I build with dead wood to heat a small hearth. Pure may it burn, purer than memory – not to destroy, nor celebrate ashes,

but that hands might grow warm by feeding it.And that heart be worked, like rare molten gold, from patience to a fathering grandeur.

Love and the Millennium

It wasn't about fondling stars. The string that tied them up as Swan and Bull got frayed. Now they're holocausts. It might have been to touch the earth, but pollution – that put paid to a response from her. Earth's way of knowing is all shot up; smart missiles rule the skies.

Nor was it to find a louder heart-felt groan or rejoinder to match the daily news: the world knows how to gasp its cries. Enough.And the distant peak of holiness wasn't it either. No, love is chaos, received unconditionally; the void black pupil in the Phoenix'eye. Its focus opens over our nightmare track – to bring us together; shuddering awake.

A Month's Hike, then Black Down

Then you know about living on the earth. That the feeling flesh doesn't sleep well with cold gault clay, chalk and flint. That all contact blisters into numbness. That being on top is no ride.

But the hill gives the view – the sweep, north-south from Leith Hill to Chanctonbury – of a lattice woven between copse and villages; of land ploughed to pap.And of earth paying its dues – fenced, sprayed and cow-trodden.

And of the downs – whose fragile flowering arises through sheep, nibbling for centuries. Old burial mounds morph snug under grass, and crumbling stone towers hold themselves up with the gnawing ivy that wreathes them.

The tongues behind axe and plough that have pressed 'down' and 'gill'onto the land – they've been spiced and chewed into English. Rich in my mouth is their speech-spirit, but wizened by traders and conquest. So to live out this marriage – it's not easy. Initiation is through a mutual wounding. And always a dying – and not just to death: but to bramble and elder, the wet soil's pull and to the knot of unyielding roots.

After the push, the hill-top is good: to sweat and be opened; to embrace the sky. But the earth we're in comes circling around; and it carries the buried life back to source. Gathering into its beauty, now is the spring.

Weathering

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who needs a home? thistle-down faint traffic drone drifting through the fields

no way to ignore the tang of crushed crab-apples – garden path at dusk

* under dark rain clouds bats flitter in ragged loops – dawn meditation

grey day delivers a brown leaf on the doormat – woolly hat for months

* winter retreat broom frozen in a rain butt – perfectly useless

Portrait in September

Picture this time: the seasoned year tilts over; the best days are behind us (some would say); and the morning meditation opens into darkness with just the light of candles to mark our presence. And yet we're framed by the long shiver of dawn; and in the evening, the warmth of a light descending full of days.And everything seen as beginning, and coming clearly to its end, lets you know there's something sacred.

Where I'm living now is bounded by walls. Out front, a garden wall.Wasps moved in, and three days of smoke, then of water, trickled through their nest couldn't make them budge. The reply: one sting.An intiation. So. And now, out back, I'm building my wall. My purpose is to resist the earth – back straining against its fiftieth year to mould a niche out of sweat and stones.

I know it: whatever I build up in time slips under the regardless creep of things – or snags and unravels the heart. Yet the lines of intent show, in their quivering, something foxy. Ears pricked, and sniffing, it runs in the pulse of the quickening night. I can't catch its form in a personal frame, but it's crouched under my skin, with dark bright eyes – a guardian over this middle country. 80

Autumn

Summer folds its soaring wings. It's glory hides under old-gold, russets and lived-out brown. Crab-apples crumble. Like fire, their ochres fade and darken – through fruition to a breakdown in which whatever's seeded, like soft grenades, lies ready to explode in spring's green riot.

When knowing's a virgin, it gets quickly stained; while that which feels, now raging, now quiet, though smirched, bloodied and pecked with pain, is a healer.

Earth-open is this blessing heart – and it wraps round every season. So here, home is just here, where birth, growth and falling apart deepen the knowing – and our lusty fragile blooms can flourish, courtesy of its worm-rich loams.

Cacti

I love their stubborn roots. Under a pounding sky with no shelter, with no deep lush earth... caught in the glare, they hold their greenness. Maybe it's age, but I attune to a growth out of what is trapped, exposed and dry.

Beneath thick skin, it's the same old madness – but where the sap rises through grit and sand, the buds are plain. Like quiet statements in which the feeling's in what's left unsaid, these are icons of prickly tenderness.

I can bow to that, just; let the dry space ripen, taste it, swallow it; and get it down that there's nothing to know.And get used to that – to sit upright among purposeless stones and take the heat that bursts the heart open.

Drape the leafless spire with prayer flags; let it rise and move the senseless sun to witness: a desert can bring forth rare voices, rich with fearless tones. In that flowering, years throw off their rags.

Masquerade

Old gloria mundi is enacting her fall: doffs purples and pinks for a uniform bronze, gives up motley. The light dims. Life crawls under the earth, to hang out with acorns until the scene shifts. But now, when time stalls, things get real. Fall has no face to protect.

But swig spring's sap, and you're filled with juice: into the game.With one eye cocked to reflect on the mottled lustres and the blood-filled bruise of being here. So widen it – view the whole show; and learn, through the drama of faces, the agility of time's shaping. Live out clown and hero and stage-hand – until the theatre empties,

leaving that one eye open, lost in reality.

Baptism

All this week from the blustering west – wheel after wheel of spangled rain. The berserk vanguard of winter: shrieks; and moans I thought only a womb could hear. It's as if I'm listening to lifetimes, scratching, beating against the glass. In this rioting rabble of winds my window has hardly stopped shaking.

Thoughts won't stand up, are flung like gale-torn screams. 'What you should...'and'What I need...' all that: washed out, broke down, thrown up in a steaming blur of greens gone grey; while what is pent up at mind's gate curses its face.Topples its towers. As on and on, with shoulders hunched, round and round, blind souls are marching.

They take me out. It's time to go; to be bare-headed in the stinging rain. Wailing trees and drumming sky – it's time to meet all this, be swept up in the way it is, how it is, so for once I'll ring in true: and that whatever shivers, gets struck and springs from the taut skin that lids the heart brings a turning, a plunge, an arrival –

to presence untouched and unfathomable. Like most, I want some ground; and so grab onto the twisting moment. It takes a storm to turn the reach back, and pull deep vowels from my throat – Oh, to forgive you your spite, human heart, your claws and your endless poverty! Let their lies fly skywards, become a song, with notes to unwrong the world's wounding!

Because if I don't burst out, I'm aborted. A passion threw us out here, so bring it back – let the heart's long struggle, the fear and the flood, pull this fisting life open.

One-choiced is the birth: to tear through webs of holding on and go down through the scar – until I kick in my truth, and get hauled up to float in a tide that's turned by dragons.

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Spring

Again he rises into the warmth, the fool in love with everything. Breezing somersaults, brimming and possessed with light...he's so full of green – sprouting, opening and reaching out: crocus, woodruff, blackthorn...! How he's burning, this earth's son! Offer him a heart then, with which to ripen – through his mother's turning indifferent, then cold.

To become human,

it take such a sobering; we live out the learning: blaze, fade, scrapped.We're all Promethean, fellow-hunters; the love of boundless light holds what inspires, binds and breathes us. And we'll keep trying to get it – till a gnostic night springs us: broken, out here, and complete.

Stone Work

I've taken to working with stone. I like what it asks of me. Big rocks and slabs patiently insist that a gathering of intent firm up around them. Chest, arms, belly – the softness has to grip a rough face, and toes spread into the ground to plant a brace of legs and back; and no bone, muscle or thought can be absent or casual. So movement becomes a gift, a miracle. Then it's a praise of everything.

And I like the feels, the textures and tones. Soft sticky chalk. Sandstone with a grit that chafes the skin like a big cat's tongue. Granite: coolness from a volcano – whose fire-flecks are still glinting. And when rock's weight bites down, it's not the cold purpose of iron but an earth-woman's gnawing gums and her nagging knowledge: *Don't forget. You'll be back with me later.*

What earth had done, or what the sea – with nodules and whorls, clefts and grain – or what some master's hand had carved: I let that be. I never cut or grind a stone. I'm still too green. Old seas are singing in them, a note a millennium. I don't have the gravity that could shape whatever's growing there. When I work, it's just to find how the stone sits, how it meets and accepts another, and then allows a wall or floor to form.

Bricks are different: man-made things – old ones, chipped, their planes pitted or caked – I've grown some skills in handling those. Set a bolster like an Aztec knife onto a rough-faced red and hammer down. One steel prayer opens a brilliant heart: a deep rose rises out of the blow, or an orange swirling flood is released. As if I were the river that laid them down, the lost molten flows jump up to meet me.

And I note the way a wing-spread angel, or a carved buddha, speaks the purity of stone. And how a finely-turned porcelain vase now reeks of water-weathered clay. Then when you and I meet, there's a current, and an allowance to wear into each other like two rock-strewn streams, churning and bubbling: what gets laid down will find its own shape. It is a craft; for a few, surely, a love. In this, a journeyman finds his living. Dolmen, sculpture or flash-flood heart: the handling must be firm and true – the way that a mountain grips the torrent whose grind and emptying give it shape. We're born in that grip. Out of the throes of decaying suns, urged into life and flesh, comes the flinty sense of me and you. To carve with it hurts. But my novice hands need some blistering: it forms and trains them. Out of onlooking, I'm here for the work.

The Phoenix Sings of Prometheus

Open and look on through the eyes of Prometheus, whose outspread form is your secret potential. Receive his fire-gift: an abandoning rapture that consumes any worlds above or beneath you.

His chains have crumbled; giant limbs and crags mossed over and bonded into the sensual. There lives the wound – which my dark twin doctors: she pecks out the dogma. Then rips guts to rags.

They're fuel for the fire. On which I'll give birth to his child, the prayer. This is our work, the vulture and I: weaving across the human frame threads of blood, threads of light. But he just laughs.

Because I have to burn up in aspiring flames – while he is free. Burnt-out.Absolute in his laughter.

January 13th 1999

This early ice-traced morning: a world with no tints, and frost on every fractal plane that edges the great heart of space.

This swelling pregnant earth touching which a thousand buddhas have found and freed their weightless, centring smile...

Light's blind journey. A cock crows; the gate rattles; latch and hinge and dawn. Listen! Then all the stars explode.

Entry to the Mandala

1. Names

Night Prologue

Warm at centre, on a long winter's night. Through the bone-cage, through the breathflow, buds of silence are opening out: awareness shimmers; suffusions glow; the heart is listening, translucent, bright; a filigree pulse unbinds my head.

This joy – what is this lovely drawing near, gathering up horizons, moulding attention? A spring, welling up through still zero; a turning tide that unbends intention into a resonance that enshrines us here: bare room; a small lamp; presence, burning.

Shine: let my colours find the axis. And my soft-edged shadow feel your turning.

Out In the Middle

Out from the wriggling earth; out from the roar of water and fire, from the buzzing air and the long-gone stars;

between absurdity and gravity, between the question and the response, listening is like a laser.

Now all that's known is gone. And the knowing closes its lips looks back and wipes up space.

Worlds can't hide their nudity. Nothing knows what to do – the gaping and the stammering.

A hit is needed, somehow. So I uncork. I can still swig old joys, and mumble truths

to fire up a belly and feel a throat; and someone has to be a body to be seen and poked and feed,

and carve a track in nameless days. Someone has to hold the middle and play for a willing moment – because there is this willing moment, unadorned. In here, reaching out. So there must be hands –

scarred, yet pink and opening to bear the fire of feeling that casts the shadows that jump and dance.

And some time there'll be a touch of us, a while, before the edges fade. Into the great dark heart of homage.

Samādhi and so on

Travelling through the wavebreak world... Brain and eye fit up their craft with all the lights that goals are seen by – but there's a deep, and steadier, keel:

of awareness, clear, outriding. Just as a redwood tree rising from the roots'deep hold is drinking in the mist's surrender,

so, what's known unfolds – beyond belief, as air and fire and trembling space and all earth's rich juices,

in pure cascades, sing of silence.

And scavenging attention meets the skies where crows can learn to carry prayers; and prayers can breathe and wrap around the zig-zag tides of a spun-out globe.

Oh how the spirit flies! Every wingbeat widens – until, feeling the grip of her own sweet space, she has to turn, and, to get clear,

pluck and rip her fluttering wings -

and with that, give up mother-land; collapse the glorious flight, and let go the push towards dawn: passage is by falling.

This is the way the Hero comes: down-swooping like moonlight;

down-swooping like mooninght,

tapping out the codes of freedom,

tap-tap-tapping on the ocean's door.

Walking the Night

Smell of horse dung crick-crunch of frost not even a scrap of moon. I've been talking too much: what could and shouldn't be...

The lights are sputtering out in a world that's past acknowledgement, as, turning and returning, backwards and forwards, I walk my walk, scoring a line –

a dawning line of presence. It's like the smoke from a volcano on an alien planet. The night reaches in, deep – and meets the grip of a buried guardian.

Deformed. Enraged. The one the sun forgot to bless.

The Northern Gate

In this deafened climate, every call freezes on the lips. A home-land with no hearth.

And spring had such a willing touch...

The grey damp is an utter denial. No lash and surge of rain, no sun, no moon, no stars. I have no way through. Even pain can't see me: it's like a blind thief fingering an empty pocket.

Sense can only extend its span, and weather into the northern mind. Let south be a softly opening palm: here bleakness is the gate.

I'll learn to lean on that.

The Foreigner

I am the mundane, the left hand. I reach through your perfect space like the sun's impulsive flare, needing to meet a world.

Above, like a crystal pendulum – emerald...cobalt...rose – you sparkle over the incarnate stew, immaculate in reflection.

But spring will betray you, spilling passion from the slashed root. Autumn will rot, and howl against comfort. I bear the sickle, winter's best man,

and my voice devastates every word; the tongue's bitter stump burnt down by the obscenity of what you will not say:

that everything's bound for sacrifice. Your pristine knife is at my throat – which is hung with scraps of scriptures. Such points of course repel you. So you do the forgiving, and forgetting.And forget the noose you looped around my neck, pulling me out of the sun.

Bodhisattva: Image in Wood

Trouble rises up out of the Earth. Perhaps it grew me cell by cell... tender sprout, bud, heartwood, bark... willing to be in this sentiency.

Carved, fashioned, I become what you see. In some dreamtime, under someone's heartbeat I must have been Chinese. Picture me: long downcast eyelids, hands arranged like fragrant flowers opening for the Awakening bee.

But the craft snared and fixed me. Then the splintering: words ran from head to heart; my face was torn off by some known God; and now only one flower is left, awaiting her turn. She screams the nameless name which is everywhere, everything.

You have drunk my blood, you who shape the signless. Give me back my thundering flesh.

Sound Logic

At the root of expression there's only one vowel. When the hard lines of sight give up their distance; and the body's felt edges flow and allow; and the skin of hearing flexes in silence; and flavour and fragrance relinquish reaction – it's that same open sound.A formless note.

So there must be gutturals, held back in the throat, and the labials, pressing supple with passion: how else would the knowing keep things clear? And how, without teeth, define and reign?

Spell me out. My first, in joy, is also in pain; a crisp retroflex, next, tells my time-span here... And an aspirant gasps: to know, to breathe my own truth. In homage or defiance – but whatever the melismas that do the life-dance, they're wailing: logos needs flesh, sacrifice – birth.

The Last Time

There must be a final vision. And I want that to be golden – an awakening into radiance like that first sense of a summer that opens the green, unimagined, heart.

Yes, as in woodlands. Oxford, Sussex – green was where I could always feel found. Within green there's a resonance... Might it be like that, the last time? Compassion's note. No words, no tune.

Or if I could see Prajna, flashing at the edge of wisdom's sword, and bear her diamond glance... But all that unsheathed revelation! It just hears me ranting on and on...

So not in silver.And not in blue, the fathomless blue of inner depths; blue lusher than any night's romance... Yet what ecstasy would walk with me? She likes those big and selfless hearts.

Black? On the shrine of the centuries, splotched with blood, bound in flame? Flaunt the managed nonchalance of global rape – but it's not for me. I don't have much history left for the burning.

And I'm done with red.

I have my own time. It's all that I have, muddy and warm. And, yes, a certain flow.

But you are the moment. And at endtime, all things will release you from the trickster that makes colours dance. As always, you'll come out of nowhere. But by then I'll be gone: out, played out. Clear.

Prayer-Beads

One name is You One name is I Am One name is That One name is Hungry Eye, the Thunder One name is Angel of Conscience One name weeps and weeps One name is Wave of Balance One name squats on a rock in the desert night and day One name is Jewel of Listening One name is Loser all rhythm, no pace One name spews forth a world is made to feel guilty wipes its mouth walks away One name is Questioning the always question One name is Ancient old enough to have forgiven Time One name is the Moment spreading the eagle's perfect wing One name is Fitting wheel on axle, chisel in hand One name is like a matador's cape to a bull who is No-Name

One name thrusts One name suckles the shadows doesn't need to know why One name gets up in the morning goes to work wonders what the hell One name went public as 'I'll never leave you' One name glows in the hero's breath One name is Fruit ever-ripening...golden, sweet... One name is Hold It All Gently, very gently One name survives, in the hyena's mouth One name is Blessing Vastness between prayer and heart reaching out... One name is Laughing Zero.

One name is always forgotten down here in the straw and leaves. Where it's only the address that counts.

Homecoming

Now heaven and hell disintegrate. Welcome to God's lost planet, orbiting through its echoes.

Their cry and pull and suck lunge out of distance – with a bite like Heracles'shirt.

Skin comes away in globs and a wash of salty fluids; beneath that, just the voices –

the cloud of voices, the echoing, the shadows that scurry, flurry, chasing down to a spindrift core...

It has to be this way: everything wants gravity, runs groaning round the hub-less Wheel.

Yet the spinning shapes an axle; and the centring grinds a rhythm; and the churning, a confessor – and a listening comes like moonglow over the blood-songs and the panic... And all their hunger, it rests in you, garlanding your thousand arms.

You who weep for the frozen stars.

Here the last sure thing surrenders. Earth on its back, kicking the sky – which is showering down with diamonds.

Head

Hacked off in the rites of duty, eyes gone, ears crammed with dirt, the buried head must sprout –

out of the worked-out land. Nerves are taut with hearkening; with the need to mean something.

Earth bears more than witness to the prayer within the skull. It bites her body, goes snaking up;

wakes her with the wedge of fire by which this ground is prised open. Anointing him with laugh and moan,

she shakes in tectonic shifts: beneath heart and mind – another; within that fracture, another cry.

Through the bony plates of history leaps the only voice that's vertical. Potent, world-embracing,

the dismemberment speaks out.

Wayfarer

The gripped space slackens. Out of the billowing mindscape a ragged figure is forming.

Ancient lights – empathy, joy, courageous ease – come clustering around.

His presence is like a gull's scream calling the scarred truths home. From the nowhere behind the pulse.

A call into the razor's edge, for whatever gets under the skin: the deaths that won't be buried; the womb that's had enough.

Enough of taking on certainties. Enough of waiting for answers. Enough of giving up.

It doesn't let go, this call, though excuses writhe around it. As they silence, it's an overtone,

swelling, and giving itself

to make the gloomy crags resound. They speak, they know his name.

And my avalanche stops before him.

Passage

I'm not seeking a thing among things. The journey East, my fiftieth year, the tide's tremble and turn towards sunrise

opens – into the mandala of light. My passage is like a flung stone's skimming – out of my hand, across wave after wave,

snatching ripples from the sea's lips. Galaxies sparkle in the water's parting; the wake's merge nods a recognition.

No advice; just a weightless reminder that every shore I've left, and what I say I am, are rainbows – on fire with light's falling.

Growing Out

Not content to let things rest after the rubbing out of all this and all that,

it's another life of time. Another spell of winning and losing. Through the mill again.

The grindstone is turning: in here is feeling, out there is known.

Between them it's endurance; and guesses at letting go: doing birth's a wayfarer's thing.

But things can go horribly wrong...

and every winnowed mood, every husk of need and fear, get lusting to have its world...

and be me again, and seeking you, serving and praising and fumbling. Another dying constellation. But I know you won't give up – pushing out from your haunted womb through promise and gasp and struggle;

through clutch and hang on and lose; through perfumed bliss and plastic truths, and every radiant contraction.

Until things stop here, clean and real. And I'm strong enough to bear you; and wise enough to kill you.

Until I'm old enough to love you.

Islander

My plans are foggy, my wanderings vague along the tidal edge where things become meanings and praise is just the intent to keep moving out from harbour.

Here has no anchorage. Attention yaws, then turns on the swell that runs, streaming to each moment's landfall – the misty archipelago that dangles in the ocean's gape.

Ferrying between the nowheres. But just this is an arrival – to be with the heave and suck and surge where all things break over. And I let the whorl of space know me as heart-gleam, salt-tang, sky...

Twister

The Way has no up or down. Body, feeling, impulse, sense – when the vertigo hits, their fibres twist and lash in a grasping that rips up space. Identity whips around its own black tail.

Birth was its dream, a feint, a dice thrown out of the sun. But under the dust, its voice is a volcano, and its vast span of heat pulls down cyclones – vortices of names and forms. Then desire gives everything its head.

But without that point, there's no last twist – the empty core sinks into sleep. So let the need to be someone be the lash; let the'can't keep going'be the lash: and let them open your fisting nothingness into the sad-sweet palms of sanity.

The Gift

Even as the fuse burned down, I missed the flame.

Because the holocaust stars seemed distant, dead. And tsunamis and typhoons, freak phenomena; and earthquakes happened in Turkey or Japan. It must have been that dim gaze, that holding which hopes for substance... In that trance, the body, all straggling limbs and rents, the blood-filled throbbing protuberances, the still-warm debris, the shockwaves and spasms – the blow-out from the perfect silent egg – seemed so solid...so me. So mine...

The long silken fuse had to loop through a labyrinth.

Because the old way – Gandhara, Khotan, Dunhuang – nobody comes that way into middle England. The cadences of the Good Law found no drum, and no Furies lit the fire. It was falling angels – the sparks that flopped out of every crescendo – they ignited the dark mass. Smouldering, then on the run, head on fire – Amsterdam, Goa, Bangkok – into buddha-lands, burning down to the end of the thread, in a tight-clenched fist, I flared.

So there had to be a blast.

The necessary timing: enough fear, enough fire. A grumbling shadow became the target; stirred, lashing: the trigger.And in that slow-motion seeing that gears life-spin to the pace of reality, things become pure and clear: white-hot shards slice through heart and mind; the membranes of time and place are shreds. Seeing goes white-black. Then the kiss on a seared retina, as one heart-nerve, end flung loose, twitches...

Before the healers moved in - a flash of joy.

The Fool

A man apart must embrace a fool's aim: live to serve and embody good heart, then die in the hunt; become the game.

And, while guided by life's weighty rules, should choose to be aimless, to flex his intent: the target is the heart of the fool.

I miss. Like when I set out to engrave, with steely purpose, truths in stone – my eyes blur over with waves

of laughter. Jinksing in and out of time; or glowing dark behind the light; a spirit pipes up, in tripping rhymes,

that my part is to act the crazy king; to notch a bent arrow, stretch, let go... and attend the still, vibrating string.

Tuning Out

I wouldn't have thought I'd ever tune out, out of the tone where stillness blooms; or that your smile and open face would fail to tell me where I am.

Once we shared a restless skin: I stamped through your mouth, your laugh sliced my brain. We sparked; and so birthed the flame into which, like moths, things are flittering.

Spangled Ganges, littered with life; Mojave desert as it flowers with dawn; England rumpled under rain: every address ripples in the wake

of passage. Images have no land, their ground keeps vanishing under waves of leaving – and no-one is left. No one to wash the imagined corpse.

No sign-off, no settling accounts. What's there to say about transparency? But that's the only trace you left of the many robes that wrapped you.

I'm not burying you under garlands.

Others can name you at the mirror's face, trace the beat of your deathless drum. Their service will dress and redress you.

But I need to live a praising sound. And it won't speak through your chiming voice, but wake up, coiling in your ear to offer'Yes!' to the pure listening

that allows every blessed and cursing thing to spring up in a fearless shout: 'I want you! I want you! I want you!' Until this fire goes out.

Endnote (on an attentive guitar)

Yes, the full voice of rosewood.

Yes the movement through chords and phrases strings and fingers the patterning

the movement the burning that works ear and hand and desire

until the silence runs is shaping sweetly unfolding seas that unfold the land; until warriors of listening shepherds of listening

with melody running and burning

until the gift of desire until the resounding hears no tune no hand no listening ear

no this or any other mind

until the stillness receives our playing.

Until, yes, the music

2. Addresses

Winter Retreat at Cittaviveka

1

Light-gleam through the grey cloud; blue smoke from the hut; hieroglyphs curl above the lake.

Sudden things dimple its surface. Then the surge, the mill-race of thought.

Shimmerings have a way with forms – undressing and posing them like questions.

2

Dirty-white spew from the long chimney out of Nick's converted truck.

He'll be in there, dozing by the stove, poking the logs now and then.

His off-the-road warmth.

3 Walking sets the track, under the spread of the evergreen oak.

walking body into to and fro... through earth and light and air and this moist morning

walking, breathing, the deep in-turn around the'flick', 'flick', in the fallen leaves:

and not even one yellow-rimmed eye on me.

Just walking

just blackbirds

and snowdrops

springing through

The Message

The sure message keeps coming, through the stillness, through the silence. It rings the bell in every meditation. In each retreat there's a note somewhere; pinned unsigned to a notice-board in the jumble of memos, and rotas and duties...

We were curling inwards, held in the clutch of a January, in the rain-mailed fist of a king among men as he batters down speech. Numbed by the howling, our days had gone flat – under routines that pressed on like an ice-sheet. Yet, asleep, he could hear it – scrabbling, tapping the window – found it and opened.And let the bird in.

There's an eye that's amazed at walls and ceilings: glistening, it knows only orbits and space. That night it was a bird's, a question on wings, head-cocked in a look that made her a sage. A look from dark nature, shining with presence. No mirror can see you so clearly, so fully,

as it peers through the blur and the slumber. Placed outside of the frame of purpose, your pulse is touched by a finger that rests there. The pauses grow curious, the old rhythm softens – and the way that things are becomes a shared circle. Yesterdays slip from their shadows to dance the old dance, and each specific arising can meet you. And morning is an offering of radiance – in sky and tree, and solid place: an all-pouring through the glass. But the bird was banging to get out. And for him it was time to write it all down...to take it downstairs...

and pin up (amongst jokes and reminders, and'in case of a fire') a slippery tale to be rubbed around the mind's rim to make its glass squeak. And glow warm. But, meeting the cold of facts and futures, I fog – until the elbow of chaos rib-prods a cool note: (to Whoever, on Becoming the Sleeper)

In storm and in whirl,

roll over, roll over; roll over and reveal your unlearning: pin the eye into such an Awakening as can see you – as the eye that centres the weather.

The Shock

Like a sudden cut, February – traceless at first; then white and blue come dripping out. In flowers, as if a martyred blood could stir again in the cycle of endless return.

And isn't it always said that the good day bursts out of winter? Out of the letting go we dread, out through the letting go we love. But this spring overwhelms all that.

Not for hope or wounded glory; not for helping nor beginning again: time and aim give up their stand so the wave of shrieking tones can break – and roll out the flood of opening.

Snowed-in

On this suddenly snowed-in morning I'm stopped; shivering in the dazzling body of things.

A sense-blown brilliance in which perfection is the synthesis, the final gathering into white.

And how it glitters with a knowing: that all this is a layer, a frozen cloud. And every layer melts away.

Dissolving ground, decaying sun – the mind-fall drifts, its core unravelling. Stopped with no place to stand.

Tracklessly alive.

Music Lesson

On due occasion, there's still the allowance – even in a set-up made stiff with things – that place may have its familiar spirit: a way of harnessing transcendence by tethering it to river, rock, tree or sky.

What address then for the dislocating angel...? who flies between appearance and change, bending a blue note – dissonant, plangent; in the minor key of expectation, plays riffs and ragas of the Way It Is.

This spirit's here. Listen and enter: between two thoughts is place enough; and a moment when a sensed solidity is turned back, purely, on itself – that's occasion enough to unleash your silence.

Time for Creation's closet demon to come out, let go, and face the music.

In KwaZulu-Natal

The heat presses its point, into my back. Time and place have gone for shelter. Nearly noon and the hills are hardening.

Buzz, trill, warble and whoop evaporate into the total drone. A sudden wing clatter can't escape –

and thoughts are much too slow. These flowers pull like a snake's gaze, draw a man's spirit out through his eyes.

Greens wrap around; purples invade the vowel at heart centre; seize it, shape it into an expression...

the way pigment on a boar's bristle flows, blindly tracing the knotwork letter into the Word of a sacred text.

Meeting Baboons on the Drakensberg

When I stopped to catch breath that late afternoon, across the gully, the light was silvering their fur. The sun gave them auras of angels. Baboons – squatting or lazing around; a few picking insects from under the rocks, munching, unhurried; or lazily rolling in the tussocky, seed-headed grasses. Mothers, young, a barking male.

Those with some interest were squinting at me: propped up against the glowing sky, hairless, clothes wound round like bandages, feet cased in boots, bottle of water; glasses to see by, hands fending off light – a cinder spat out of evolution's blaze; a lone silhouette with the knowledge of roots and rock shelters burnt out of him, paused on an edge. Survival uncertain.

Human: the god that dangles. Turning between mind and body, like a fruit on a tree, out of touch with its earth – while, under the sun, the mountains burn without place or any roads to travel. And maybe nothing means that much. Yet, jolting the nerves, a sense forms and stirs: it runs up the spine, hooks in a question – then knowing itself, slowly, pulls out a thought.

Homeward Journey

Travelling, the location gets smaller: a lodge, a room, a train, a car. At the airport, it had come down to my worn immediacy and zip-up bag – and that lighter and less important now with the 'return' label dangling down like a notification of terminal disease. And how much, then, does anything weigh? Half my world goes down the belt...

...and in exchange, a right to passage, a gate and seat are granted.And so it's time to cram with fellow dislocated cells inside the hull...get comforted...get made secure... The ground withdraws – and our lives suspend like verbs become nouns, abstract, common: inflexions sealed under a pressure through which remote stewards flitter bearing consolations wrapped in plastic.

I turn down the lot; let senses float and pivot around a centring pulse that, under the glass of my name and number, resounds: this homeless tribe; this stretched-out, unloved night; this journeying on, strapped down in space, onwards, nowhere... And I am dropping open – six miles up, above the skin of restless nations. Destination: the shared lost planet.

Shine on, our planet, under a pilgrim star. Homewards is the farthest journey; orbiting, off track, letting go; the lurch, then the lift, snug into vastness.

Swallows in the Woodshed

Now even formless space has to reveal its lines of force; the subtlest channels of air are known; these black-backed shamans have traced the yielding edge where lightning runs, and thrown themselves through. Raptured bodies, scissoring wings, slash the blue silk of summer.

The audience is uninitiated; can't read the looping signs they've drawn – or follow, before the pathways close, their tracks through the four dimensions. I gawp at the turn-tumbling specks, the wing-dance; an epiphany possesses my vision.

And it asks to be tied down; made into place. A roof on timbered legs is ground enough, where living forces are held into form. Here, to be cut, shaped, and bolted and harden into time – is a judged defiance: a stand taken in an exploding universe

where God is amazed into gravity. So my gaze has to unfold, has to spread wide to follow the arc of the creative urge that binds space into sense and structure. Aloft out of mud-daub nests, florets of beaks lunge out and open. Flies banged in like nails.

August Evening

Insect-specked, the soft air simmers, weaving viscous currents. A swelling sky is deepening my head.

Its ripe juices darken, bleed down from the crown, mantling the span of green-shouldered Sussex.

Only the pond holds its face tense. Ripple after living ripple keeps twitching at its secret.

A swallow's swoop traces it. A rabbit's scream stabs through the wood-pigeon skin of the dusk.

Certainties shiver. And I can hardly flesh out who I am – like a somewhere fly it buzzes

against the glaze of summer; scrabbling towards a watery star across the meniscus of awareness.

The Rains Retreat

1

Parched summer sky: but let my vows rain through and every leaf and all places be washed

and aspiration spread its span and the eye of all things open – unadopted, coolly present.

2 Beautiful regard: late summer evening.

Among the tremors of intent the martins'wings flick the pond with the harmonies of vanishing.

3

Leaving October a bright moon after the storm in and out of the clouds.

Morning will bring more rain, present the shining of dead leaves; and, like the richest seeing, a mist that penetrates the bone.

In the Monastery

1. Father Roger

An old Benedictine monk, serving God: Father Roger, with his dead arm.

The scream it gave is still travelling. It started in Peru, from an accident, squeezed itself out of a mass of torn nerves in the right shoulder, and found voice. Doctors had to kill the arm to let it go. It's been travelling out ever since, dragging constellations around it in a wheel.

Father Roger took his dead arm to Rome; walked all the way, going inwards. Only his scream could walk beside him, knowing that it would get there one day – if only it could get big enough, strong enough to meet all screams where they burst.

Mine is coming the loner's way round: through a universe that steps back, opens its arms and onlooks in silence.

2. Master Xu Yun

The century's-old eyelids enshrine a timeless knowing. Emptiness has smashed open and from this luminous cloud pours sweet, sweet rain.

In the shadow of your robes the darkness now seems rich. There we might grow like the trees of Ch'an on a steep and crumbling crag.

My place

1 moon silvers the clouds pit-patter on the window the sense of return

my place old stone yellow brick

after five days'rain I sit by the stove as it grumbles and pops

in the circle of darkness years can settle

'bye now' 'see y'later' leave the door open let what we've said breathe into the night

2 first sun warms the dawn crows clatter in the bright birch

oak leaves bobbing chit-chit-chit of squirrel-squabble OK, ready to roll cross the legs, lengthen the spine

this is the straight road through a world of no roof, no walls

yes, without ends

Journeyman

Journeyman

Journeyman, journeyman, where's your home town? I come from the chasm beneath the Great Vow.

Journeyman, journeyman, what clothes do you wear? Wolf-skin and owls' wings stitched together with prayer.

Journeyman, journeyman, what is your craft? I lash hope and despair into sea-going rafts.

Journeyman, journeyman, what wage do you gain? The keys to the doors of pleasure and pain.

Journeyman, journeyman, what are your tools? The straight rule of kings, the sharp laugh of fools.

Journeyman, journeyman, who travels with you? A one-eyed seer and an outcast or two.

And what paths do you follow, and where are you going? More falling than following, through the bright fog of knowing.

Then who is your Master, and what carries you on? He sounds the lost chord, I echo, a drone.

Journeyman, journeyman, leave a teaching for me! Dig down where you left me, at the root of your tree...

Humpty-Dumpty

There came a time to fall off the wall. It's the time that time keeps moving for, as it mounts up, brick by brick.

The wall was everything he could want. It was decades high. Maybe lifetimes he had given to dredging rivers for their clay, then baking the bricks. Small ones first, rough-cast, uneven, pressed out of childhood tracks: trees with flaking bark, a gate that squeaked open – summer in a London square. Occasionally he'd slip-slide down, to glimpse the foundations. Compressed, they were printed with fossil shells and grooves: trapped creatures, their dramas worn down; a few legs, scraps of bone; no clean edge or face. Picked at, they wouldn't budge. Pried, they screamed. They promised to stay put, just to be held by the warm weight above them.

So it was everything he could have, the wall. On top, towers, shrines, walkways. The wolves on the motherless moor – they were way, way below; the glittering ice-field on the other side – the freeze would never get this high.And so, full and round, he rose to speak.

But the words! Tumbling out, scraps of dirge and drawn-out calls... Eyes sharpened; vagrant birds drew near, silent and nestless. Out there, they knew. They knew they knew they knew...

how a song, as it fills the mouth, turns into hunger. The thick tones swell, like wet rags in the throat, pressing against something smooth and hard... The runny stuff inside stirs; and then it kicks: an eye pops open – to brick-crack, clatter and gasping dust; and the flutter of flightless wings...

No blame, no blame.

Singers of the outback howl, throw back your heads. Open your throats and welcome him home! Wrap a pelt around him, frost-shagged, bright. Draw in deep space, let legs unfold: through the clear black night, we'll run and run, chasing the moon across trackless snows.

Conception: The Choice

A hole in the bubble of satisfaction; a calling, a voice like the sun's, with cinder-black horses tugging at the reins: desire.

It looped around her like a slingshot, held her like a pebble, ready to fly. Ready for the fling into bouncing times.

She'd been down this track before, tugged by a thread through her heart. Yet still with every beat it nagged and chafeduntil the scar tore open... and gaped to receive the blade of conviction: It's time to get born.

It wasn't the strangling urge into flesh; it wasn't being squashed into personal form: she could breathe through the fear and hope (though they ravaged her complexion) – but a cloudy sense, a dust of forgetting, bodged the event.

Connections snapped, and little me, skull like a moon, came out pushing. A hardening wedge, it split the cosmos; then went into orbit, carving out kingdoms. Space fell back gasping, null and void.

So she said it again, to get me placed: bones belong to earth, in the body's dust; the throat is of space, so the word can rise up; semen is of water and the rip-tide of birth – and it's all just that much ... elements playing.

But she somehow felt to get involved... and flew inside-out, going here and there: thirsting for me in her own fire's warmth; fearful of me in her night's embrace; groping at me in the itch of her hunger...

and wanting something, somewhere... strong enough, close enough... praying for a sun that could ravish her choiceless.

Little Me

It's behind you. It's beneath every thought – the peerless hunter. By comparison, a shark is discreet, lets you be senseless, dumb meat,

relieved of inner dimensions. But little me descends, scythes through your comforting blur. It scours your unspoken core,

and implants an endless feeding. Your very juices transmute into panic as it grows and flutters between the worlds. Hungry, a homeless genie.

Self is its shrillest register, born of night; frantic, unconsolable. It's bled you white, and still it sucks, chewing and chewing.

Keep pumping out the barren eggs, and the shrivelled fruit from your wishing tree: but it will never consume you wholly. Its need needs you for another feast.

Your knowing can't swallow its gape; its squeak chases your words, pirouetting through the darkest spaces. And you don't have the flesh to expel it.

So dream on, little heart, dream on! From the shadow behind passion and fear, shape the ears, wings and pointy teeth with your wild and rolling ache.

The squeaker grins into your groundless life. It knows you so well by now, your miscarried child with his little bite. The bite that tries to release you.

Note in a Bottle

maybe somewhere there's maybe a you so I'm throwing this note the waves sweeping over it's a kind of goodbye could help you find your own drifting life-line but no worry no problem the waves suck and pull still toss it around and it won't let you down a line stronger than sinew grows tough under glass where nothing connects bob easy float nowhere there's a whole world of options claw some suck some so I'm throwing this line my umbilical nerve it's stretched down my throat runs into my fingers they can imitate touching feel the smooth cool wall so let's clink celebrations in the sky-grasp the sea-lurch or is it in a shark's gut or choked in some net where we'll huddle unshattered yes safe and at home here

and the waves can sweep by unless something gets shaky enough of all that unless corks start popping enough of all that and it's out that we're here that we're all out here whining spluttering soft-skinned alive and throw me hey you throw me your bottle throw it high and throw it far lifetimes break over but throw it anyway scrawl your own note we who survive red-eyed and brine-mothered got to teach those goodbyes how to float how to swim

and say'Cheers!'to our dying art

No Exit

When the light drops, there's the circus. So get a tin whistle, give the bear a name. The one behind, gaping over my shoulder.

His eyes are fixed and going blind – so I've given up on looking in. I just press my back into him, like it's an udder studded with teats.

I sponge away with my breath, swabbing the mess, the dying tissues; smoothing out the tangled nerves, the numbness and the tics.

My shaggy, matted shield. We're joined at the heart like Siamese twins – but it's time he learnt to dance.

Because there's a scattered host out here; drifting, in our space-capsules. Out in the nowhere between the stars, where nothing listens, so nothing's said.

Sent out here, we don't know why.

And we'll never get in touch.

So maybe we could make them gasp as we wrench open the hatch, give a wave – and take our one-legged leap: out!

There has to be an out of this mother-ship!

But there's the one in front of us. Wide, a far-flung universe wide, blessing and smiling and bleeding, with her pause-filled, deepening hands...

They hold the space as we come into tune – hanging in the now like a moon under earthrise.

And we watch the crowds go home.

They're wondering where she's taken us the one who sends us out – past exits, and beyond the reach of coping.

The one who breaks all our rules.

His Monster's Voice

Take your needle out of my heart. Your eye might grow pleased and dull. Shadows don't need fixing.

You're a man of some substance – an actor in and out of work and no audience stays as loyal as me,

content to mutter from the basement above which you stir from endangered dreams, find a body, dress up and feed,

get into function, inhale the news, reach for an upright with half-formed hands... You try; you frown through the smoke

at the leather girls and the granite judge, and cheer all your gold-foil heroes – but you never cleaned your mirror.

Now you can't find your own face.

But I'll be there to sing for you in the tides that pull you apart. We've been through this so many times:

my need for a body, and to be seen; your absences and cockeyed facts. Maybe we could get a life.

Because a few have met me without alibis. I was the tree that they dwelt under; and they grew steady and serene

as all their knowing stopped. Now their visions fade. And nothing shines as bright through you

as the shadow you've made of me.

Prayer

white light white laughter white lotus white ripple

white mother white circle of joy

flow through the iron days the statutes stuck on spikes the busts of loudmouth gods

there are boats bobbing amidst the debris made of skin, of skulls, of marigolds

let them carry my junkyard prayer let them touch your rainbow's feet at the rust-brown wound of your birth

Spring Day on Dartmoor

Into my gasp, into my covered-up face, the freezing flung slush: the icy attack of a sleet-traced spring. Sense is capsized; I'm thrown out here on a storming sea.

Where struggle is vital – under layers of cloth and animal fibre, and pulsing skin. Bundled within my densest wraps – a wintered softness, my buried life, staggers in the shove and the fight to be born.

Steely whips lash the moor's back. But the gorse holds. Splattered by snow, it shelters the hag-bitter blast close to its spines. Its yellow blazes into the rawness, like the mercy that cuts through flesh and bone

to haul me out: to be peeled by this. As the mother-wind thrusts and grinds, my reluctant flame kicks back. Its birth-curse wakes and rages, feels for the heat within the crushed land... Then the cold squelching grasses break under my stride; and my reach claws through soft fingertips to scrabble over the lichen-scabbed granite. I lock into the wind. Like dogs in a tussle, our struggle. It will kill me,

but today I snatch breath-threads out of the freezing grey vortex; clutch them into flesh and throw the line back. Like a gale-bucking crow's croak, my spring. It spits out consequence,

cuts the ties and strings of purpose; just gives back how it feels today to be a warmth bursting out naked; to be the inside of a circle of worlds holding their passion, and know it.

And how this feels, this marvel, that as sense skewers in again and again, its charge spins a prayer-wheel through me; and my whirl holds the world's emerging – and it comes out wet and glittering and green.

Growing Up

1. Fur coat

I was out in a world not so much wild as worn: a dog's chewed rubber bone.

The sound of a lid hopping up and down over boiling cabbage; dust through a rationed sunbeam. Salvation Army band passed by on a Sunday.

Mum had a fur coat – beaver lamb – hung behind the door. Nuzzled in, it smelt good.

It took me forty years to trace it back to a snow-melt lake among pine and paper-birch among trees snapped by a big-fisted winter...

It was spring at last, deep and clean. Unused, under the wide blue sky of New England.

2. Holidays, 1956

rotten fish and tar pitted roads, cobbles out of Boulogne

every town shell-pocked and grey with its Place de la Republique

we sung along in our Bedford Dormabile Mademoiselle from Armentieres... parlez-vous?

early light in the bar elbows of bread in cafe-au-lait smudge and tang of Gauloises

Rouen: a cyclist baguettes tied to the pillion bent, long as my leg

St.Malo: procession candles and sorrow long into the night

Ave, Ave, Ave, Maria.

Images clasped in black and white: we called them'snaps'–

and burnt them after the deaths – father, mother. Fingerprints of family.

3. The Hole

It was Dad who pulled me out, again. Once, he'd come to get me from the rocks that the sea was isolating, soon to submerge. In Brittany, I was six. He put me quietly on his shoulders, struggled back through the rising, foaming tide. And never said a word about it, then or later.

Dying, 23 years later, he pulled me out of buddha-lands; out of trawling through my flooding space, trying to net that No-Thing. I got the telegram.

Out of huge Asia, flying...over patterns. A little world down there. Small London, small Heathrow, shrunk in the years of absence; little England disappearing under the tectonic plates of a global world. Small houses and compact cars pressed together in twisting files. And a shrunken white-haired woman who'd carried and mothered me.

What could I say? Death takes it all. Her now so small and thin and white. Just hugged her a longer time than for 20 years; her now, as I say, so little, and me towering over her. In my very own gaping hole, holding her: little me, growing up.

Sawing Logs

'Let the saw do the work,' Dad used to say.

So my boss hand wedges the log into the horse so the other, the right, can do the no-work': wrap and tighten round the bow-saw, and set to. In-out; an eye keeps the line.

Each thrust rasps like a sick man's cough. It's that kind of work. It doesn't end.

The rust-stained teeth score into the log, then chew on through. I push and pull – with the will that shapes me, body and mind: gather and focus, grip and sweat; get some fire, sustain my shelter.

The tree had none of that. Just rain and sun, descending to earth.

So my work is for a full out-breath – that dive, and wait ... and then the swell ... and to meet what arises out of its warmth as it takes me where I want to be:

welcoming the careless, immaculate night.

Snow in New England

Black sky, earth in full glow: strange brilliance of a world not yet dawned.

Every tree, every single branch, twig, crotch, curled leaf-rag, is illuminated.

This and that stone, and each hard place, is smoothed and rounded.

Old tractor – yesterday's rusted hulk – is dressed and clean.

Bird-track, squirrel print-pricks, slurry of something bigger,

going that way: getting out before light sharpens the outlines. The window holds me in its sights. I shimmer in the phosphorescence, a negative ghost,

too hot, too solid – a stranger here, a human; burning, untouchable.

Thoughts in a flurry, try to ask for what they want... falling and melting into the dazzle.

This is enough, this is enough – the brilliance, the melting

like an old love stirring. A shivering earth; a whole earth shivering and dripping with light.

The Revenant

Spring's in its swell...and my driftwood sense rocks in this upwelling of life-in-form. The greenflow pours out, and asks for a consent like that of the dying as they open to silence. With each'Yes'there's a boat. Then, 'Cross over,' says birdsong, as if the sticky ground that holds root and bulb could open out of its trance, and its downtrod soil gather me in the balance

whereby this planet turns. Glowing and enriched, it's a crystal of free-fall, affirming space – like a new-born coming to be within a mesh of sentiencies; then welcomed, wrapped and washed with whispering air! Winds murmur, hurricanes howl, quakes heave their spasms along a surface scar: through this I'll make my way. It's my one sane wish – to be known by these currents, get nerved and fleshed...

And hushed. Out of a vision that blinds us with seeing; out of the one-way gaze of gods. Knowing has to breathe through permeable skin to find full flex; then widen and lift, attuned like a wing. Feel it, fanning updrafts of thought and soaring their thermals as it cradles the plummeting sense of grasped-at ground – an inborn well-spring, rippling the mind to resonance.'Fully attend this unsung song,' murmurs every dividing cell.'And pass on. Feel in this, your ever-pregnant season, a budding potency...Speak the marvelling tongue. Climb down from the tower, and let the quiet moon dissolve your tracks.' Now there's no direction but to the end of journeys: to live the return of light. Held in the hands of a healing sun. Relics of a Human Age

Gathering

Each year it takes me longer

during the months of leaf-fall to stop arguing and get used to rationed sunlight and hostile sky and my skin burrowing down under layer upon layer of synthetics.

Until, even at night, alone,

nothing can be naked and open.

In its inevitable season

there's entrenchment. Endurance normalises wet socks,

colds, sniping draughts;

and the die-back of everything -

which we share with green life;

along with the survivor's strategy: feign surrender, but return to the roots.

And here we'll meet, sometime,

under all our pinched attitudes; held in the diamond frosts

as a reflection of the clear sharp light.

Here nothing gets in the way

of whatever is past the horizon.

Nothing to trust but being here

and wanting to give you everything.

Evidence

smudge of smoke where the chimney pokes the sky upstairs, in the dark hours, a soft light;

yardbroom outside the door sandals, just inside;

rug slightly skewed on the floor beside it, dented, a pillow;

image on a small table, bronze, a Buddha a begonia sprawling beside it;

fragrances: musks, sandalwood plain white walls;

stubbly head, broken nose scar on the left thumb;

phrases such as:'noetic field' 'a resonant intent';

behind them, the usual flagrant cosmology surfs the flows of silence.

There appears to be no centre the boundaries keep shifting –

I rest my case.

Transmission

My teaching is a rolling out over no fixed ground: of no onward journey.

This way is of no way home; of a sudden strange arrival on a waterlogged raft of dreams.

With every dawn come the duties: clear the jangled mess of wires and hooks from the spine; bale gurgling monologues out of the head; breathe deep and breathe steady: all around otherness is watching.

Everything buckles, talk gets leaky. Texts won't listen to a thing. Is there an image that doesn't see right through you?

All that can be here is the shining wish.

And into this I give my eye: and for a giddy while we float, and for a while there's a rhyme that lets the glitter of light and rain that roars through our own wild country say all the truth that can ever be said

about those distant sun-warmed hills about this deathless ocean.

Forest Recollections

What's it like to be climbing through the woods towards a hut in the rain as if my shadow were there to greet me...? And the host of silver birch shining through the dusk were the easy-flowing dead come out at last to acknowledge just what it takes to be here...

What's it like to be turning a key in the door tugging off boots and entering into what is a home for now: a shelter made all the more precious by being built and kept with care, and in simplicity, offering as an only comfort my own questioning faces...?

Night holds no answers.

Here is where all that bows down.

But there's a coming through:

where thought-flow, and birdsong,

and the cool subtleties of dawn

pour through compassionate hands.

And it's as if I'm walking -

among stumps and moss and leaf-mould – in the beauty that blows out the stars.

Holm-Oak

Coming up from books and papers – there's a window, an out there, and the holm-oak: evergreen, holding space – tchrack tchrack crichacrich-crick –

just for the magpie...

All right: there are no true statements. Things just keep happening; and, speaking for themselves, sprout, open and decompose.

But the deep thrumming of the soil, how will its fertility burst through what shuts us down without an instrument, a drone-string?

Presence has to be earthed like song in the willingness to be exposed... To be out; pushed into teeming space to flourish – briefly, clumsily – in the terrible power of light.

Open Road

It's survived my aims and ends – a copy of Basho's 'Narrow Road', from thirty years ago.

Pencilled on the inside cover are words in Turkish, enough for my needs: 'bread', 'salt', 'cigarette.'

I was hitch-hiking East – to buddha-lands, with a gathering absence forming an indefinite quest.

Three years in a hut among cool-eyed images and monsoon rains trying to meet a wholeness;

hunting for a bright knowing in an autistic world whose downpour roars the dharma of falling open.

Wordless mind has no author. But between what gets lost and the need to be run language trails, human country.

The Unanswered

Stichwort, bird'sfoot trefoil, borage... in a world of non-seeming, of dew, sunbeams, and sheep...

– on a day like today –

of a pigeon on the roof, in the looking-down world, where space keeps lifting

- in a meandering summer -

of the spiders that attend my room, cradled, rocking in thread-thin legs, for whom there's no winter, no regret

- but years ago -

while for me, it seems, this world is me and everything else: a woman in the orchard

– a girl, a child –

bare-armed men

with chisels and saws (meadows behind and summer hills)

- looms up:

her father pulled her out of a burning car, over there – we rushed her to the hospital, skin split like a sausage

- black and pink, hair and eyes gone-

Out of reach.Yet embedded: the world of the senile aunt, the image of the brother, drowning

- and while we watched -

OK, and the secret love; and the silence behind all this: the after-thought's strange gift

- that watchfulness broke away -

All this – I call all this you'for short – still corkscrews through every me there is. Maybe it's supposed to be this way:

- and stood prayerfully -

so that whenever I try to meet you

the question will rise up: Tell me, just how real am I?

- it stands over every breath -

just a twist in the reflective wholeness? Just the infolded feeling knot?

- through the in and out, and pause...

You know the pointless conclusion – that none of us are real – you've heard all this yourself –

- until her very last -

but this life, doesn't it run past every stop, leak out of every wrap-up,

- collapsing into an unknowing flood -

in here, out there; now, then; dream, truth; the way it is; because, just so, and all will be...?

- leaving the twisting question -

where do we stand? Or writhe? In the vice of contradiction? Or as a point that has no line

– that owns no place –

yet keeps running, playing, shoving, through the endless breaking up of a forever that hears itself

going on, unanswered

How it Happens

I do not know whether the irrupting silence that comes to swallow us and our stories will be enlightenment – or just another death.

So I train myself not to care over such things. I make my mind a refuge: its sturdy doors, its quiet roomy depths.

Because isn't this a moonscape world? The laws of space, the struggle for air... And words well-said, and solid work – what shelter are they, when being born, poking a head

out into this crazy spring, is just the first of many surrenders? So I hold the inner ground – amidst the sense of turning tides that can only be met by bowing.

But the one I share this voice with, the one who lives on my back, grows calm in all of this. Tirades have left him. His breath rasps into my heart:

there he knows the silence will lift him. It will lift him carefully – like skimming the puckered skin from milk in a pan that's been a long time simmering.

And then there's a someone – though I've tried not to hope for such things – someone who can love him: utterly, messily. As I crack fully open. And the years sing free as a bird.

Tree

At night, it's a wild thing, a raw shivering thing. It wind-rants the revelation beneath which my cottage recoils, stiff and closed up tight, roof numb to an engulfing cosmos of vulnerable canopies: shifting leaves, knowledge...space...

I know nothing fits this world more truly. Nothing else meets the wrestling and coupling of earth and sky, squirming and gnarled in their gristly grip; twisting as they are twisted; wholly burning in green; opened, perfectly: tree.

A heartwood with no resignation. Tree: rooted, utterly. Downfaring the path of the fallen through its own dead matter and seeds; fed on human breakage, and animal remains. The earth-quest, the descending; the fine rootlets that probe past defeat.

Nothing delves into the underlife spring

so purely, and draws up its radiance. There is no testament so crowned by April. A sap-swollen joy! Every fibre, work-hardened, defends the resurgence: a summer spread out, leafing and easy.

Winter's witness, limbs an accusation; stripped bare, gale-kicked and shattered. Curse, song or prayer can't reach this far. Nothing has worn out so much language yet still holds its own ground: upright, hammering and weeping.

Traveller's Tales

Kandersteg, Switzerland

cool mist in the pines drip-dripping through the silence: the old grief comes home

*

awake in the dark rattling of a distant train: night among mountains

Dharmagiri, South Africa

solitary retreat: green tea another candle measure night's deepening

*

wood-stove warms my back slow cloud smothers the mountain bare walls no thoughts come *

walking in the mist as if there's somewhere to go: grass bends with bright drops

Around North America

Chicago airport shuttles come and shuttles go: let's drift in the jazz

*

vast Ontario: outside a roadside diner a woman crying

*

after the retreat a cat rolling in the dirt: spring sun Western Mass.

*

a flowering dogwood beside the wet paving stones: leaving New England *

chit-chat and music in lunchtime Greenwich Village with thick miso soup

Scotland

under Schiehallion wriggling lamb butts the udder evening gathers cloud

*

no houses no roads pale light through the towering cloud Loch Lyon probes west

Extramadura

even in Spain tee-shirts are speaking English from distant bodies

*

under the mountain the notes of an oriole the cool moonless night

The Rock

While your heart can remember, be seen. Attend the swirling arabesques of starlings and how you fit in their flexing lens; rest held in the golden eyes of a wolf as they gaze down the long probe of its head –

because then knowing will gather around you: an elder who now must bring forth your word. The much-used ones have gone dry and hard; but what felt like a rock that could only perch, once placed, can hear its own deep cry.

Auschwitz and Tuol Sleng: the holocaust world blasts Hell in its face. But the rock grows neither guilt nor revenge; it is clear. And though monks rake meditations around it, centre its stillness among scattered leaves,

you can feel it form when your aim takes shape. Then, in its whorls, strengths and splintering, you see the imprint of all you've become. And all you've failed to meet.A mirror, framed by the helpless desire that stirs the seas.

But the rock haunts the end of every sentence where my truth takes a pose. It hurtles. Speechless, resounding, it thumps me present; then births the pain as a world comes open – and shatters to splinters of tenderest space.

In that silence, and before the animals, we're born in the loops of a seeing flame.

Autumn: studying Nāgārjuna

The mulching smell of leaves, in their rich return to earth on maybe the last barefoot day

when the black and white cat freezes eyes nail me to the wooden seat then, like a triumph, she's gone

as this turning life, breathing through, swells the airsacs of identity with feelings, voices, all my people

and the autumn sun rests on my nape while the rain barrel leans against the wall and under its dripping tap, a puddle glows

this light, how it's wrapped up in things: a going on becoming evening before day and night get spoken.

Middle Way

Out there, take the subtle track. Follow it where disbelief and certainty, like land and sea, shake hands briefly...

and where that glance through which we meet what is, delicately, most here – sees all impressions are way out of touch;

and where the white that gives words a sharp black conviction blossoms to break up their clench...

until where and why are lost. And you're over the edge, in the listening hush as it plunges on through wavebreak things –

scent of lemons; yesterday's moon; or the gleam of that fire that sings of you. Nothing, no-one, gets off this wave.

No way to tramp the lifeflows. But right there is the heart-emerging tide; and a deep-keeled craft, gently rocking...

with room on board for outcasts.

Better take it.

Living Room

As long as it's light, anywhere, even an empty room, is OK

although windows are essential and sun feels good and when the truths don't fit

moon and stars are a blessing. At the end of a day even rocks are granted this

and touch of water and ruffle and blast of wind. For them everything is running wild.

I look out through two small eyes and in through cloud after cloud of knowing and wanting

while just receiving light is enough, gives an outline, and allows the centre to be incoherent.

Blazing or murmuring – as long as it's unfigured, there's this place.

Nothing has to last,

nothing stands complete, but here is meeting you

between the familiar walls and vacuums.An edge, that wriggles, open-mouthed.

At the Estuary

The land is laid out; face down, arms out-stretched, like a corpse leaking its fluids.

A sink of fishy decay.

A wash of greys and pale gleams. Sandpipers and snipe tread membranes of light. Movement goes nowhere.

Find your own horizon.

Cry, gull-scream, is sucked out; raked into the trawl of wind and tide. Only the sea.

Only the sea. The stream has given up, the shore is helpless, they slurry together.

The sea knows it all. It waits, power swelling with every fall-back. The latest risen wave will collapse.

The argument is logical. The monologues calm, rhapsodical; acceptance is canonical. But I'm out of line. My I.D's fake – a bunch of grit and twisted residues; a throw-up from the bellies of stars –

stuff that's learned to roll and swagger.

So I can stand for a while, as a solidity that meets the waves. Every mountain's sacred.

October: early morning. I'm trudging the shingle – lumpy, grey as an endless sermon –

and scanning the long sea-roads. On the look-out for boats; and flinging small cool pebbles.

Mottled, smooth, they fly like words.

As they plop in the water, the drowned rise up. Their eyes are sparkling to meet me.

The Island

There's a mountain that stands for everything. There's a valley that empties everything. There's a sky that blesses everything. There's an earth that gives back everything.

There's a muttering over the maps and charts that runs calling across the hopeful world; and ransacks, howling, the jewelled cosmos. The abyss sucks it whimpering back.

Then where could that focus surrender ...? But there's the near side of nowhere – intimate, dangerous, untrodden. The abundant.

Yours. Mine. Everything's.

Sabbatical

Harvest Home

This market I've pushed through, elbowing, haggling – now the bottom's dropped out of my bag.

This life I've worked at: summer has eaten its fruit – autumn spat out some seeds.

But things fall on an open ground where crows unfold their honest wings. Their croak uproots everything.

And the tune I live in steps out of refrain. It plays on the lips of a slow night river among sounds that murmur to the tragic stars.

Here are no strangers.

The Knife

Walk me down to the end of the knife...

because I was never much good with a blade: the sharpness, its demand, unyielding. But in the butcher's hand, a cool judge of texture, moving smoothly through the fact of flesh – then the warm secrets come spilling out, messy, slithering, tender...

Into my skull goes spoon after spoon – another analysis, another cure; all those good intentions. While a body crawls towards the slab across a much-ploughed life, and seeing comes sliding out of its sheath.

Then let me sense you, sharp-eyed sages, whispering from the pages of eternity; unfleshed, but fingering the edge. Dig deep: because darting thoughts have never bared what lolls and flops and needs straight clarity to pin down...open...and gut it.

Held, each moment is a sharp undoing, slicing a way between the causes. At its point, a wild thin voice pierces the hide and protective gristle; meets and questions; twists and unshapes me. A passing through with no goodbyes.

The shining, vanishing blade.

Finish the job. Cut back the lid; gouge out the calmed abstracting eye; address the shrieking meat.At last I'll get it, a lived-red knowing, stainless in unashamed release.

Here at the end of the knife; where we glisten with grief and love and praise.

Welcome

There's enough dust in my eyes from all the winds that blow through; enough to build a house.

There's still some fire in my heart from the last true flame. That'll keep us warm.

And the Big Idea has flesh to spare – ribs, chops... Before it rots, there'll be a bite to eat.

Wanderers who come by, selling their gear – caged birds, panaceas, charms: they've beaten a path to my door.

Listen friend, don't even knock. Come on in and wake me.

Song for the Spring-Tide of My Passing

It's time.Time for the light to ascend through the morning; to hold it, keenly.Time for a spring that celebrates the ear of listening, everything's obvious dawning.

It's time when the struggling hour I was born in takes pause.And lets a slow change contemplate its time: time for the light to ascend through the morning

of presence.When the years'abysmal yawning meets air...when their secret wish can resonate – the ear of listening, everything's obvious dawning

collapses the yesterdays. They have to stop mourning, and stand up – in the knowing that clearly states: It's time.Time for the light to ascend through the morning...

and for a mind of no aim to allow each thorn in the heart to blossom – and let their flowering consecrate the ear of listening. Everything's obvious dawning

can rise through the tangle of promise and warnings – if you're clear. When you give up locking the moment's gate, it's time. Time for the light to ascend through the morning: the ear of listening, everything's obvious dawning.

Meditation Retreat

Faces keep opening like the gates out of winter... ungraspable Body, give me shelter.

How many more nights...? Towering rain; a breath that yields to deep descent;

shiver of heart-silence. Moment after moment streams, fluting its dawn-prayer. Make room for it all.

Who I was and may yet be sit together – quiet as old friends on a bench in the sun.

Wing-spread steadies into a hub-less wheel: a heron over the lake in steady flow. His watchful cool.

On the road

Writing the ways – of places and directions – helps me read my life. I need punctuation.

A room for a few nights in Camden, Maine; spring sun through the window in Barre, Mass:

always there's a road, marked with signs and imperatives – the running monotones.

Trucks sloosh through the rain. Cars, parked, float on the night: a stream with no valley.

The thought-line goes rambling on and on. Comma, dash, colon.At stop it opens: the unwritten source; beyond horizons.

Wraps

Out of the down bag, wriggling out of the tent: dawn under Kailas, the sacred mountain.

Out there silence; and a torrent's roar. Thin-skinned humps over warm-bagged humans.

Exposed, every wrap is precious – nylon and down, then skin. Then faith.At centre, a pulse.

Attuned to that, the membrane of this day resounds. Its space is pregnant.

In this belly of being, identity stirs like shining fog; then lifts, unwrapping. Back to clarity.

Wildflow

Bark, the old guard, grained like leather by a hundred winters in a world of other.

Tips reach up to suck at the spring; leaves, fresh-fingered, pull the udder of light –

and from the stillness of pine, maple and oak, an earthy coolness ripples my tide.

In the land's wide hearing, my hands go loose; whatever the seasons close down, let that in.

So I sit on the rocks that shape a stream: their gravity. Then drifting, like friendship, an old sweetness comes, nuzzling, warm.

Devotion

When straight gets tight, I turn back to the sages who entered their wildflows: my sacred images.

What's sacred is tonal. I'm not moved by the lines that lay meanings out frozen and flat –

all black and white, with their potency cropped. Let me swim a live truth, or drown in the learning.

And when light dazzles, refracts and plays tricks, let a night-chant find and carry my voice.

And around a buddha's silence, float in praise: His light. His healing touch. These sacred, honest lies.

Turtle

Say there's a world turtle. That under this dark there's a support, a guide. Say there's a back.

Look up and it's crossroads, with no destinations; functions, scrambling from no place to no place.

So I'm running for cover, dragging clouds over me – the woman, the mountain, the road. One more time.

Until a heart full of storm thunders its truth; shatters the surfaces; lets everything drown.

Crack my shells.We weren't meant for consequence, but for being here, full-bodied. A desert tent for ghosts; a way-place for presence.

Seeker's Story

Don't answer me with answers. Just stay home, with the door unlocked. I'll get there in my time.

My place is on stilts. Above tides that swell each day with the voices of unicorns.

Night holds me in its hours, with unblinking owls that keep the watch. I float in all this:

fishermen just make waves. But when all that's over, there's a touch – like the moon's on the lake.

This shining threshold: it's an open koan that tips every stance into pure space – where you're just the sound of my question, echoing.

Networks

Geese and salmon: how their cycling migrations morph knowing into trails. Logos as motion.

Its heartbeat is the living rhythm that entrains the unending dialogue

in which words are the darts of contact – of outreach and tremble, of swoop and float.

And meaning is just a phase in the flowing transparency. Pools meditate; currents inquire.

In this temple of networks, passion builds form as the loom of spirit: on which we're unravelled – threadbare, awake.

Roads

Roads press us into the fit of journeys. Through approach and pass, and head-on crashes, we're doing the rounds. Driving ourselves.

Thrown into the junction of the right and the loved, I skid in loops. Nothing goes straight.

Lanes like sages, wandering through leaf-fall. Roads that curve, light-dappled under the trees. Highway, white line centred, stabs at the distance –

through mindless traffic, and a broken deer. Its legs point up and east and south.

Choked streets, made homeless by occupation: Broadway, Threadneedle Street, Patpong Road. Addresses that have nowhere to go.

After childhood games when the street smelt of summer, the asphalt whines through the long driving night.

Orbitals that treadmill ten, a dozen, manic lanes. Single streets threading hill-towns, stitching trades and feuds to the bloodlines of history.

Snarl-ups, and jams. Dead-ends and ruts. A road for every story you wished would end. Yet the rains – when roadways churn as streams; and in the desert, a vague track where a road broke down, still pointing. No other signs make it this far –

to the end of direction, where the purposes dangle, and then start climbing down, through nerves and heartbeat.

Plenty of breakdowns. But as the earth rolls over, and the camel rests in the tent of the stars, and each breeze ripples the mind's dark mirror –

the point far ahead, and the point behind move in: because movement is just the dumb heat, shimmering...

Then if there's a path, it lies in the woods. Where, amazed again, we pass with shy greetings: lost to all ways. Nakedly unwheeled.

Lake Killarney, Ontario

in the free dawn creation is the courage

to cast off from the shores hard edges forgiven

reflections shining embodied in the weave of water

mirror deepening widening unwraps the cool

places drown into light and breezes

fish-ripple and reed shadowy stare of mind

the long note of the loon

arising within it, the mountains

Arrow River Hermitage

Out of Thunder Bay turn off 61 south. Strip off polish and veneer.

Spread out some ground: a body that can stay and stay; cabin in the thick of spruce and birch.

June's heat, sticky and droning: mosquitoes, deer flies. Bathe upstream from where the moose feed.

If I think of this life, I laugh, softly, opening wide the ear of knowing.

Black bear and a monk or two: working the patch between the winter that was and the one to come.

Fearless Mountain Monastery

Sunlight through the madrone – copper-rose limbs, peeling skin. A lizard clatters over the fallen leaves.

In back of the cabin, the kettle screams on a propane burner. Pour into a blackened teapot.

A walk up the ridge trail through oak and ponderosa pine: another time, some other time...

My bag, half-unpacked, gapes to be packed again – books, tea, gear. It speaks of a journey,

a way that rests on a bridge: one end planted on the swell of memory; one end moored to the tugging breeze.

Santi Monastery, New South Wales

Screeching cockatoos across the canyon; white flung yelling into the blue. Canopy of gums for a hundred miles.

What it takes to heal old wounds: a sand-floored cave, quiet and dry; a mat, candle and shrine.

Sat there, under overwhelming stars, held in the ancient heart. May my loving know such earth...

and grow like a tree on a rock – amidst the gagging of a poisoned world, calling thunderheads to rain sweet rain

and streamlets to water the dizzy cliffs. A far cascade emptying, emptying... Teach my living to be like this.

Home and Away

minutes agendas – in the narrow white margins I doodle wild trees

*

long summer evening – out of a bright screen-saver distant mountains gleam

*

reading the hate-note while the cat sniffs my porridge – her soft fluffy tail

earth's whispered teachings – through rain-notes and bird-song speak out and move on

*

*

through dew-dripping grass my long shadow straggles on weightless feet *

end of the day camp – some small thing under my head struggling through the night

*

socks on the guy ropes – after seven weeks'walking a cool night breeze

*

this black rock white sail playing the ocean – ah the salty sky

Old Bag

I don't go for the hardshelled, two-clasp kind. My bag is soft-skinned, made to stretch: a small grab handle, compression straps; guarded by zips with hundreds of teeth. All my stuff and portable needs – it just gulps them down and doesn't complain.

Wayfarer of the travelling world. Airport handlers give it a hard time: down the chute, then the once-over. It comes out scuffed, bashed, torn; often violated (for security purposes) with a sticker pasted over its mouth.

Yet shrugs it off. Lifer, it handles the internment with dignity, and its freedom with quiet glee – Heading for exit, bouncing, big, it nearly rips my arm out of its socket. So glad to be mine again. Liar.

Because when I get to this night's room, it empties whatever I've packed inside. And – not to devalue socks and books, gifts, and bags within bags – but it's all just stuff; not to scratch out New York, Bangkok, and Rome – but anyone's bag can let go of this. No location, no owner, no choices. Some things never fit, though I unpack and pack. And now? The porters all look shifty to me, and from up on a shelf, the zip just grins. Places to go? I fumble through guide-books – fantastic...honest...All way out of date.

Still, On the Road

What else can move the mind like waiting ...?

On the road, where the legends call, the great ways form, and the light of home. Onwards, and away: the romance grows.

But I was young then; in Tunisia, sat by the road, eating a prickly pear; hitching my way to Fes, and Marrakech.

Now I've learnt to roll where the dusty wind blows through, and shapes don't stick: an open hub within the wheeling.

No brakes; and tumbling on for thirty years to get to no destination.

People who know where they're going pass me by. They think I'm solid, rooted here like a tree; or some old fuel pump that's run out of gas.

Water Boatmen

What has formed, and what will come to be are not our concern. We live on the edge.

Our realm is the liquid mirror that invites resonance – and images that do not, cannot, hold. To float and to twitch: these are our certainties.

The sun sets discs of shade beneath our feet; the stream tracks rings around us. We live within trembling circles that touch and intersect.And so on. It's all just circle after circle...

Sensing this, we do not fight.

Now someone is watching. He takes us for advisors, like the rocks and the water – and the sound that they are weaving. It rounds around his escaping reflection.

Bridge

Nothing stands as clear as a bridge. Travellers rattle on, across the dizzy gorge...

Transits. Crossings that focus straight to a vanishing point. Out there, forever.

I squirm in the grip of those smoky horizons, as if onwards could hold my completion,

when meeting is all we could ever do – to share the collapse of homes and distances.

Flung in the crossing, we spark. Each other: that thread of feeling. Then landscapes flash, out of the dark.

Home Again

Early April morning brings it: return. Frosty nip, full moon going down;

a peopled earth. Soils spread out wait to be turned: dig here, plant there.

To talk and respond, to carve lines in water, is transfiguring work. It homes me

in an always that doesn't get found. But in the wake of words, place keeps forming

between me and us. Here the synapse widens...and floods. The 'no-ground'feeling. I'm back on the raft, trawling the gaps.

Daily Duties

Crack open the casings of a warehouse life; balance honesty on the tip of a knife;

untie the barge of the questing dead; wash the wasteland out of your head;

shear the sun and milk the moon; another tangled sky to prune...

go with the gain-loss, of being born to taste the nectar between the thorns...

and be pierced, by the quiet jubilance of being no-one. Unfolding heart...! peeking through the strip-tease of presence...

Song in a Time of Global Abuse

The blackbirds keep singing, unattended, notes on the way that our deaths can die. Live in their promise. Stay open-ended:

hold to the threshold through which breath sends its gifts.And where, though thought fattens into lies, the blackbirds keep singing. Unattended,

their summons finds my door:'Stop pretending. To name the deceit is the way of the wise – live in their promise, stay open-ended.'

For the bones that rules have never mended; for the heart that hangs where conscience fries, the blackbirds keep singing on.Attend it:

the beauty that sees in our undefended, unachieving presence, leafy truths that facts deny. Live in their promise; stay open-ended.

Trust what keeps your truths suspended so their wings can wake the shrinking skies. Blackbirds, they're singing unattended: live in their promise, stay open-ended.

Circling

This time I'm on a round-about ramble.

Because a beaten trail only goes to battered places. On the slide to conclusions, truth has to find itself by avoiding named ways; needs the bridle to drop.

Because every path becomes a track, cutting out the gathering at the hearth where we spoke softly; or the moment among pine shavings in the workshop

when an upward look touched the flight of two swallows paddling the air with short sharp wingbeats... And because the centre of our outreached attention

never loses its axis, which holds this spine as it does the rugged masts of Kailas or Scheihallion – I wipe out the mountain. There's an everywhere hub,

turning through flower-flushed grasslands,

backstreets, markets – and all my lost places.And it just gets more balanced as the riders and drivers wear themselves out,

to leave me here in strange skin. Then whatever goes on has that 'means nothin" style – like an old jazz band that can jam all night and not give a damn if it's heard. To be pure flow, beyond all performance! In such an unbinding, as in one breath in innocence, we live our heart's circle: this pure sphere of knowing.

It's an island for those who leave shores and firm ground; it's a rich green country, and it offers a gathering – but eventually, always, heart throws out its patriots.

So come through the slogans, and pious convictions; move through runes and reasons, and sweet realizations. As we walk together our words are falling like leaves.

Let their time pass on and out of the journey.

Finding Your Place

Mindscape – a rumpled skin stretched over its own tremors; fake earth, edged with horizons.

Open it.Travel: hack the expectations, sail through the meanings.

Keep following the nerve, unashamed of its pain, unconvinced by its comfort.

Turn left at the knowing.

Under the Raft

Bare Beauty

Against the glow of rolling rain-cloud, the turning of wings engraves a falcon. Grey hills smoke under a zinc sky; welling up, a bared sense gathers.

When beauty dares to relinquish colour, its cool burns such depths in seeing as bury thoughts. Softening, opening, the muted tones invoke a potential

that washes over my heavy reds. Blues break loose, and a deep listening floods the heart's vision. Spread wide in that pupil, I'm swallowed: me into us.

Blind, this eye hovers over our circle; senses itself; then dive-bombs the locus.

Winter Love

Among the sycamores in their leaf-fall; under the shuffled rags of a summer now dropped to earth, there's a resting place. Among the solitaries, straight and grey.

I get to this place however I can: where will-power falls, and a willingness lets things yank free. Is this love? The tug that offs the quilt of shining green

and faded blooms; the wintering touch that leaves everything out here shivering? It won't let me sleep. Now it's nudging me to get into the soil at the roots of grief.

Love's bed is lumpy, a lived-in mess. Gold crumbs scattered amongst rumpled leaves.

Eros Grows Up

After the dreamy whirl, the play and drive, after the fire and sweat of uphill passion; after the gasps soften to murmuring, we are moment's meteors in eros'skies.

Bodies loose and crumpled; their coffers plundered and every bright coin given away. A wealth in that emptying. It doesn't come, but is here through surrender. Strangely regained.

Then take nothing. Let everything be broken, even the heart. Start out poor, and by tender courage, skill and luck, release what's left. This is the secret.

To share it shines the deep virginity with the kind of blaze desire forgets.

In the Water

If I could haul out of the mingling lake... If I could stride right out of this water...

But feeling has no shores. Just a sudden pike that tears off fingers. It'll savour my innards. Sharp and cool is its steady eye: 'I eat your choices; nothing personal.'

Not to be separate, definite, a single blob: some people enjoy this, streaming gladly in merging currents. Neither lost nor found. Strangled songs in the choking weed.

No up-down gravity; there's just being rolled over and over, a cell of water held in huge seas. I wrestle my swelling tides.Wiser? No. Fulfilled? No.Alive, ludicrously alive.

Hermit

Monastic ecstasy: to be under so much light, even in October, in granite Northumberland. This hilltop is sacred.And this small stone cell, in which a skylight, straight-framed as a priest,

can yet uplift me with blessing hands... How its fine warm rays reach streaming down through body and mind...! to the depths where gnosis pours forth its chrism.

In that flow, my raft-gone heart waves its petition for incarnation; pleas for betrothal to a mutual world, for something to wrap around – soft, with lace.

But naked being: that fits closer – adrift in the currents of northern space.

Sneaking Through

Now I'm too old to fight, too weird for prayers, I'm focused on sneaking through.

No passageways, no door, no stairs. An identity of cluttered, vacant rooms; but...that crack between sense and thought... I know my chance, I'm easing through.

Where big talk's a tumour, and belief's a death-rattle, in the squeeze of being in blood's bad dream, I'm waking from mind. Bare as sunrise, on the wavebreak of worlds. Clear and falling.

Or like heat that seeps through a wall, or like the watchfulness that surrounds a thought: so, I enter and capture. I'm no thief; and I don't do deals. I'm just claiming my way.

By Itself

Sometimes in knowing that whatever, whenever it happens, looks after itself ...

and in the washing out of what felt clever, brave or free – spirit is breathing me. Nothing is added, nothing taken away, except a tight solidity.

And what is more a marvel? The tree that grows under the woodshed's roof, where no rain falls; how the ripped-up soil worms back to level; or how I keep on keeping on?

As a wave is complete, in the humour with which it keeps meeting and shaping sand, nothing has to move, and things only ever change. Doing being is just how it is.

Bird

Faces get the headlines: kisses, insults. Cameras catch their every mood. Little darlings – pout and weep; smile, then a lowered gaze – coyly inward...

Or look on, cool and distant.Again and again, the bird inside my chest flies up – and hits the bars. And so a perch is growing in my back; bent, between rusted shoulder-blades.

Ride there through the traffic of the street; be there, unescaping bird, help me to say 'yes!' to the non-arriving tide of face after face. Be there, unseen, with compassionate wings,

to sing in the still poise of meeting, O beauty, born from the shell of our never-quite partings.

Need

The need for live skin. The need to scrape off gold-leaf, melt down the bronze. The need to rip the stripes from my sleeve; peel off the alibis. The need for undressed heart.

The need for wild deep distance; for an engulfing space that pulls out my eyes. The need for a ditch. I need to hit my darkness again and again until it turns to meet me.

And to be here, and to be nothing; until need is hollowed, an empty bowl.

The need to have been lived in. Fully. The love of brilliant courage, of an arrival that can bear you and me and separation. The need to not need survival.

Shield of the Spiritual Warrior

Now heart carries him in its life-bashed shield. Battered, its stern will glints a softer tone. The lion on its buckled face just sighs; warriors, striding across its gleaming span,

are shattered; dents cave in their chests; champions, cracked under the hammer of dream campaigns, are now of quiet eye. Light refracts the barren triumphs, turns them over...

and warms slowly something within the carapace; something that won't blow the bugle anymore: a will of single radiant duty – to be done. Done with marble and heroic words.

Done with the myth that impales us. Us guys. On our young unknowing swords.

Lopping

The grand oaks, silent, boughs knotted; lived out. Stumps that once were eager fingers.

I walk around, survey the grove in its mess: before the spring, to clear the tangles. What's good, what's dead, what's needed. My mind like a chainsaw. Ready to snarl.

As long as I can hear that, I'm probably safe; safe from the blades of the straight and the bloodless. No I won't forget you. I won't lop the stumps my time has left. Nor hold back what now must come.

Let the light throw through me twisting patterns of what has bloomed – and through what beauty. Shadow-mudras point past green shapes, to being leaved, gnarled, and returned to ground.

Into Blue

Full moon hanging in the morning sky, saner than at midnight; soft and close.

She sees what four billion years'separation left behind: tits flicking through the birch; the race of hunger, its yearning and struggle; and the ballads we've lifted to her shining face.

But he was silent, the kinsman of the sun, rising through and beyond the faded stars – oh morning! – as, up from its root and out of time-storms, the shadowed heart unfolds.

And through that I know you, lonely moon, as you note what moves, is desperate and true about this earth.While what never leaves us lies between you: still, and opening into blue.

Human world

candle-flame glimmering against the ice-stroked window the too-early world

*

pain shoots up my back the rucksack pulled off the shelf fifty-seventh year

*

community life my name on my damned tee-shirt indelibly inked

*

polishing my desk books and pens thrown on the floor spring sun in the birch

*

no problem, my friend wood-louse, out of the toilet, squirming in my hand *

sat here all summer white walls white ceiling bare wood world through the window

*

after the funeral cloud of her ashes hanging grit beneath my nails

*

opening the skylight let out the struggling cranefly oh! it's september

*

sat under my quilt a door banging and banging the dull light of dawn

*

new year's gathering flood of faces here and gone one of them mine

How We Learn

bent, listening into bone which effortlessly holds presence as form

in a teaching about structure: that ribs and spine are not a cage but support the ground

where senses can roam and white spaces beckon knowledge to pause, look back

and stand disarmed in the great pulse breathing in, breathing out learning to be softly that;

but yes, there's also the feeling and so the splintering and the terrible crunch

of being stuck within bones forever with hope-fear struggling oh how to fill the hollow

aim for something or quick, find something, or where to hide, or how to wipe myself out while the uncertain centre has to hang in here, learning

in its breakdown way

to have felt it all and been seen in it all until it's been done by it all

to know what it takes to fully say'Thanks.'

Mount Carmel Blues

If I'm still here tapping and listening it's for nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing and even on the mountain sweet nothing

which rings truest after giving up a generation of sucking on the smoky world of licking at the sticky edge of chewing on saliva

although it all comes down to nothing

but to keep asking keep questioning tell me how to stand up for some things?

demanding tell me tell me how to not just be climbing and falling

I never find out what to do

and nothing gets known but how to get small and tight and sick and tired and then how it turns to embrace you, the cry

of nothing

Nimmala

What comes to me

from being with your dying are many bodies: the familiar foreigner the wave-form of pain the intense intelligence strapped to tubes, morphined, struggling, breathless, focused; the love-body, the grief-body; the still body

and from the unexpected angel who shone through your cancered flesh are fibres: lived-out blessed in release.

And so what comes to me is presence, pure presence. And how we skip and tumble through it.

Yet it comes

when this body is accepted as the vital'just-so'stone with which you skimmed the vastness

so beautifully

Prayer for Lost Hands

Carrying these stones around with my lost hands to keep me working because the flashing silver fish have been dredged from their symphonies behind my jazzed-out ear-drum, because the razor wire has ripped a world into zones before my flesh remembered her the air the trees the rivers had their arteries snipped and emptied when I went through amputation.

Mostly now just the soft matter is left: the tongue, the guts, the heart and brain – and every one of them carrying stones the vertebrae of a lost and radiant body that is always too wild and nameless.

So my daily yoga is about strengthening the skin against the pull to go abstract; about breathing, touching, nudging; about awakening an eye that can forgive the impotence of how I should have loved her.

I move these stones around so these lost hands will understand will feel and discover themselves as tools and prise a truth from the dumbed-down earth and pull up canned tumours and bottled toxins and plant another hazel another hope for another morning when they will rest in all things and fold up on the land

where the knowing rocks will shelter me.

Return of The Bacchae

The scream descended quietly, behind the heart

as he slipped out of his clothing, stepped into the stream, slid onto a rock; the woodland gathered into its dream.

here is the side-step between a frozen age and whether we can keep on going

The water received his heart-beat, teased out allowances; he slid down, lay back. Cool currents wrapping around tugged

after the stakes that burnt the thousands skewering religion into the female eye

until the hard muscles gave up; and the stream rose through the canopy. Light sifted over the skin's sudden childhood

the napalmed girl running naked running from her flesh, running from the sky

and he was loosed, floating headless – as in the trance of the long-haired god, when tongue leaps loose from the word running from the earth where a hundred flowers bloom into the tightening noose and cry out

like a tree throwing itself up into light; a language of zig-zags, embodied, unstoppable, running through the tracery of nerves

caught by hands pinned to the clock the scream stopped it, they open like vajras

to clean out the lies and convenient verbiage and release the old men into their dance. Hands on each other's shoulders, they are dancing

beneath God's single eyeless socket where she's perched smiling back at them

a blessing for the boat full of souls who are now stamping their feet and chanting for her to take her seat by the tiller

the water carefully holding all in its flow judged outrageous by the world of men.

Home-time

I've been out a long time edging over surfaces stretched to my depths with hearing.

Then it's home-time. It arrives when the cloud-feathered sky feels simple, and rests on the line of the old garden wall.

This was built by local men; local as Storrington and Petersfield, who worked all their lives with Bargate stone.

Years of work, gritty; and now it's lichen-splotched. Pale grey roundels, barely breathing.

The crab-apple tree reaches over it, just where the wasps tunnel their lives; right by the gate that rattles behind me.

The Wave

I do not want to miss the wave where the ground peels away, the mind stands still and every nerve speaks up, its soft fire rising

even if it ebbs trailing after murmurs or falls with dusk when the woodland turns its back and rolls under itself going deep and private

just for the sense of finding a rhythm and of being stirred by the beating of prehistoric wings

that's why I stand knee-deep in the vagaries of a life that comes undone while my brain's trying to figure out how to dive

and I'll swear that the wheels of twittering starlings are souls gone quietly mad in the overwhelm of being passed through.

Yet, if it's the dolphin-tide, the rush of joy, or another vagrant dune down my throat, or there's just the swell of one in-breath –

to surrender into that rolling on, that breaking: just to dare to touch how it could be to be riding a choiceless ocean.

Black Poplars

The day I discovered the black poplars massive in their roar

twenty-five years working on the house while they'd stood by the green river

just the other side of the broken-down fence and through the willow tangle

and how I'd never sneaked through before that also rose gusting through me

as I crept down and slithered grabbed a twisted-over branch

and stood under the host of leaves all-praising and gospelling

the ceaseless dazzle of underleaf like Atlantic gulls on a gale-swept stack

cascading around its stillness. But let that be...impressions, expressions...

just allow me a standing, a location, an alignment to the pounding question as this day implodes into uncertainties. The trees stream straight purpose;

they are ascending one-pointed into a resounding blue which suddenly self-presents

and descends to the root. Thick seething earth, and nothing separate.

And now how it outspreads, hushing

Hangover

The light creeps in, like a snail, extending its eyes, this, that, one at a time.

Recovery from the rule of reptiles. It awaits the time before the clock begins; before there are voices to leave behind.

That window keeps slowly flooding with feelings that turn from purple to yellow, filling and emptying into its centre.

This is where the eagle kept its heart. And now a great tree stands within it, silent.A witness, gathering gravity.

Old days have reaped sour harvests while what we fear we might be has been forming in the blindness of eyes that have lost their heads.

The glass is shaking, it morphs into smoke. As it howls into flame, you have to dive through. There's nowhere else to go.

Dawn in a Room

Times well up when you don't want the light on. Just a candle or a small oil lamp. Enough to sip some coffee by.

No, not even a voice.

If there could be someone else, you'd want them to be there quietly. Not too close, wearing old clothes.

Sirius paling in the south, and Venus; sky cold and stark as a Nordic Hell over books, calendar, my father's gloves –

it gives the sense that waiting is all, is the only truth you'll know. And not for any thing.

No not for the dawn blush and birdsong. Thanks hopeful day for licking my face, but this isn't what it's about.

Do you ever get that highway feeling, like you're stuck in a flood – droning traffic, eight lanes wide?

And that the 'it' that isn't going to end never began anytime, anyplace?

Do you ever get to lose your wheels?

And just be a glimmer, hanging there.

Yes, to hold a light in a world that comes barrelling through my covered wagon, my destination –

and into the emptying. Into a life where the roads fade out.

The Great Tradition

Lotus-seed bread wrapped in gold leaf: I'm handed an appetizer, a welcome here, in this sanctuary for the mute and the maimed.

The priests are firm, but fair enough – I'm offered an individual cell in which to attend, alone, to my human needs.

Then sandwiches, stuffed with living meat – tissues that quiver with every bite... can't digest them, can't spit them out;

to get clear passage, I have to keep munching... as eyes and voices form in my mouth, glaring at wrongs, reasoning my rights,

curling up into whispering circles... But the silenced throat is coming open. There is no slick transcendence;

I need big jaws to swallow it all – my wings, horns, and pretty little words; even the grinding teeth.

A growing tongue remains. It flicks away the sacrament. And on its tip there softly play the thousand dancing names of gnosis: a flittering in the potent dark like bats in the timbers of a ruined hall.

Waterfall

a long nerve leaping out of its sheath

not around or about anything but held within the free-fall logic of chaos

the life-blood's explosion

not just in each flung absolute droplet but in the fall infolding its ragged scattering

plunging through the clutch of shape

plummeting through the sphincters lustily resonant it births at the brink

into the abyss of itself

before flow before rock boiling into vortices into the blown-out spray where dragons laugh

as if there's a thread of freedom

and it's pouring through an abandonment

that becomes full-bellied like a round-bottomed pitcher

filling bearing emptying

but mine is the work within the burning dust to sense that completeness for a cold clear axis

where the stand is true

without hope

or hunger

Bamboo

Creaking, gently swaying we know what cries the wind carries

what the earth holds close our roots infiltrate

we are monks, zen adepts void at centre

gathering together our inner solitude resounds

as we yearn upwards through the busy rain and mist

grow tall and dry and splinter while our Way keeps pointing

pointing to what stars and storms pass through they're brilliant in their passion

you can depend on that and that there'll be places to find and things to know

and still there's what you never know because your knowing only goes one way you've only got the human way: take a blade, cut one of us down,

bore a hole – and blow.You're stuffed. You need us to say who you are. Why I Walk (Abhayagiri Monastery)

The trail uphill past the bell-tower through the madrone and manzanita scrub

four-wheel drives can climb it but today isn't about getting there

or getting the work over and done with sure it's not easy to live without achievement

and keep heading uphill but it carries a because

that maybe the deer would pick up with those ears that swivel like sails

or the black bear would sniff and claw out as something luscious, full of grubs

and maybe the bell that was a bomb-case could ring it out, now that it too is empty

how we can be lifted out of our story, with each step, each breath, one at a time

that draws purely from what is given and wrapped in brief flowers and earth-music. Today that sense is resounding among the ladders, pulleys and precarious scaffolding

of who we say we are. That lost cause. And I need no sky or crumbling valley.

Clouds

If we seem to be up there every seeming is a passage immeasurable as our weight

as our tumult and billowing of the river-world's rising mist until it ruptures into the downpour of facts which are passing

rock bears its duty briefly but we are always driven into fleece rolling on and on into a wolf which breaks up into a sailing ship which disintegrates into a tyrant who sags head squashed

pure white cream slate grey satanic shot with moon-sheen it doesn't fit it doesn't last just blown out and whipped back held in the grip of a butterfly's wings while dinosaurs'voices echo through

we taste of peat of herring-bladder of caribou's outbreath and of city-fumes war-dust factories in the ongoing chronicle of blood and dew we well up like laughter like fear like promises we never shall we never were all we ever do is wet and groundless blusters through changes and merging the last breath of the dying the tears in this ageing which is ageless pardoned but incapable of release

all we know has no direction and all we do is coil and recoil at the fraying edge of a sanity whose forms and dimensions mingling always always coming apart knot around a clenching centre

which can barely feel sun and skin just a watery scrawl across the spirit maybe it's all that voices can do to keep building and speaking clouds

until the wind accepts its anguish and listens to its sobbing to its ceasing

and within the ear there is balance

The Mudra of Mountains

gesture of space opening above all this even though it neither knows nor cares

but allows the pines to stand their brittle spears and the snow to blaze and crunch and squeal

and the valley to draw its warm wings over the cluster of night-lit houses

and we can climb and struggle together and feel touched by a wordless praising

so that we step out of history over its edge into thin clear air

with its sound like crystals singing for every brief, blossoming snowflake

though we never wanted such freedom it will come

it will come out of inevitable mountains it will leave nothing behind

but their clawed and weathered fingers glinting light, carving decisions

this is Amida Buddha's blessing mudra before he claps his hands

Dhamma Moon

such a hand, such opening dhamma moon

glow that melts the finger's pointing into listening with the skin and speaking from the bone. Legends From the Frontier

Guide to the Session

You'll need to gather purple berries: the ones that grow from the heart of your world. Crushed to juice, they'll give you ink. You'll need a skin: of deer, or mist – rags will do. If as you touch it, it becomes your own, you have the only sheet worth writing on.

Then you'll need the eye of a gull, cold, just so, an ocean-gazer. Be wrapped in earth; take a bear's shape, and be guided by sounds that stretch your hearing and tell you what to weave in words: desire, wholeness, the journey's threads.

Call yourself uncertainty's joy' and wait in the gap between the hours. Follow immediacy, and how each thing is an event that can flip you into cupping hands. And if knowing that induces a trance, be the sacrifice when the ritual stalls.

Because to hear the tale, we'll need your head: need to look through deep eye-sockets; need earholes that have heard the trees moan to the wind, the thrush, and the snarling saw. Then the voice that's born as the old myth sours can empty its world into the sun.

Border Town

Newcomers get the point: keep passing through. Stick around and you just get busy with shops and bars, offices and banks. At a border town, there's always work: gangs in hard-hats repairing the walls; men pushing another road to somewhere, while the kids stand around looking on.

It's the streets that get me – their stories, even at night when the crowds are gone: a skinny stray dog; a drunk or two; a busker scraping his violin. I sit by a lamp-post, sometimes with a friend: we pass around photos of the mountains, or travel again the far skies of summer.

Under daylight, people weed their gardens. The sun is as good as anywhere else – though everyone lives with complaints. We make plans, but nobody leaves. The news rolls on; the war is distant. You can die here with manageable regrets – though even then, the border stays closed. A while ago, a stranger came by. I was chewing my fingers as usual. We got round to playing three-card brag, and I beat him five games straight – cleaned him out.All but his quiet smile. Catching his eye, I looked for a thought. Nothing. Just my eyes going blind.

As he disappeared, I heard the world sing.

How Mountain Got Born

Through the arising of time, the river – the force-flow that suffuses the wildness and wetlands, and the hundred million cells of the cosmos of roots – descends to split into light and shadow and ripples; and enthused with living and dying, and murmuring validations through the skin, it resounds, the river. A singing bell.

Bound to rhythm, its currents, fluent in homage, swell into full glory – with moon and storm throwing themselves down as river-joy and river-prayer. And, as they arise like a dawn in our morning ear, the river is the maiden, shy-smiling; willing to be opened by what wells up from stillness, to be enriched with inflections. A silence that surrenders.

And as the tranced intuitions slip out of their mist, with the defining'yes'that sheds merging and space, sheds wish and play, sheds threat and undercurrent, she inclines to unambiguous ground. To be embedded. Churned against her own recoiling edge, river resonates the unswallowable, the deep's blue note. Which, in awed attention, blows and roars through you: a river, breaking through the throat of the unspoken; river, tonguing into the thirst, licking its dust; poking, chivvying, shaping views into aims; coaxing direction, carving a valley, she world-winks. And leaves you out there, bare and upright. Declared solid:

a pearl in the river's own oyster, bemused; a pearl in the soft pink meat under the shell; a gem that hardens to sanctify selfhood's pain with a glint that arouses its ache into quest; works it, compresses it and fires it into rock – glittering, twisted and splintering, but shouldering clouds. They long to rain...

So he stands, the mountain, upholding the sky: his work.And day after day, he shrugs off the river, the night-shining river. Knee-deep in her laughter, he stands amidst purposeless grace. Bald and dry-eyed, born into knowing there's nothing to get. Nothing to guard, and yet earth-bound.With the stars offering their nowhere, he stands: their king.

Old Man Lizard Keeps on Going

Old man lizard, he's our night-world's mover; he's got gold stars in his eyes. He's crawling across what we deserve.

He's crossing that desert. And round his neck are hung three hearts – he's carrying yours, mine and a spare.

They feel full of the slush from all we've been up to – it's like snow gone to mess –

falling on streets since our time began.

He stops, head cocked; he takes a sip from each. He's got to empty them: it's a lifetime's work, maybe more.

But those hearts are boss.

And his work has to finish

before the moon woman

gets up and leads the night home,

and so allow dawn's hawk to rise; before the magic dark can fade – those hearts need to be drained. Be made clear, transparent.

Becaause lizard fears that bird; It hunts and pecks at his shadow. Something real keeps hovering over him – so his wits are starting to freeze.

And he doesn't like broad daylight. He gets soft with warmth on his back. He misses the sense of direction – although the desert has no direction.

So he works the long, long night. So he'll find some friends, build a house; get solid, get finished, get a life.

So in his bright clear heart it starts snowing.

Room with No View

I called the starry night through the window, but about this room it could only speak shadows. A ghost dropped in – for old times'sake. By dawn I knew it was time to leave – the walls were heaving to throw me out.

The next to move in, all hair and impulse, was scrawling over them when a door snapped her up.

Policemen took up a watchful stance at the gate.

Then it was bailiffs. They took out the bed, the couch, TV, shotgun, stuffed bear... One got strangled by a curtain. The other went strange. There are hazards in trying to repossess space.

Wind and rain blew through for a year, kicked up some dust, wrestled in the hall...

Then a doubt crept in, small at first. But hungry. Saw no-one home and ate the floor. Growing bold, it crunched the joists like breadsticks. Then munched a ceiling – got so fat it burst the roof. That brought the sun in. Oh-oh! Trouble! Was he mad! (Though some say he was kidding.) 'Whose house is this? WHOSE HOUSE IS THIS??'

I opened my mouth, but all that came out was a cloudburst. 'Ah,'smiled the ocean,'Your very first time!'

The Selkie

I've got just this much skin as a voice can hold, but now I know that truth's just another one: like seal, like woman, like the great salt sea.

I didn't know you couldn't shed yours. Man with the key, I pity you. All you have is a chest full of hides,

and your key, hung on a cord around your waist. It's rusting slowly under your trousers, and the cord is rotting away. One day

you won't be able to open the chest and say you know how it is to be free. Then the skins you stored will laugh at you.

I've grown glad you caught me on the shore. I hadn't known that work was hard; that time was chopped down into days;

that passion was a night thing, not a green thing, but a strange red burst wedded to despair. Under the sea we carry no chains, no shadows, we don't have the weight; just silence folding itself into echoes.

No mind, just a green flowering through tides and tows and slippery kelp. No word-skin, no home-skin, only the touch

that asks for nothing, doesn't believe in things. Eat the children when I've settled inside you and gone quiet. In you they'll learn to swim.

Eastwards

Forty-two days on foot, then we lost count. The supply truck left behind to rust in the rain. Two men already turned back, one sick, one broken: onwards. Over three mountain ranges, the last one so cloud-drenched we were under water; but stuck, with everything rotting and stinking. Like guilt grown too old for expression. The forest grew thicker each hour; apes howling through the creaking and crashes of the high canopy.

At night the air closed in, with the insistent insects. So we held to the circle the fire gave: light – and a glow that we'd made it this far; and that there'd be a tomorrow, with the crystal fountain a push and prayer nearer. Then a guide slipped away, and another; sensed the dark ones'soft presence: their jasmine fragrance, and voices like flutes at sunset. Three of us held fast though, biting our fists, counting breaths, telling stories.

But the machetes were gone.And only one rifle. I'd heard between night and dawn the impossible jungle brings forth its flowers: a way opens and makes one a leader. So we took it in turns: chewed creepers and drank their sap to stay awake. The fire spat in its smoke and laid down ashes – the way our blaze does, given time.Ashes that knew me from lifetimes gone by. In the way that a fire can know.

Of how the mind glows; of its stars pulling onwards

through every cell's pulse; of thought as a river to drown in, and memory a slippery rock. Of instincts that hop around pain's waving stick. And of onwards being only a loop – along ways that ring with desert laughter. While I'm huddled in yesterday's mouth, like a word that can neither be said nor swallowed. So to listen. Is all that's true to be spreadeagled open? While the skin of our passion blisters into journeys – under a growling sun, the ongoing trails.

But East is arrival: to live under the leap of perception, to be guided by heart-creatures'onlooking eyes. To rest on our earth as its beauty holds us. Coming into the orchard where the veins of our solitude cross, someone asks our names and lost wishes. There are by now no answers, but a smile lights us up for a moment, which, here and always, is the only one that counts. And the knowing that we pass on as lovers of presence, a point that opens, unfinished.

The Day of the Horses

There's a road out of this town, on the way to the next; it stops at the river. Bronze-backed, uncrossable; the banks are steep. Here the hour has to turn and deepen –

to a moment when out of its grip will burst horses. From its twisting arms, the river will release them – fox-red, cloud-white, or dark as a rook's joke. They'll fly

on impossible wings, cello-sounding. The sky-bell will ring its lost bell, on that day when nothing is impotent; when the head throws itself open, and voice breaks out

through the cracks in language – just as the river gashes through the heart, is its nurse, its mirror, its confessor. River of silences, of presence, and widening.

May I stand in that stream, on the hub of a world with no rim, and give thanks. For its roads, and its ways that tease the nerves to bring forth their passion,

so a net is conjured, cast and hauled in. O river! While a cool, clear music pours over it like milk. Laughter and murmurs; and each breath's full arising – then the splash that speaks of return. The surface stays cool, and from these depths we haul only water, but a thousand suns scatter with each throw;

scattering senses, body, and time-tethered mind – scattering us all into galloping drops. This day when the road can pass through the nowheres.

And in the muttering dusk I can be without fear, and walk freely among the sweet breath of horses – who tail-flourish and open their heart-aching wings.

After the Age of Kings

First, a hunter awakens. In the clear morning, his movements know the sound of a snapping twig. In the afternoon, a shepherd trails by, attending whatever finds itself straggling down the hillside. By the evening, the weather has blown a monk through my door. He's the last of the lineage. He shaves my head, folds my stiff legs and straightens my spine. So I sit up. It may be ritual, but this is the entry to night:

to the time when a net is cast – and hauls in a flurry of silver bellies, of lidless eyes staring, and slimy green shapes that hiss and break up; and mobile phones that thank you for calling; an old cannon, brine-gnawed spars, and tangles of weed; and the last mermaid's hair. They come flooding through: all that's been lived, until it's been owned; wave after darkening wave... And as the strands weaken and the net breaks up –

around midnight it could be, or when even that has passed – a tall queen rises up through my throat. She's blocking the exits I wish I'd known. Her rich voice is belling out phrases of terror, backed by the weeping of a long-necked guitar. So I try to strum out our throttled history – but the anthems slip away at my touch. The strings that remember the slaves and the gold unravel. One by one, the drummers move on. At dawn there's a group of us, gathering on the beach. The old days are ending, but now we know what we have to bring forth. Out of what our tides have thrown up, we're building a ship – wide-bellied, deep-keeled. The storm-gates are gone, the levels are rising, and our results are merely provisional. But our hands warm to a supple strength. And the days run through us like children.

Seven Mountains

There are seven mountains standing around where I sit on the mountain I don't see.

Three rise before me: one is of history, one belongs to romance, one is snow-peaked with learning.

The light throws a veil of changing colours over them: the past, the world, the truth, the new.

Two mountains stand at my back.

One is set aside for wildlife, where giant sun-birds swoop on their prey – the water-snakes we used to swim with. Here apes can act what it is to be human, and jewel-like lizards, regally striped, peer through the foliage you thought you'd crawled out of. But only weird types go there. It's a mountain to shield the left side.

The other peak is clad in fire and smoke whose sulphurous clouds blot out the sun. People go there for purgative cures, in those times when the guards are asleep. From here you can taste the over-breathed air, hear the drums, and the horns, be part of the singing. It's all lifting with the whoops of the healers, helping our All merge into their One.

But it's the two tallest that draw me; I see my profiles stamped on their slopes.

Unconquered, one mountain still holds the east. Halfway up is a tea-tent, with no two cups the same; pilgrims hang out by the stove, swapping tales. In the higher lake, crystals form that grant wishes – but the air's so sharp, your thoughts can't take hold. Instead phantoms appear that snare climbers'wits, whisper of a summit, then lead them over an edge. Survivors say that's the point. East mountain: steep and misty, it towers with promise, and it seems to get taller every year – or maybe it's just the mist is descending.

The one in the west has an easy approach. At its base there are women who pick through the mass of old clothes, odd shoes and tangles of wire. They'll gladly give you a hatful of flowers. Then you can make an offering to the impassive idols that squat on the clouds. The top is flat, tidy and well-defended. It gives us freedom to choose. But by the time I get there, shoving through the well-dressed dead and the cans of laughter, I'm nauseous. I just want to find a way down – to where the ground will keep opening beneath me. In these lost valleys is my mountain's strength. Along them I know my river will come.

The House at the Edge of Silence

In our house at the edge of silence the headlines are fading, the speeches dissolve.

There will be another ocean but insight flashes on the breaking wave.

There will be another sky but peace is rolling on the dragon's tongue.

See how he flicks the moon with his tail, and combs with his claws the dripping stars! Tomorrow's dawn gleams on his scales.

In our home at the edge of silence we can hear the wisdom of the trees growing and breathing in things as they are.

Their roots are turning back to just be here and the walls open out as touch and trust

as straight through the roof his thunderbolt drops.

Old Man Lizard's Vital Role

She hovers in the virtual, over the border. But where we're born, her flush keeps dimming. It's as if her countless tears aren't enough and that we need a guide to her great compassion.

That need bounced this way and that looking for a place.

Saw the Crucifixion – but it had got cultish. And the Holocaust was reserved for the Chosen; and the Terror and the gulags behind the Curtain. And they'd all got locked in time.

So she shed another tear.

A lynch-mob came by – but that was blacks only.' Then a travelling witch-hunt – gender-specific. Even Hiroshima, Agent Orange and genocides, searing as they were, had too narrow a scope.

There was always someone left out, just going to work, feeding the chickens, or leaning out of the window admiring the moon.

So she turned to Prometheus, chained down for eternity; a reliable mate, if a bit old. Groaning, he spurted some blood from his ragged wound, fresh from the spot where the vulture's beak hit –

and in the blindness of faith her seed came alive. 296 It was smooth, white and perfect.

She studied it, perched amongst lofty thoughts. It was in a very dry place, all alone. And so cold! It seemed all would be lost.

But for Old Man Lizard.A dream stirred him up; he twitched and flicked the egg into his nest – where rolling in the dust were me and you. And the other.All roused to blood-heat.

Something was bound to hatch.

She breathed out and smiled – and the jingle of her ear-rings was heard through the cosmos: endless would be her child's incarnation – red-eyed, fire-proof and ready for battle.

Spring in the Timeless City

When spring can arise in this tall-walled city, the winds blow through it a scattering: ashes from the heartlands, music from the ocean; and names that flutter like tiny birds.

Then the people without faces wait, perched on their balconies. Maybe a breeze will form a nose from their dust... or, if they hold out a socket, an eye-seed will land...

Meanwhile, those who can run many faces are parading the streets to display them. Faces are everywhere, laid out on the pavements or hung up on walls for passers-by to admire –

or perhaps to make an acquisition: a strong nose, a slender arched brow, a set of full lips, a dimple, a smile... Some take a whole face – or two, or three:

one for work, one for wearing at home, and something special, for weekends away. They soon wear out. Then it's time for another. An artist can make half a dozen a week

before they dry up. It's tough work: promises, small lies, obligations and will; attempts to meet, or just to be seen – all interwoven and tinted. Until the skull dies.

Those with only one face, the migrants, are camped the other side of the river. They came out of winter; it was all they had. They fled the ice with just this loose bag of skin

with past, future and dreams stuffed inside it. The stories! One gave his fine set of ears to a grandmother; another, her mole to an orphaned child. These people know who they are.

And no wonder they hold that one face so tight, even as furies whisper down each nerve's thread: "This is your father's. This is your mother's. This was the accident. This, the disease.'

So they fear any witness.As if from my perch I could form, deform or destroy. But I can't wear that. I'm just a reporter – and like you, a fool's wind blew me here.

Where it rests, I sprout ears. They're listening like hounds that eagerly snuffle the evening air; and in the hour of compassion, they'll find my face – nestling in a backwater amongst the reeds.

The Teachers

The first one's clothes are rags, patched with careful elaborations: leaves and grasses woven on durable thread.

His wise hands have coaxed out of earth's clutches, a diamond. Now is his offering.

When I've worn out some grasping, I'll study his feet: their strength and their flexion;

follow them out of the clamorous land, to a shrine on the last firm viewpoint. Hear the heartbeat, know the blood

as leeches suck out my poison. And all I promised I'd never be.

The teachers.

Decades later, another will see me. She helps me slip out of my future. We join in verses, calling your name.

Change of Season

Out back, once you get the door open, it's all gone wild. You can see the road we used to drive down every day by the line of thistles and nettles that curves through the grass.

No-one's going to work, no small men in tight suits; no motors droning and gasping, no muzak clogging my ears; just life, ripe and rotting. It smells rich out back,

but no corpses hang from the apple trees now. The hut where the trolls used to store their piles of bones – it must have collapsed one day, or on a stormy night,

but it had been leaned over for so long, windows smashed and roof-felt flaking off, that no-one noticed when its last post gave up. This makes me think that time

doesn't have moments, that nothing definitely begins, nothing ends. Like the summer that one day we call autumn, like the sadness whose swelling radiance gathers us in.

My voice changes and moves away from where I used to live, and I let it go. Now it barely speaks of the dragons I loved, the ones whose breath burnt my skin to this brassy sheen,

the ones I wrestled with who made my fingers strong. 'Don't look back,'they said,'beyond the broken wooden fence, wait for the deer. Now they are your guides.'But how,

I want to know, do I speak of them, tussle with them,

who are born of light and grace? Of course, there are owls in the silences between words.And stillness, doesn't it stalk

everyone, bold as a lion? But to meet with the deer takes an offering, and more, until the shiver of contact settles, and the creaking of this one-hinged door turns sweet.

Blind Men's Story

We began with a look We built up a picture, we knocked out some space We built in dimensions and a place for nothing We built a truth in the nothing, it was stark, it was lonely We built another, they fought We built another and another and another We built so many they made a world in the nothing, going this way and that So we built an it for the coming and going to play with We built a name for it, with a mast, rudder and sail, it sank We built it a hand, we asked for a loan, it clenched We built it an eye, it looked at us

It screamed

We built it a reason to be It grew an appetite and horns We built on previous knowledge It grew dark, it grew twisted and yawned We built it a telescope, a laser, a cyclotron It grew like the sun and swallowed its traces We built a word to sum it up It grew a doubt with a body like a snake, it wriggled through We built a sigh to soothe it It grew five feet and danced We built an ideology to lift it off the ground It grew inside-out, pulled out its entrails, plucked a tune and roared its battle cry It grew like the rumour that nothing was wrong It grew out of the nothing with feelers of joy We built a brick to hold it all down It grew like the dawn in the docks when the fishing boats return We built it all that we knew We built it all that we knew Ue built it as best as we could It grew a voice that's murmuring under our ribs It grew an ear like the night It grows very close, closer by the hour

We have to keep running and running

The Emperor of Stone

Losing heart in that melt-down city, I broke out: south, riding the rails; in search of a centre. Between the wheels came glimpses of dry stone walls holding olive groves, cropped and stunted. A thousand years old, and still twisting with growth. A land like me. It had lost its people.

At a halt I slipped out. A northbound diesel drew alongside, and the trading began: amid haggling and back-slaps, laptops swapped hands with live turtles and amber – from the emperor's palace, they claimed.

So: Go that way. And only by walking. A long way down, I came to a crossroads. Watching out for patrols, spied an old friend; he was working his way through assumptions. Stones in his hands, stones in his pockets. In them, he showed me the sea's footprints, and the emptied lives of its creatures.

He showed me the stones in his bones; in his blood, in his words. He showed me the great rough rock of his death. He gave me the stone of attention. But the only lead he had on the emperor was to follow the geese and their mantras. Years of migration. Until I returned to a lake that held fragments of face in its ripples. On one wavering bulrush a dragonfly poised, alive as a guess and crowned with this day. Anointed by the wellspring of light, wings shone around him like auras.

His eyes are eternal; in them, worlds bow. Their days cannot swallow such presence. A catkin falls, shivering the water; the sky is an open bowl. I'm ready. Bearing gifts of jewels, the envoys approach.

The Ice Harvest

No-one can say where water really begins; or even if there are any beginnings. All arising is a shared co-incidence in which attracted potentials cohere and freeze – and in the ongoing current, we're found.

To source true water, some go north. Far north: beyond the managed land and the steel towns; beyond the mines and the mountains. There time breaks down to a motionless wave and everything twists into the improbable.

Darkness for six months of the year. Feeling goes to monotone. No centre, no horizon, no reckoning. You've got to get through it, that's all. And you learn: This is the ancient law.

Drumming breaks out, and wild dancing; booze and sports that spar with death; sex is urgent, to keep the juices flowing. We shake spears of heat in the teeth of the Cold, against a winter that's more than a season.

The seventh month stirs; and for a week or two – before the colours come storming in, before the nesting and the burning light – there's a chance to know emergence: crack-up, then water, then sanity. Soon the ships will come, and the frantic trade: tea and tobacco, cloth; and hot news. We'll hear of the wars and the deaths; we'll hear of the Games. We'll light up with the pictures, the music and the winners. And in return we will bring out our ice.

Slabs prised from the face of black seas; blue ice chiselled from beyond the glaciers; blocks of what is endless and inevitable, harvested to cool the free-wheeling south. And in them the seeds of all that has been.

A seal's tooth; the crystallized breath of a bear; a hunter, who lost his return a millennium ago – all frozen into the corpus of being-knowledge. Grief, daring, beauty; halted, these resonances lock the ongoing saga in the gene's deep pool.

But while light is still tentative, all that is fixed is held by intention. How even the shaman returns. How love and rage get aligned to a realm of consequence and changing purpose. And how recalled, we lay out our life's harvest –

with no final judgement. Only half truths. Only currents through which startled eyes loom amid unfathomable ownerless voices. In this brief season of blood and breath; of being a vortex among the waters.

Old Man Lizard Gets a Break

Old Man Lizard poked a claw in his eye and took to thinking.

For the amount of work he had to do, the hopes to carry, the pains to bear, he needed to be fit – strong in body and mind.

So he started working out.

Dumbells, bench-presses and cross-trainer; then push-ups, ab crunches, pilates; followed by stretches and headstands, then back-flips, asanas: lotus and fish.

Some people laughed. Some voted for him, wanted him to be Chief. The young lizards found it disgusting.

He tried polishing his speech. Listening comes easy when you live in the desert, but speaking...! As much as he tried, elocution and oratory were beyond him.

So he took up counseling – and found if he lashed his tail and shook his head, he could come out with a plausible croak. Not bad - though his wattles got bruised.

Some people wept softly, they felt better; some hailed the new prophet. Those young lizards took careful note.

Then he took up meditation: thumped a rhythm on the sand with his tail, squinted his left eye at his crown chakra, recollected the thousand names of the light –

and mindfully let the years pass. Even the cacti were moved. The land did seem to get more mellow.

But it all weighed far too much. He collapsed, broken-backed and whimpering. Turned out it was the best thing he could do. It took him back to the dharma.

Because a scarab came by. She bundled him up in her ball of dung. Aah, she was used to this kind of thing.

And that some'd say they were lovers, while others fight over his remains. While we, who always knew, get younger and slicker by the hour.

How Time Changed into Space

A lifetime she's stood lording it over us. Birthed us, drove, bowed and buried us. Yet still a few prayers and music escape.

Time laughed at the trees, their willingness to be here: Green, then hardening; wintered and lopped – and yet their roots know a deep dark life.

Earth? She too a mass of contradictions, going nowhere in an orbiting trance.And yet, somehow belonging. So Time sensed a need to change direction.

Always running and pushing; always hungry for new lives to chew: Shiva's pet. Glorious face, ignorant heart. 'Who called me, who made me?' Who cares?

So I've had to take her into my veins, like a drug. Blow out endgames; let death shatter my shields – just to get a feel, just to wrap some flesh around her.

Stay now with me, demon, eat my hopes. Gnaw the meat off my dread and failure; get fat and happy in vast aimlessness.

Together we're spreading our mystic wings. I'm an eagle, an albatross, a walker of skies – and you can unfold into a now you forgot.

Down South

This is what it's like at the very end of the south: the land has extended so far it's like an old witch's crooked finger. She's used the nail for spearing fish at the bottom of pools; or for dangling bits of meat on as bait for young squids. Done it so long that now the joint won't curl back. When you've gone this far south, nothing collects.

Cliffs don't so much face the great ocean as are hypnotised by how it shrugs off direction. It circles out there: beyond certainty, beyond fear, where the sky swirls its magician's sleeves and widens into awe. Beyond its horizon, there's an island: monks have set off in their wicker boats for those blessed shores. There is no return.

So this is the end of all roads. After they wear out. Way past the villages made of railway sleepers; past the abandoned silver mines; past final duty; past the last stage-post of making things work. Some say it all ends in the swamp of unknowing – but this is way farther south than that. Past what even the oldest bones can sing of. This is where the laws turn around, and as they give up, find that everything knew all along what to do.

A mystic totters by, saying, 'Beats me, beats me...'

Words stretch out on the ground, quietly laughing at how the long-bearded lichen tickles the wind. A doubt lies on its back, kicking the stars; their light is massaging its travel-cracked feet. It's hard to believe how many kinds of anger there are scrambling among the rocks and wrestling with each other. Dolphins glide past and take some out for a ride.

So many hours are pouring out on the wing, out in the abandonment of end and beginning, that the days first tried to extend to hold them, then taking a breath, gave up sun and moon; and then finally threw out all the measures.

The land rests in its grey and brown dignity. No need for shows. See what you like. Lightning flashes; each flickering image is a prophet, stabbing out the need to absorb all darkness – moment after moment after moment. We who have stolen and sold them; who have slaughtered the sick, and all our orphans – this is where we go to get sane.

It's a long way from the yesterdays. So please sit a while. Tomorrow is still out hunting for something solid: just give it time. We will all learn how to kneel and invite. There are songs here waiting to meet the voices at home.

What Gets Learned While Doing Time

At the edge of the river's mouth, there's a boat, still stuck and creaking, in which we all used to doze the days. This was before the ocean stretched out its arms; before I inhaled its tang of homelessness, like a kid sniffing dad's whisky.

Half drunk, I can still feel the sea-pull. It sucks me out on a blessing journey – to be amazed by narwhals and tritons and buoyed up by each wave's eloquence. For years my juices have been trickling out, trying to eat the fruit in that mouth.

But isn't this how we all get formed – chasing the wake of what's already past us? And isn't it true that, even without my ear, the shell I picked up was always roaring; and that, even as I open it, a door squeals: 'Right here is your non-location.'?

Doesn't any sail flapping in desultory winds yawn:'Your passion goes just this far.'? There's only transition, soft like the snow; it's drifting from nowhere to nowhere – and yet each flake, as it falls on the water, is quietly kissing our prayer beads. And everything melts into a blessing.

So I don't have to hunt for some thing. No more cabins with spying windows. No more gripping tides. Even the moon that's dogged our lives can take a break – as, out of the compacted silts of mind, its endless dream-journey, and its truth,

another intention bubbles up. And, embarrassed by the touch of light, rides the roll of an incoming wave. Says this time there'll be no drowning. Who can tell? And anyway, I always wanted to die in beauty.

But perhaps she's right: clear reflection has no weight. As the days discreetly move out, let the muttering question go comb the shore. To get off this boat, one step is enough – and I float on an ocean of deepening.

A note on the author

Born in London in 1949, Ajahn Sucitto entered Buddhist monastic life in Thailand in 1976. Since 1979, he has lived in Britain, mostly at Cittaviveka and Amaravati monasteries. He teaches Dhamma, and travels extensively to offer meditation retreats and talks.

Ajahn Sucitto's teachings are available in book and audio format and much of his work can be downloaded from the following websites: www.cittaviveka.org www.forestsanghapublications.org www.dharmaseed.org

Ajahn Sucitto also assists in the supervision of the Dhamma Moon poetry website at www.dhammamoon.org and keeps a blog of ongoing reflections at sucitto.blogspot.uk.



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