

*Travelling
the Middle Land*

Travelling the Middle Land

POEMS

AJAHN SUCITTO



DHAMMA MOON

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Travelling the Middle Land
Poems
Ajahn Sucitto

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‘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 ...

Connected Discourses of the Buddha
(*Samyutta Nikāya* 12:15)

Preface

How does experience happen? Can we be conscious, without being conscious of something? And what makes that 'something' seem separate from the ephemeral yet restless sense of a self who experiences it?

The consciousness that presents subject and object as separate entities has had serious consequences in terms of subjective disorientation and the loss of respect for aspects of creation that are sensed as being 'out there'. Not knowing what we are involved with or where we are, we don't know how to behave. The thus-created external world gets dominated and abused by a dislocated self.

True understanding dissolves this deadening dualism. When subject and object, apprehension and appearance, are known as dependently co-arising, there is a harmonious relationship and the cosmos is in balance. This sacred cosmos, which I call the 'middle land', has to be sensed through inquiry and attention in the journey between an immeasurable world and an awareness that has no home. It is a journey marked by visions and mirages, and resonances that shimmer in the heart.

And yet it's travelled through the specifics of time and place.
To draw messages from these travels has long been my aim
and to pass them on has been an aspiration.

This is another attempt, a major rewrite of a collection of poems
that evolved over decades and was published in 2013 as *Travels in
the Middle Land*. Revisiting the territory, I've named it *Travelling
the Middle Land*.

If the poems can encourage a reader to travel their own country
with enhanced awareness, then these writings are enriched.

Many thanks for the encouragement and advice of Ajahn
Abhinando, Graham Brown, Peter Fernando, Linda France,
Lisa Gorecki 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 frost.
The air warms itself in my throat
like some small mammal, burrowing down ...
to be held, 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.

At that breaking edge, everything moves
as it's felt. The owl's long call swoops,
widening from source into arc – as it enters,
hovering over the heart to serve summons.

Out of form, we share night: tones
of presence held in a slow-turning eye.
In that clear 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

Salt-white sun
crows in its wake
trawling the early mist

snowdrops
address the blades of rain
heads bowed

song pours and shapes
the blackbird
centring the morning

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

the tips of a magnificence
that pokes at my head
nudging raw mind

to meet
green-spurt and sprawl

then breathe it

Old Bridge

The stars are too old now.
Night's cool simplicity
drifts off, into distance.
Gleam of water, chatter -
chortle; 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 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.

Vesak: Night Vigil

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

The moon's silver dulls.
Shadows crawl 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,
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.
A luminous wash – 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 mind hangs in its haze,
without a basis in seen or seer:
an openness that can't be known,
nor expressed through any effort –

or even aim. It's only streaming on.
I try to focus; or to sleep. Then let be –
at still point, unfutured; afloat
in a time like a prayer wheel's turning.

At such solstice I am hosted:
the light playing on as dreams and rainbows;
the candle ready 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 peck 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 to yourself.

Good, that's it.

The desert will draw close, very close.
Let go, attuning your voice to the desert.
Let your first true word 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 star-sweep night –
so much sky above my head
so much perfect sky

*

lone 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

*

radio alarm
oozes Country and Western –
four in the morning

*

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

Desert 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 places into trails, and returns to source.
To what has to be, before homes and bloodlines;
to the bareness where truth starts to breathe.

Pinto River dived under the sand
when he heard that whiteman was coming,
with his cattle. Ol' River got out.

Joshua Tree, Twentynine Palms:
average family drains off 892 gallons per day
from the web of everything's life

And his ranches, and his gold-lust:
broken glass, hoops of rusted steel, tyres,
splintered shacks, *Keep Out!* fences,
military huts

– under a sky jet-ripped
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.
Its dignity is in being raw;
and in the deep calm that stores green
within thick skin and spines.

Until the rain –
when 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 through its pain.
Rain-stirred, the 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 fisting 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 for 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 stand on this:

I have been there when such time's dethroned;
when the implacable day slides into eternal night,
shyly; or when the awful dark softens – and turns
into a rose that opens to the scouring blaze.

I can be there in that shifting time,
feeling the 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.
Here, Prometheus laughs at the gods:
he finds their pettiness amusing.
He lets their groundless pomp,
their fear of death and pain, wash over him.
But maybe they can learn ...
if he takes the human part:
to be a maze of stark uprising forms –
until day and night shall see him.

New Zealand: South Island Refuge

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

Bean stew streams 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 embodiment,
muscle throb softens.
Then the incoming tide.

Red beech and totara,
waka, blue duck and fantail:
ripples of sensing
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 roar ... an avalanche
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 ducks 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 a rolling billow
Mountains drop their weight; the held 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 world's morphic
whirl is praise, dancing. Through the crystal of the thankful hour,

this howling spin invokes a cloud-breathing rapture –
its under-thought shines, embodied, tingling through pores,
alive with tonality. 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 in the bowl of years,
is my gathering up – into form, into being; as the water-born,
a fleck of squirming, a sperm-like pilgrim in the terrific
death's-end of god's blindly weeping womb. 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 out on the doorstep.

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

Their touch traces my edge
like the words of cool angels
from the far circle of silence.
I can be just an outline:

nose, cheek, and forehead
defined by snow-speech –
in tingles that tell how
I'm pricked out by melting.

Cool spies of Awakening,
uncover such presence
as will stand in the white-out
when solidities go.

Snow through me the lightness
to receive my time's splinters –
the pang and the fragments.
Snow through me our melt-down.

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

Buddha Images

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

walking Buddha

2
two hands open
softly raised

the forefingers cocked over
attuned to each thumb-tip

between them
a thread of silence

as the how I don't know
is held
in the nothing he knows

3

My need swells up, opens its face.
Stands like a rock, rough-surfaced.

A bare heart finds it
wrapped in the voices of all these years.
Lets pleasure and pain return to the source.

From the silence behind the rant
this naked life

moves out in 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.

Leave-Taking

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 –

and live the ancient resonance
that wafts on the strophes and stresses
of our drifting off-beat ballad.

It's getting too late for reasons.

Red Ritual

I will gather round
my flesh-pink pulsing life
my rosy springtime life
my carmine-flooded crushes
and the muddy road they ran

I will gather round
my splattered ketchup life
my red-inked *'could do better'*
my ragged scarlet flags
and the shut-down smoky nights

I will gather round
my rusty tin-can voice
so the wine-dark stream it bobs in
can sing me to a sunrise
you don't need a smile at sunrise

let it pause the shrugs around
the bruises and the burn-outs
get the failures to unbutton
so an honest breath can come through
can touch the old moon's crimson heart

may that breath-stream feed a body
formed of dust and heat and caring
with hands of earth and rivers
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
flags 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 heartbeat
to a dark like the wild deer's eye.

Maps of Earth and Sky

Mapmaker

Like a moon lit up as lord of the night;
like an autumn tree, when its brittle leaves
hold blaze ... hidden by glory, hosts of light ...

If our given blessings didn't make us thieves ...
if a moment of seeing and some mind-plucked insights
didn't entice a starving self-belief
to gobble ... Light possessed consumes like fire.

So, stand on the rock of your desert dark;
wake up soulful. Don't die lazy. Drag desire
from its stretcher, and make it cough up its sparks
and smoke. Then you can trace the deep earth-heat
under the clamour and glare.

Your life:

it crosses the canyons of heart. Bare feet,
warm ground. Your measureless steps. Your dusty love.

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 such ground, my life rose up
through miraculous struggles, with its streaming,
its smells and its juices, forming a shared body.

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

That flow is possessive, relentless;
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

The long road East: hitchhiking through the snow,
freezing in the Alps – but fired-up by the choice
to go choiceless: *Nirvana (via Goa)!*

Maybe breakthrough growth is always seeded
in a life that's true to our migrant roots;
not stuck in the head, safe among the voices
of theory. Steady steps and hands are needed:
to lead the spirit as it flutters and broods;
then pluck the old feathers. Attend to the core –

and stay on track, as gut-deep decisions
drive into hard places. Something young and raw
must learn – we can! – through melt-down and passion:
Keep the wings steady. Not to flit and soar
through dreams, but to hatch a caring vision.

Abandoned Railway Line

Destination and departure – have gone off track.
Highgate, Fortis Green – they're running late.
White petals scatter, patterning the wind's whirl;
sycamores shoot, elders wave; trot-skipping
through the tangle, a fox sniffs out gardens
and alleys – bins ripe for the forage. What laws?
Look! From a railway arch, a Green Man, grinning ...

Through Victorian brickwork, his vulpine smile:
it's pure London – where, more lucky than blessed,
I'm strolling along a gone-green scar; aiming
nowhere on an abandoned line – yet going on;
on through spiky graffiti and delinquent blooms,
as, masked in lime, purple, lemon, and rose,
guerilla artwork cracks the urbanised crust

to release gouts of life. Lawless, this is heartland:
its blood forms souls – that get drawn to the pulse
of getting this, making progress, dumping that;
while legs march to signals and convenient beeps –
faster, go faster! – urgent rituals, the abandoning
dance ... And I'm in this, tranced on a bridge,
musing on traffic: *Stuck. Who? What's sticky?*

A feral canal, broken pram in her lap,
contemplates the rites of passage; stagnant,
but tidally rocked. Locked, sluiced – and greased
with profit and loss, consumption and write-offs –
onwards that tide, swelling to an offshore world
that's all rumble and spin. Greed's long journey:
pull and link; rush and shudder; on to a halt –

but no start, no end. Just the vanishing point ...
while a nervous certainty contracts the mind –
and the logic of all constructing things
beats a wild drum: *More, more, forever more!*
Homes get glimpsed through entranced convictions,
but cities reveal us, the connections and street-talk;
they fashion and play our spawn-song better.

Pub, warehouse, gardens, cemetery –
the travelling-on uproots all stations;
drives through clatter, on through smoke – to derail
into an ever-opening now: a brief given breath;
the rapture of hawthorns; 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 few words, and grubby joy,
held in the balance of vigour and order.

The wood clunks and rings; a thudding clangour
firms up purpose, forges the man-trance.
Then, softening into a wider sense,
there's *us* – heartwood bared, 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; I'm freezing!

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 move freely under my skin.
And here, now, is the legacy:

this flare in the heart's crucible,
flickering and blazing; how it shapes
the remembrance – into an eagle
that lifts, exultant. Let it roof-burst

to ring the sky's bell: *Welcome!*
Though my time passes like smoke
and my words come out smudged,
may they stream from that torch.

May those signs reach out –
to whatever feels lost and alone
that needs boundaries and warmth.
I'm fathered; I've been raised

to live on this pyre of days:
I must offer a hearth. Pure
may it burn, purer than memory –
not to destroy, nor celebrate ash,

but that hands might grow warm
by feeding it. And that heart
be worked into a thread of gold:
Carry the grace – then pass it on.

Love in a Fossilised Age

Love was the heart-rise under shared stars, a weave
of luminosities. It's getting dim; I'm frayed.
Between flares and wildfires, a pulse of grief
now links us to the Earth. Almighty gold put paid
to other, pagan, bonds. Mutual cosmos?
Maybe. We're *all* sold out. Money rules our skies.

Midwinter mind. Pump it. Dip into its chaos
and daub raw truths on the wall of lies;
speak what's under ground. The frozen surface,
the heartlessness, must crack – and a felt logos
move fear through your body into an embrace
that births the Phoenix.

Light-bringer, ghost
more whole than holy – be the love: one foolish
enough to keep rising up. Pure enough for ash.

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 to Chanctonbury –
of a lattice woven between copse and villages;
of land ploughed to pap; of soil paying our debts –
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 *brook* and *gill* onto the land –
have been worked and shaped into English.
Rich in my mouth is their speech-spirit,
but wizened by migrants 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 will's push and wit, the wet soil's pull
and to the knot of unyielding roots.

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

Weathering

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 flutter in ragged loops –
dawn meditation

*

stopped at the front door
by a brown leaf on the mat –
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 suggesting we're solid.
And yet we're framed: by the long shiver of dawn,
and in the evening, by the light descending
warm and full of days. And when that lets you
see things beginning and coming to an end –
you get to feel 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.
Their response: one sting. Initiation.
And so ... 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, as they poke out, the lines of intent
trace something foxy. Ears pricked, and sniffing,
it's sensing 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.

Autumn

Summer rests its soaring wings. Glories fold
under old gold, russets and lived-out brown.
Crab-apples crumble; like fire, their ochres fade
and darken – from ripeness to a breakdown
in which whatever’s seeded, like soft grenades,
lies ready to explode in spring’s uprising.

Here’s our ground; among the flight and the falling.
And that’s a fruition: to know we get wiser
only as our triumphs, tangles, and petty brawling
are digested.

Compassion’s an earth-opened heart,
and it wraps round every season. So, home:
it’s here, where birth, growth and falling apart
go deep. Trust that; and the warmth that blooms –
courtesy of your wormed-through loams.

Cacti

I love their stubborn roots. Under fierce sky
with no shelter, with no deep lush earth ...
Caught in such glare, they still hold their green.
Maybe it's age, but I attune to a growth
through what is trapped, exposed and dry.

Thick skin shields the juice-filled mass –
but where sap rises in a world of 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 a dry time ripen;
taste it, swallow it – and get it down:
There's nothing to know. And get used to that –
to sit upright among meaningless stones
meeting the thirst that cracks the mind open.

Drape their leafless spires with prayer flags.
Let such praise move the sun-seared skies
to witness: a desert can bring forth
the gift of presence – a flower that rises
through grit. Petals of life-torn rags.

Spring Rites

Again spring rises up the warmth, the fool
in love with everything! Breezy somersaults,
brimming and possessed with light ... So full
of juice – sprouting, warbling and streaming out
through crocus, blackbird and hawthorn ... such burning,
this earth's green son! Wish him a strong heart then,
with which to ripen – through a world that's turning
autumnal, then cold.

To become human,
it takes such a sobering; to receive the spark,
then blaze and fade – and be touched by a gnosis
that opens and empties. We learn in our dark
how to balance; how life is a gate that closes ...

but turns on a hinge. That point sounds the call –
of the love that stays. Let flowering, let fall.

Baptism

All this week from the blustering west –
wheel after wheel of spangling rain.
Beating my walls, scrabbling against glass,
the berserk vanguard of winter:
lunges, shrieks – and moans I thought
only a womb could hear ...

as if the wilds we demolished were rising up,
young, in wall-breaching riot. Closed, tight,
my window has barely stopped shaking.

Rattled, its viewpoint flies open:
'claim ... own ... improve ...' –
gale-grabbed, the glazed logic shatters
as place dissolves in a hissing blur

This house stands condemned.
And what lies pressed beneath its feet
curses the walls, the towers, the looking down –
the imperious tent within which we're confined,
in which nothing is ever given back.

That takes 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;

to be blown through, swept from supremacy –
so for once I'll ring in true;

and whatever gets struck, shivers, and springs
from the taut skin that lids the heart
brings a turning, a plunge, an arrival –

to something touched I never fathom
Soulful ground? Like most, I want that flat –
and try to civilise the twisting moment.

It takes a storm to turn the reach back
and pull deep vowels from my throat –
oh, to forgive you your greed, human heart,
your claws and insatiable poverty!

Let an indomitable intimacy turn me around,
to a warmth that includes all the wounding.

Because if I can't enter that, I'm aborted.
A passion threw us out here, so bring it in –
let the world's wild wheeling, tumult and flood,
pull this fisting life open.

One-choiced is the birth:
to push at the web and weave of holding on,
and squirm out through the scar –
until, received in truth, my spine hauls up –
and turns in a tide drawn by dragons.

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 at conceit. Rips dogma 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 selfhood, threads of light. He just laughs.

Because I must burn with aspiring flames –
while he's burnt out, out, released in his laughter.

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; then 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 what'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 stone's purity.
And how a finely-turned porcelain vase
honours the 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 friable sense of me and you.
Sparky, skin-stripping. But my novice hands
need that edge: it forms and trains them.
Out of onlooking, I'm here for the work.

January 13th, 1999

This early ice-traced morning;
a world of cool 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.

Entering the Mandala

I. Names

Night Visit

Warm at centre, on a long winter's night:
through the bone-cage, through the breath-flow,
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 bends intention
into a resonance that enshrines us here:
bare room; a small lamp; presence, burning.

Shine: let rapture keep the axis clear –
so my edgy shadows feel your turning.

Inside the Out

Beyond the lurching weight of earth,
far from the rush of water and fire,
opening out through the busy air;

between thought and its silence,
between absurdity and gravity,
attention is like a laser.

Turned back on my retina,
it's everything – then seeing's gone.
Knowing shrugs: all's void.

Now worlds can't hide their flimsiness.
Nothing knows what to do –
the gaping and the stammering.

A hit is needed, somehow.
So I uncork. I can still pour out
old joys and conjure wishes;

and they can lift the mind-sprawl,
coax it to enter the cells
that light and touch lead through,

where voice brings sound to life,
and meaning thrills, unspoken:
inside. Here's a hushing welcome;

curled up, here, within the given.
Tendrils of wholeness gently stir ...
here, O willing heart

Until being-time warms up.
You know the visitation:
how living gets shaped and pinned

by dawn and violin and rose;
how fluidities tighten into vibrant skin,
and touch turns sensing inside-out ...

so feeling shows me how to fly,
for a while, before all comes to fade.
Into the great dark heart of homage.

The Way after Samādhi

Travelling through the wavebreak world
as brain and eye equip their craft
with all the lights that goals are seen by.
But there's a deep, and steadier, keel:

of awareness, unsteered, unbidden.
Just as a redwood tree
rises from the roots' deep hold
by drinking in the mist's surrender,

so, what's known unfolds beyond itself –
as air and fire and trembling space
and all earth's rich juices
lift mind to silence. In pure cascades.

And unleashed attention meets the skies
where crows can learn to carry prayers;
and prayers can breathe and wrap around
the zigzag tides of a spun-out globe –

how the spirit flies! Every wingbeat widens –
until, feeling the grip of her own sweet space,
she has to turn, and, to get free,
pluck and rip her fluttering wings –

and with that, give up motherland;
collapse the glorious flight,
and let go the push towards dawn:
passage is an inwards falling.

This is the way the Hero comes:
down-swooping like moonlight;
tapping out the codes of freedom,
tap-tap-tapping on our ocean's door.

The Northern Gate

They say there is a garden;
and it's entered through a quiet touch
This winter's wall denies all that.

I remember once, things spoke –
but in this deafened climate
any call would freeze on the lips.

No surge of wild sweet rain,
no sun, no moon;
the stars have slammed their doors.

Night digs deep, but can't find ground;
it's like a blind thief
fingering an empty pocket –

so numbness has to widen its span;
keep wintering on,
extending North.

Let South be a softly opening palm:
here, bleakness is the gate.
I'll learn to lean on that.

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 prayer
I must have seemed Chinese.
Picture me: long downcast eyelids,
hands arranged like fragrant flowers
opening for the Awakening bee.

But the craft snared and fixed me.
Then came the splintering:
as an image shaped by public eyes,
I'm made wooden, remote, ideal –
and now only one flower is left,
in your heart, awaiting her turn.

Through the split in my chest,
the broken face and wormholes,
she screams the nameless name.
It's everyone's and everywhere.

You who have cut my roots and reach –
you have drained my blood.
Now give back my thundering flesh.

Prayer-Beads

One name is You
One name is I Am
One name is That
One name is Wrathful 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 wings
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 mind 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.

Head

Hacked off in the rites of duty,
eyes and ears gone virtual,
the buried head must sprout.

Out of a worked-flat ground.

Nerves are taut with hearkening;
they need to feel where I arise –
as an immediacy they don't control ...

where mind is more than a witness
to the keening chronicles
that roil within the cloudy flows.

They wake it with a surge of fire.
Wires that held things tight melt down.
The locked-in body starts to ease;

fingers extend into claws and fins;
throat finds its roots ... and sings the land
that's been sliced up into bloody maps.

Out of that fracturing ... another cry.
Through the tectonic plates of selfhood,
breaks the only voice that's everyone's.
And no one's.

Potent, world-embracing,
the dismemberment speaks out.

Wayfarer

The gripped space slackens.
Out of the rocky mindscape
a ragged sense is finding shape.

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

It's moving like a seabird's wing,
folding, unfolding; shaping fresh air.
Faces flicker and person fades

as it feels through stone-scrubbed skin
into what gapes underneath.
Warming the nowhere beneath the pulse.

A finger resting there
on the deaths that won't be buried;
on 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 touch,
though identities writhe around it.
As they silence, a hearing stirs

to swell and give itself.
The gloomy crags resound

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 mind-wake subsides, in recognition.

No advice; just a weightless reminder
that every shore I've left, and what I say I am,
are rainbows – arcs of 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.
Sifting birth's a wayfarer's thing.

But that 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 striving 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 conviction.

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, thought-spray, sky ...

Twister

The Way has no up or down.
Feeling, meaning, impulse, senses –
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 be the lash;
let the *can't keep going* be the lash:
and let them turn your fisting nothingness
into the sad-sweet palms of sanity.

The Last Time

In time there's always the next time.
Even death beckons on the angels' show:
wings of fire, wraps of radiance ...
But the dazzle! It turns you towards softer hues ...
like late summer's; the live-in romance

with Earth. On whose uncomplaining back
you can roll and always feel found.
Within ragged green there's a resonance ...
as time comes home, stretches out, touches ground.
Then wide are the skies of acceptance;

wide as the heart that opens around
numb places. With a poised compassion.
No hope, no despair. No backward glance
to get clockwork hands weaving conclusions,
or rouse stiff memories to line up and dance

the lost soul. (Your pale one, trying to glow ...)
Oh, you can sink in the aura of subtle breath
to feel warm; you can swell, get entranced
by the purples of numinous depths
But time kicks you out into chance.

Life here's for frogs: we hop in the mud
that's surging through mind's one-hinged gate.
In time. It has to do its performance,
its build-ups and let-downs. Just squat
in the pause. True jumps come from absence.

Heart's release is into no-time,
where being defies non-existence.
Honest work: it jumps over the desire
for the endgames played up by ignorance.
Work till you're played out. Seen through. Clear.

Endnote (on an Attentive Guitar)

Yes, the voice of embodiment

Yes, the silence within chords and tonalities
strings and fingers the patterns

the movement the burning
that works ear and hand into desire

until melody runs is shaping sweetly
unfolding the seas that unfold into land

until warriors of listening shepherds of listening
with harmony swallowing our songs

until the gift of presence until its 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

I

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 as questions.

2

Fourth bell of the day:
its long sound-resound
signposts the silence.

Dirty-white clots loop and spurt
into our stainless sky:
chimney-spew from the old trailer.

Nick'll be in there
dozing by the stove
poking the logs now and then:

maintenance man.
Through birth after birth,
his off-the-road warmth.

3
Snowed-in morning.
Breath hangs; moves away from me
into the dazzling body of things.

Surfaces blend into the glitter
of a sense-blown brilliance;
a gathering into white.

Hands tingle in the given,
a frozen cloud –
and its glistening descent.

The mind-play drifts,
melting into earth.
Stopped with nowhere to stand.

4

A sudden cut, traceless at first;
then white and blue come dripping out:
spring flowers. As if a martyr's blood
could stir again in the wintered heart,
in the cycle of endless return.

And isn't it always said
that the good day bursts out of darkness?
Out of the letting go we dread,
out through the letting go we love.
But comes a time when we've done all that,

and sense another turn:
not to hope or begin again –
futures are for yesterday.
A swelling sun now flips the wheel
and points to centre – *There! There! Speak!*

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 your sensed solidity
is heard as a voice, gripped with belief –
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.
Lush 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
leads and binds the scribing monk
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 the ground.
Here we got born, where mountains swell
and the land spreads out. No date, no map.
Under such skies, soul is in passage
through rain and tree and bones and voice.
A sounding of presence, a singing of worlds ...
that, sensing itself, asks, '*Why? Why me?*'

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 ... made secure
Then ground withdraws – and our lives suspend
like verbs become nouns, abstract, common:
inflexions sealed under a pressure
through which remote stewards flutter
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 formless space is summoned to reveal
its lines of force. Black-backed shamans trace
the subtle channels of air, find and play
the yielding edge where lightning runs –
and throw themselves through. Raptured bodies,
scissoring wings, slash the blue silks of summer.

Uninitiated, I can barely see;
can't read the looping signs they've drawn –
or follow, before the pathways close,
their tracks through the four dimensions.
But my gawp is possessed by the wing-dance,
the tumbling specks, the gestures of grace –

and the urge to fathom Creation's play.
A roof on timbered legs offers a template
of once-living wood fashioned into form;
a sacrifice – whereby cuts and bolts
press idea into substance. A flight of mind;
the defiance of planting structure

where to hold together needs god to dance
with gravity. For such magic, my gaze
must brace, rise, and attend the demiurge:
how its drive entwines form and sentience.
Out of mud-daub nests, florets of beaks
lunge open. Flies banged in like nails.

August Evening

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

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

The pond presents its shining face.
Ripple after living ripple
twitches its secret. Dragonflies

share it; evanescent, shimmering.
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

I

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.

My Place

I
moon silvers the clouds
patter of rain on the window
the sense of return

my place
old stone yellow brick

after five wet days
we sit by the stove
as it grumbles and pops

in the circle of darkness
years can settle

'bye now' 'see ya 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-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

How I Got Here

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

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,
her heart tugged by a thread,
though with every beat it nagged and chafed.
Until the scar tore open ... and gaped to receive
the blade of conviction: *It's time to get born.*

It wasn't the neurotic urge to have flesh;
it wasn't being squashed into personal form:
she could breathe through the fear and hope
(though they ravaged her bright face) –
it was a cloudy descent, in a forgetful daze,
that bodged the event.

Wholeness 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 dissolve little me:
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 –
it's all no-one and no-one's ... 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

So I'm seeking something, somewhere ...
strong enough, close enough ...
praying for a sun that could ravish her choiceless.

Little Me

You know being-time? Intimate space, uneasy tides?
If in that blue-green wash a seed descends,
with a touch of red – it's then that an eye opens,
and a mouth – hungry: it's you, reaching out
So little me springs up, takes your voice.
In return, skin is offered; it's a place to belong.
You shrink down, curl up, try to feel at home.

If you tighten and dive into what's sensed –
all touch and shiver, carefully wrapped, casually worn;
rolling over and all round ... pulsing ... warm –
you'll hear little me orbiting around and inside you,
pirouetting through the jostle and grab
with coos and sobs and a cascade of faces.
A genie that pushes you into its bottle.

And if you remember, before you start thinking,
how he took hold, drove and became you
Can you feel the drive rods pumping a cycle
with what you need, and what you should be;
of what went wrong, and who did this,
and how to get free and get out?

How you're pumping out barren eggs to suck?
Thoughts pumping you dry, and still pumping –
and there's no muscle that knows how to stop it:
you're just recycling yourself for another feast.

But maybe you don't get this. Maybe it's the tearing,
the barb of a love that failed, or when your dad,
who worked too hard, too long, cracks up; or it's when
whatever you take to get you through the night
takes you to another night – then you feel something
cut into a heart you didn't know was that big.
And if you wipe your eyes with the mess that leaks out
maybe you'll see through the flurrying wings. And maybe
you'll stare down the one who's gobbling your life.
The one you should know by now: little me,
with his squeak and his bite.

The bite that cuts time. And makes it release you.

Humpty-Dumpty

There came a time to get off the wall.
It's the time that time keeps moving on for
as it lays down its residues.

Those murky layers had been dredged for their clay
for decades, maybe lifetimes.
The wall. It was everything he could want.

Small bricks first, rough-cast, uneven,
pressed out of childhood's streams
amid leaks and dumps, and choking drains,
as the city urged: *'Climb, young man, climb!'*
Purpose-built, with corbels and coping,
the walls kept him safely poised
where everything could be achieved.

On top, towers, offices; deckchairs with books
on God and Love and War. And views ...
See the wolves on that friendless moor?
They were way, way below.
The glittering ice-field on the other side –
the freeze would never get this high.
The wall was all he could need.

And so, full-bottomed and smooth,
he rose to sing ... breathed deep ... swayed
And heard scraps of dirge and drawn-out calls
as he glimpsed the foundations.

Etched with claw marks, their features were worn.
No clean edges. Pitted, rough-faced.
Studded with dull eyes and scraps of bone.
Compressed, they wouldn't budge. Probed,
they whined, promising to stay put,
just to be held by the warm weight above them.

Vagrant birds drew near, circled round,
silent and nestless. Well-travelled, they knew.
They knew the tumble, they knew; they knew
those sounds, and how their tones vibrated
as they filled the mouth ... and swelled,
choking like wet rags in the throat

His insides stirred, heaved ... then kicked –
hearing popped open – to shell-crack, brick-clatter;
a wingless flutter, a gasp in the dust

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;
warm the budding legs –
unfold his time into no time.

Through the stainless night we'll run and run,
chasing the moon across untracked snow.

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 currents 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 names.
I was the tree that they dwelt under;
and they grew steady and serene

as all their know-how stopped.
Now their visions fade.
And nothing shines as bright through them

as the shadow you've made of me.

No Exit

When the sun goes down, there's the circus.
Always travelling, always rolling on –
 centred round this high-wire act
 where you do what it takes to be someone;
 deserving and failing and scratching at doors.

Way off the ground.
Way out of tune.
Way out of touch.

Except for my bear.
The one behind, a shaggy shield;
 old and faithful, chewing my neck.
 He gapes over my shoulder.
The one who stays.

His growls are slurred, his eyes going blind –
but I'm out of holy oil and charms.
 I just sponge away with my breath,
 swabbing the mess, the smelly tissues;
 smoothing out the tangled nerves,
 the numbness and the tics.

To look good; we have to –
because there's always an audience,
 grumbling and clawing and munching peanuts –
it's such a show!
But we're the ones who show up.
 Out here –
 where you're just the seen,
 where you're just the thing

So my bear wraps around me.
And, from his coarse-haired chest, pulls out a tin flute.
Holding it to my lips, he gives a nod:
it's time we changed our act!

I don't have a tune, but I blow.

I don't know why, but our limbs let go.
They roll out like snakes, rage-wreathed –
as something softens and opens.
Buckles loosen; straps kicked off –
feet! They flex in the silvery light

And no one knows the dance that breaks out,
but the crowd starts swaying and jumping,
and our crumpled suits and furry faces dissolve
Aaiee ...! The screeching's like parrots uncaged

We don't know who sent us here
beyond the reach of coping.
Out here, in here, no exit.

But we're broken and fearless and shining.

No one knows how a moon can listen.
Find your flute, play the tune, pass it on.

Tara

White light
white lotus
white circle of joy

of silence

rippling

imagine for us two lapis eyes
sparkling, beatific

Let Earth's green life-force
suffuse you into active form
so your hovering smile can widen

and let rip your fierce black gape –

chew through the hard-wired mask
the verdicts stuck on spiky reflexes
the straw from a much-ploughed head

Black mouth, black love, black truth
swallowing the glue and nails.

Which the heart will be the last to let go of.
Opening, slowly.

But look back, star, look back;
come down, lady, walk among us.

Here amidst the debris, are prayers
held in skin and withered marigolds
Float them in your ocean-hands.

I'm not asking you for rainbows.
I want my breakage to learn how to swim.
I want you to know that it can.

Note in a Bottle

maybe somewhere there's maybe a you
so I'm throwing this note
though the waves sweep over
 it's my greeting card
could help you find
your own drifting life-line
 but no worry no problem
though waves suck and pull
toss it around
 it'll keep on twitching
 under glass
 where nothing connects
so you float nowhere
 there's a whole world of options
 claw some suck some
still I'm throwing my line
 it's stretched down my throat
runs into my fingers
so they imitate touching
 feel the smooth cool wall
we can clink celebrations
in the sky-grasp the sea-lurch
 or is it in a shark's gut
 or snared in some net
 where we'll huddle unshattered

yes a bottle's a home
the waves will sweep over
 unless something gets shaky
but enough of 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
but throw me
hey you
 throw me your bottle
 throw it high and throw it far
 lifetimes break over us
 but throw it anyway
 scrawl your own note
 this is what we can offer, must offer

words
 soul-hungry brine-mothered
but got to teach other bottles
 how to float
 how to bob and bring cheer
ours is a dying art

Spring Day on Dartmoor

Into my gasp, into my covered-up face,
freezing flung slush;
the icy attack of a sleet-traced spring.
Hump-backed land, snow-blurred, crouches;
out-thrusts its broken crags –
while, in here, an untouched softness
under layers of cloth and animal fibre, under pulsing skin,
staggers in the shove and the fight.
I want ground in this storming sea.

Steely whips lash the moor's back.
But the gorse holds on.
Splattered by snow, it clasps the hag-bitter blast
close to its spines;
its yellow blazes into the rawness,
like the mercy that pushes through flesh and bone
to haul me out; to be unpeeled –
as the mother-wind thrusts and grinds,
and my reluctant life kicks back.

Birth-cursed and raging,
it feels for the heat within the crushed land –
and, as cold squelching grasses yield to my stride,
my claws reach through soft fingertips

to scabble over the lichen-scabbed granite –
and lock on earth. I'm here,
holding upright, nailed to bare skin.
For a lifetime.

But today I can snatch breath-threads
out of the freezing grey vortex, drag them in,
then throw the line back.
Like a gale-bucking crow's croak,
my wind-rocked spring spits out purpose,
cuts the drive and reins of onwards;
gives back how it feels
to be a warmth bursting out naked;
to be the soft innards of a circling world
steeped in its 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 that whirl holds the day's emerging –
and it comes out wet and glittering and green.

The Revenant

Unlocked, returning, the light. Every wintered sense
is rocking in the upswell of life-in-form
as the greenflow pours out. Again, a consent –
like that of the dying as they open to silence.
Each bud's 'Yes' is a boat. Then, 'Cross over,'
says birdsong, as if the potencies that feed
root and bulb could stream through my thought-trance –
and their timeless tide gather me in the balance

whereby this planet turns. My clamour is hushed
by the free-fall through vastness, the coming to life –
like a new-born gathering form within a mesh
of sentiences; then welcomed, wrapped and washed
with whispering air Winds murmur, hurricanes howl,
quakes heave their spasms along a surface scar.
But in all this, there's a way for my one sane wish –
to be found by these currents, get nerved and fleshed ...

and opened. Out of a vision that blinds
us with knowledge; out of the one-way gaze of gods,
and into shared presence. That my spine
straighten up from the weight of days, and, unbound,
the heart find centre. To soar out of fixed state;
to feel thermals that widen and coolly span
the plummeting sense of personal ground ...
Inborn and rising this well-spring, rippling the mind

to resonance. *'Fully attend your lived-in song,'*
murmurs every dividing cell. *'And pass on.*
Feel in this, the ever-pregnant season,
a human 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 light's return;
to be held in the hands of a healing sun.

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

This is arrival, just this:
waking up to an opening night,
unfigured, a stranger.

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

Every tree, every single branch,
crotch, twig, 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,

all going into namelessness.

A world of outlines and tracks
shines
as light gathers and swells

to flood my window.
Made luminous, I shimmer,
emptied by presence.

Thoughts in a flurry
try to ask for what they want ...
then flutter and fall into white.

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.

Relics of a Human Age

Gathering

Each year it's the same slow slog
during the months of leaf-fall
to meet my grumbling and open up
to rationed sunlight and hostile sky;

feel heart shrink and go burrowing down
under layer upon layer of synthetics –
until, even at night and again alone,
every thought slides down cold walls.

In this inevitable season,
I hit entrenchment. Just hang in.
Endurance normalises sniping draughts,
the damp that sinks in and clamps deep,

and the wintering gaze –
numbed by the die-back of all green life.
Stumps, and the survivor's strategy:
feign surrender, but return to the roots.

Here we'll meet, in the time
when my clock drops its desperate hands;
in the dark, on still ground.
Stopped where fencing gives up.

Then nothing can obscure the ancient domain:
the free-falling heart, the open field –
where all there is is 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;

yard-broom 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;

stubby 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

This teaching is on a pilgrim's rosary:
beads of old age, sickness, and death –
threaded on a shifting space.

This Way is of no way home;
a rolling out on uncertain tides
on a waterlogged raft of faith.

With every dawn arrive the duties:
bale gurgles and cries out of the head,
disgorge the jangled mess of wires and hooks,
breathe a life that's deep and steady,
judged pointless in the minds of men.

All the talk gets leaky.
Texts bulge with notes on salt and turbulence –
and they won't listen to a thing.

Doesn't every idea stream right through you?

All that remains is the shining wish,
floating here – with the light immediacy
of a mermaid's laugh.

It scrubs the tongue.
Eyes get cleansed of far-off shores.

Tease it out, that thread.

Give ear, and more than that.
Give heart, and more than that.
We signed up for this an ocean ago.

Forest Recollections

What's the point
of 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 present
the cool of being here ...?

Where's the sense
in turning a key in the door
tugging off boots and entering into
what is only a place for now:
a shelter, though made precious
by being built and kept with care,
and in simplicity –
yet offering for companionship
only 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, enfolding space –
tchrack tchrack crichacrich-crick –

to present the magpie
Alright: nothing stands apart.
No, not even this.
Things are born within a seamless matrix,
speak for themselves, and decompose.

A gnarling potency –
and we need its earthy welcome.
How else will the thrum of our being
burst through what shuts us down
without its affirming resonance?

Contact the source by voicing.
Still presence wraps up nothing –
but extends to claim the throat
and express you as a shifting melisma,
mouthed by the breathing 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 the wordless way
where a manic world might flip its page
to the *dharma* of deep return.

Traveller's mind avoids all maps.
But between what has to die and the need to be
runs the narrow, open road.

The Unanswered

Stichwort, birdsfoot 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 memory of the brother, drowning

– and while we watched –

OK, and the secret love;
and the silence behind all this:
the gift in helplessness.

– that watching broke out –

All this – I call all this ‘life’ 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 understand it
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?’*

– over her struggling thread, and our chokes

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

– until some mercy let her go –

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?'*
While a sense that has no base

– that stands in no place

keeps running, playing, shoving,
through the endless breaking up
of a voice 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 about such things.
I make my mind a refuge:
its sturdy doors,
its quiet roomy depths.

Because isn't this a moonscape world?
The short dead views, 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 old 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 though it's not cold, I shiver.
It's as if someone walked in;
someone who can love him – utterly, messily –
and heave a door open. This is how;
how the years move out. The move into light.

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.
Wayfaring 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 –
wayfarer's language

*

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 –
no horizon no shadow
grass bends with bright drops

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 road –
backcountry spring

*

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

Extremadura

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

*

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

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 air sacs 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
when tidy truths don't fit.
Then the sun feels good

and moon and stars are a blessing.
For them, everything can run wild.
Water can just flow or freeze

and wind flurry and blast
and light swing in a cradling day.
Even rocks are touched by this.

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

until receiving light
is enough, gives an outline;
lets be the incoherent centre,

lets ground remain unfigured.
Blazing, quiet, swirling ...
here's the living space

where nothing has to last,
and nothing stands complete –
and there's room for you,

beyond the familiar walls
and vacuums. With an edge
that wriggles, open-ended.

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.
Collapsed, the waves rise – and push back.

The argument is logical.
The monologues calm, rhapsodical;
acceptance is canonical.

But I'm out of line. My ID's fake –
a bunch of grit and twisted residues;
a throw-up from the bellies of stars:

stuff that's learned to grip 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 – see them fly!

As they plop in the water,
the drowned rise up,
their eyes a-sparkle with greeting.

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 claims and dissects the supine world;
then ransacks, howling, the jewelled cosmos.
The abyss throws it whimpering back.

Then where could this hunger surrender ...?
But there's the *here* side of nowhere –
intimate, dangerous, untrodden.
The abundant.

Yours. Mine. Everything's.

Sabbatical

Sabbatical

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.

Then the tune I live in moves 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.

Song for the Spring-Tide of My Passing

It's time. Time for the light to ascend through the morning;
and be sensed, 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 – so their flowering will 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.

Wraps

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

Out here: silence, a torrent's roar
and thin-skinned humps over fragile humans.

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

Attuned to that, the membrane of this day
resounds with sentience.

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

Meditation Retreat

At the edge, being seen by the mind of winter.
Stray dreams shuffle through my spine-thin shelter,

touching earth. Nights stretch under towering rain.
Just a breath that learns to deeply descend

and draw up a dawn-prayer: *Moment*
after moment, make room for it all.

Who I've been and may yet be sit together –
old friends, quiet, on a bench in the sun.

Wing-spread steadies into a hub-less wheel:
a heron scanning the lake's clear face.
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 line on my page rambles on and on.
Comma, dash, colon. At *stop* it opens:
the unwritten source; the near horizon.

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 truth.

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

Killarney Lake, 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.

Hide and Seek

Although the rain keeps its secrets,
its streaming downpour
speaks of the silver flows of fish.

The cheers of the bloodwoods –
that offer wild shapes to gales
and to the squabbling burst of cockatoos –

are like the flourish and cascade
with which thought reels out from chaos.
As if mere utterance could bring forth light.

Dumb messages. But they carry a sign:
of movements dazzling, appearing as things;
a play in the fizzy glow of delight.

Now it's in birdsong, now beckoning on ...
But now a knowing, with cat's claws, crouches –
stalking the singer in the jazz of happening.

Trail to the Open Country

Even as the leaning, outreach and grab
at what happens next, has passed, or keeps grinding on,
does give us some shape,
the same tracks get carved:
beaten trails to battered places –
 while around them, the land is shrinking.

Even as turbo-charged drives feed
yours-mine snarl-ups that wedge '*right*' down our throats,
what resounds through the skull
is the chatter of teeth.
Life chewed into territory.
 Is there some space to get found in?

Even as progress is marching ahead
with reasons that launch a world up in the clouds,
behind it is dust: trail of tears,
famine roads, diesel highways.
Gusts of gutless, heartless talk
 blowing through, blowing through.

Behind it, the bogged-down conclusions:
your ghosts, my ghosts, lights flashing, gears whirring ...
promises wave and deadlines stab;
hands shake and pump –
but the eyes don't move.

It's only breakdowns that keep things sane.

This is the crack we come out through –
from under the skin, where location can't land.
Here the lost voices are gathering,
swirling, tumultuous ... clear.
The call from our darkness,
streaming through grief and love and prayer.

Into the open country.
Where our lives fall around us like leaves.

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 to get solid,
but to be opened, here – like a desert tent.
It's time to greet the ghosts I've buried.

Seeker's Story

Don't meet 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 at dawn with the voices of unicorns,

and where unblinking owls keep the watch
through the scurries of night. While fishermen

make waves, I just perch. When they leave,
comes the 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 the sound of my question, echoing.

Networks

Geese and salmon: how their cycling migrations
are lived-out knowledge. Texts of pure motion.

How heartbeat entrains the splash of contact
into the dialogues of embodiment:

tremble, well up, reach out, sink down –
the somatic truth of spate and tide.

Every meaning's just a phase in that flow.
Meditate – we're a pool; currents inquire.

And how in murky swirls, all chatter-choking,
a vortex forms the recycling owner:
held in thought-loops, trying to grasp the unspoken

Home and Away

minutes agendas –
in 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
in 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

*

black rock spreading wide
white sail playing the ocean –
ah, the wind-smacked sky!

Old Bag

I don't go for the hard-shelled, 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 gear 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, battered but bouncy,
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 disgorges grubby clothes and books ...
gifts, bags within bags – it's all just stuff.
As for the skin – not to scratch out Rome
New York, Bangkok – but everyone's case
gets labelled. So the old bag rests:

no owner, no substance, no place.
Some things never fit, however I pack.
And now ...? The porters all look shifty to me,
and from up on a shelf, the zip just grins.
Somewhere else? I fumble through guidebooks –
fantastic ... quaint ... 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 morph.
It's all just circle after circle

Sensing this, we do not fight.

Now someone is watching;
face conjured, ripple by ripple,
by fragments that sparkle with change;
heart cradled by the voices of rocks.

He takes us for advisors.

But we have to keep moving:
to ride the reflection
that sees through these surfaces;
their play and resound.

We who've been travelling so long.

Bridge

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

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

I numb in the grip of those smoky horizons.
As if onwards could hold any completion,

when being here, fully, is the true arrival:
to share the collapse of homes and distance.

Poised in that absence, we meet and spark.
Each other: that thread, that 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 never arrives.
But in the wake of words, place keeps forming

between me and us. Here the synapse
widens ... and floods. The *no ground* feeling:
back on the raft; travelling the gaps.

Performance

Crack open the doors of a warehouse life;
balance your baggage on the tip of a knife.

Unclip the goggles of the questing head;
ease out of the boots of the restless dead.

Dump the calendar. Let a free sun's rays
reveal your moon; these are night-clubbed days.

Bur come out in style You found yourself born,
and played with roses in a bed of thorns –

so sweetly spurred! Now, dancer, show your trick!
Where stiff thought stumbles, a limbo heart
slips through the sensed. No prize, no bows, untracked.

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 to 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,
unachiweving 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.

Finding Your Place

Mindscape – a rumpled skin
stretched over its own tremors;
lived-in earth, edged with unknowns.

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 eases up my heavy reds.
Blues break loose, and attention opens
into clear view. In so still a pupil,
I'm seen and swallowed: me into us.

Bright heart's eye hovers over our circle,
senses itself – then dives through the locus.

Heart of Winter

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 solitaires, straight and grey.

I'm drawn by the wintering through of things:
how heart recoils to find its centre,
and gathers like a spring. You know that pull?
And how it offs the quilt of shiny stuff

and shakes your head ...? The wake-up tug
that leaves everything exposed and shivering?
It won't allow sleep. Now it's nudging me
to get off my bed, step out of moping
and enter the fall.

Believer, feel your roots.
Enter what's bare and greens you open.

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.

Hermit

The hour stands alone in the awe of hard skies –
in autumn's reign, in a damp granite land.

My cell is bare, cool and measured.
Its window, like a sage, holds the view open.
In grey, we wait. The Way's revealed, not sought.

Hills, gone past greening, grow ripe with cloud –
they have their triumph. But here it's quiet,
in my shelter.

The clouds roll ... and swell

Then we're in rain-time – the surge of scent
and storm and soak; of rain-runes' clattering riddle;
of a streaming world, all-gone to origins;
of a bright-flow that bathes the scarred stone

The old days slip by on keels of light.
When that light finds me, it'll free my bones.

Shield of the Spiritual Warrior

It wasn't *your* light ... the fervent glow, the dazzle –
from a shield. Bravely engraved; but the lion
on its boss looks tinny and dumb –
as warriors, carved striding around its rim,
get humbled. Life caves in their swollen chests.

From deepening dents, shadows twist a smile
at the need to conquer. And soften its glow
from brassy glare to an ambience that reflects –
and warms something within the carapace.
Something that won't blow bugles anymore.

Now you bear the quietly radiant duty –
to be done. Done with swagger and fiery words.
Done with the myth that splits us senseless:
kids, impaled on our impotent swords.

Lopping

Stag head oaks, death-crowned, grub-rich.
Lived-out stumps that once were shoots.

I walk around, survey the grove like a lord:
Clean up before spring; 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 brutal logic. No:
they're already clear, the dead. They've done
the ragged path of spurts and snags,
fulfilled open ground with a greening grace.

A ground to heal my sliced-up days –
no cuts, no ends; just wild rich space.

Birds

Faces get the headlines, kisses and insults.
Cameras flash-freeze every changing mood.
Darlings pout and ogres scowl; a smooth smile
is produced, directed – turned coyly inward ...
then distanced ... into fade-out.

But to meet,
face to true face ...! The bird in my chest flies up –
and finds empty air. So a perch is growing,
between rusty shoulders, under their hunch.

When you talk at me, that cracks: I'm out
– in some dull sky, where masks are fluttering,
like kites loosed from their owners So pale ...
and homeless ...

Yes, best keep a face on.

But let's be sly ... waved, our masks form birds,
parting the murk of a feigned separation.

Into Blue

Full moon hanging in the living morning;
out of night's orphanage; too far, too near.

Look down cool on what birth brings on
and animates: coal-tits flicking in the birch;
the drive of hunger; life's endless yearning;
the ballads we lift to the Absolute's face:
pulsing tides, this drum-roll show.

But feel how seeing's stuck in looking down –
while the living twitch calls out for touch,
and mind-trapped nerves need warm skin;
need let their passions throb. From bright to dark
and blood-fogged, let phases pass on through.

Then moon meets hands. Dawn-struck palms,
earth-cupping. Emptying into blue.

Human world

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

*

pain shoots up my back
old 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

*

summertime office
white walls white ceiling thumbed files—
one window pale blue

*

the funeral's ending —
a brief cloud of her ashes
grit beneath my nails

*

rainy grey morning —
at my skylight a crane-fly
legs beating the glass

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

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 loved-body, the grief-body;
the still body

and from the unexpected angel
who shone through your cancered flesh
stream 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.

The Wave

I do not want to miss the wave
when mind unhooks, its skin peels back,
and every nerve speaks up, its soft fire flaring

like the sunrise that drags up a world
where shadows stare as the pathways fade
before light enters Earth, going deep and private –

just for the sense of being lived through;
of surge and undercurrent; of being stirred,
as if by the beating of prehistoric wings.

That's why I stand knee-deep in the eddies
of doing a life that's coming undone –
while my brain's trying to figure what's next, what's next

as people go faceless in the dried-up days.
Then, if there's reach, it's up – it has to be up,
and opening – to listen, to be here, fully here

where you'd swear the wheels of twittering starlings
are souls gone blessedly mad
in the overwhelm of being gathered and flung,

high into murmuration. Shaped with so much cry!
So comes the wave, the rising ... and the jolting tug
of an inwards turn; then the grab and upswell

of voices, sharp in their rush to be heard –
as what's felt crests, falls, and drains to the unspoken.
If there's passage, it's this.

It's through this creaturely flood. To be engulfed –
and emptied, as what rolls in, rolls us over and out:
this ocean I thought we could cross.

Prayer for Lost Hands

Shifting and shaking my stones around
with padded kevlar gloves
as I keep on working because
the flashing fish have been dredged from the symphonies
behind my tone-deaf ear-drum, because
the razor wire has ripped a world into zones
before my flesh remembered Earth
the air the trees the rivers had their arteries snipped
when I sleep-walked into the machine.

Now prosthetics have been fitted:
wagging tongue, one-click heart and cyborg brain –
and every one of them moulded from tissues
stripped from the bones of an ancient body
that was always too messy, too raucous.
But I feel its pulse when my stones stop grinding.

Sometimes it stirs a muffled moan
nagging me to dig for hands
lost beneath the hardening rubble
of canned promises and bottled abuse –
so they might touch the dumbed-down Earth ...
and feel shoots that unfold into green
and dip into water that's bright and warm

Enough to bathe the impotence
of how they should have loved her.

But it's winter now. Time for bare skin;
to brisk out of the numbness that betrays what's left.
In the cold that surrounds us –
far from laughter and before grief sets in,
where the pulse is beating and throbbing –
I hear tones at the root of my voice.

They're embedded in the land.
And they need to find an open throat
that will chant for a body to shake off the wires
and plant today another hazel
and pray there'll be a morning
when our hands will grow
wide enough and clean enough
to rewild the stone of the land we stripped
and drop the stones of what we've become.

We've reached the end of kingship.

Mount Carmel Blues

'And even on the Mount, nothing'

St John of the Cross

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

and so climbing into letting go
into rapture into knowledge
which all come down to nothing

but slopes on the mountain
leading on
to pushing and yearning and becoming someone

who finds there's nothing

but the need to keep asking
keep questioning
tell me
how to stand with all things?

demanding

tell me 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 roaring nothing

Recovery

The light creeps in,
like a snail, extending its eyes,
this, that, one at a time.

Recovery from the rule of reptiles.
It comes in the time before clocks begin;
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.

There's shelter here; a ground
where shreds of intimacy still flutter
on the wires that straightened out our heads.

Words drift down trying to find speech;
the scar tissue swells and aches.
As it begins to shake, blood warms:

the return to the sacred body.
No more scratching scabs.
There's nothing wrong with you.

Dawn in a Room

Night spreads out the truth about Time.
It's cold and endless;
leaves you so much nothing you don't want the light on.

Well, maybe a candle or a small oil lamp;
enough to sip some coffee by.

But even then, not a voice.

If there could be someone else,
you'd want them to be there quietly.
Not too close, wearing old clothes.

Even then, as day reaches for a wrap,
it's just a fading Venus, a worn-out Dog,
and a half-light draped over
books, calendar, my father's gloves

And we get folded up in all this.

It's either that or get unwrapped –
but not by more of the same.

No, not by dawn-blush and birdsong.
Thanks hopeful day for licking my face,
but I don't need more wash and blur.

Because don't you get that highway feeling?
Like you're trapped in traffic,
lifetimes wide, just grinding on?

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 hanging there –
like you're a nowhere?

But when a world barrels through
the potted plans and nest of thoughts
about life and love and purpose ...
what's felt has to find its own way –
through the cleansing fire, to the end of days.

Children of the sun, come in.
Come in; come one, come all.

The Great Tradition

Lotus seeds on dry palm leaves:
appetisers, on carved teak plates.
They're freely offered, a welcome here.

This sanctuary for the mute and the maimed.
It's a kind of hostel; self-catering.
The rules are firm, but fair enough –

I'm invited into a bone-walled cell
to attend, alone, to my human needs.
And taught to make sandwiches;

fill them mindfully with raw stuff –
tissues that quiver with every bite.
Can't digest them, can't spit them out

But the thing is to keep on munching –
as eyes form that glare at wrongs,
and voices swell that reason my rights,
then slither and wrangle into coils.

Oh, it's all good they say:
the silenced throat is coming open.
But I need big jaws to swallow it all ...

wings, horns, sticky little claws;
even the grinding teeth –
swallow mine, swallow yours.

Until only a rising breath remains.

It finds a ledge in some soft place,
poking holes in the dusty hours –
and through them I can listen;

as, within that dark behind the blood,
the thousand forms of gnosis turn.

And something swoops in fluttering pursuit
like a bat in the rafters of an empty barn.

Home-Time

I've been out a long time
in what should and shouldn't be.
Stretched over surfaces.

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, hard and gritty;
and now it's lichen-splotched.
Pale grey roundels, gently breathing.

Between where the wasps tunnel their lives
and a crab-apple tree, a small gate opens.
Passing through, things rattle behind me.

Black Poplars

How I discovered the black poplars;
how I hadn't heard their massive 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 –

how I'd never sneaked through there before:
all this 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

among the 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

of how my day runs out like a harpoon
yet explodes into uncertainty

while trees stream an earthed purpose.
How they ascend one-pointed into a blue

that self-presents; a resounding
that descends to the root:

thick seething soil, and nothing separate.
And how that spreads out, hushing

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.

So bore a hole – and blow.
Hear that?

You're so full of yourself
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 caribous' outbreath
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
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 Vision Quest

... at the winter solstice
on a ledge, with no candle.

Your eye needs to be held
by the mind of an albatross.
Crossing night, there's no place to land.

In the tunnels of silence
voices will push right through you.

So you'll learn to hear
the breath of dark stars
as it passes over the heart's strands.

It's clacking beads of subtle presence
in a mantra of protection.

You'll catch the whiff
of guilt-sodden stains
behind the creaking one-hinged door.

All your fear-soaked robes and rags –
offer them to the guardians there.

They'll dip your tongue
in the echoing well
before the mind and after the flood

when you roamed as a bear,
or dived, a salmon,
or as a tree, linked earth and sky.

Reach in, touch and be seized
by the power of where you cannot go –
where Elder songs live, and only they.

One of them watches over every pulse.
One will get into your head and stay.
One has relentless dancing feet.

Dancing the rites of birth, love, and the long road out.

Be trampled like grapes –
the peeled-off precious skin
will cover the world like a drumhead.

When your drum speaks, the Dreamers will come.

Border Town

If you land here, pass on through.
Stick around and you just get busy
with shops and bars, offices and banks.
At this border town, we make our work:
gangs in hard-hats repairing the walls;
men pushing another road to some nowhere,
while the kids stand around taking notes.

Under daylight, people weed their gardens.
The earth is as good as anywhere else:
plans well up, visions flutter – but nobody leaves.
Screens declare truth; the war remains distant.
You can die here with manageable regrets –
though even then, the border stays closed.
What peeks open is a living pause –

a gap within which streets unbind their stories,
especially at night when the handshakes are over.
Drunks play with goats; a crowd's at confession;
a busker's playing her thighbone flute.
I sit by a lamp-post, sometimes with a friend.
As landscapes drift by on a rising breeze,
we travel again the far skies of summer.

It was from those that a stranger appeared;
came from way down south where roads don't go.
You only get there by fasting. Not me!
I get by chewing on thoughts, as usual.
So we got round to playing three-card brag;
I beat him five games straight – cleaned him out.
'*Nailed it*', I thought. Yes, should have done –

but he kept on playing – and losing. Gave me
his hands; invited me into his mouth –
said to pick a true word. Things went dark.
Hours faded out. Not a house in sight –
not even that other place over the hill.
Trees began dancing, ravens laughed.
Then the voice arrived: *I'm out, I'm out.*

How Mountain Got Born

With the arising of time, the river –
the force-flow that suffuses the wildness and wetlands,
and the hundred million cells at the roots of the cosmos –
descends to be split by light into 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, fluent in forms, its currents
swell into their glory – with moon and storm
throwing themselves down as joy and prayer.
As they resound like dawn-song in our morning ear,
the river forms as maiden, shy-smiling; needing to be held
by what wells up from stillness, be enriched with inflections.
A yearning for surrender.

Suffusing all things, from dolphins to willow, and yet ...
oceans and clouds reach out to absorb her, and yet ...
wanting something to call her own, she sheds currents,
sheds play. Inclines to unambiguous ground. To embed.
So within her streaming, her constant change, the river
churns vortices that turn around the ungraspable:
the deep's blue note.

Which roars and blows through awed attention;
a river, opening the throat of the unspoken;
river, a tongue of thirst, licking its emptiness;
surging, poking, shaping views into standpoints;
urged to be useful, she carves valleys, and world-winks.
And that leaves something out there, small and bare,
declared solid:

grit in the river's oyster, formed out of misfit;
grit in the soft pink meat under the shell;
grit that shines to sanctify selfhood's pain,
a pearl in existence, all lustrous layers,
hardens, unswallowable, turned in on itself.
So we praise him, lift his head to the clouds.
Then he stands,

rain-maker, the mountain, parting earth from sky:
his duty. And day after day, he shrugs off the river,
the night-shining river. Knee-deep in her laughter
as she cuts and eludes him. Squinting upwards,
born into reaching for victory. Nothing to guard,
yet he stands. With the stars offering their nowhere,
he stands: our king.

Old Man Lizard Keeps on Going

Old Man Lizard,
hero of the Western night;
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.
Promises, claims, a deal or two –
 emptying them's a lifetime's work
 (maybe more).

But those hearts weigh tons.
And his work has to finish
before the dawn woman
 gets up, leads the night home

and lets loose the cold-eyed hawk.
Before the mystic dark can fade –
those hearts need to be drained.
 Be made transparent.

So Lizard fears that bird;
it hunts and pecks at his shadow.
Something real keeps hovering over him –
 so his resolve is starting to wilt.

He doesn't like broad daylight.
He gets soft and loses claws.
He's confused by its sense of direction –
 the desert has no direction.

Then he finds himself working days,
seeking friends, building a house;
he wants to get solid, get on, get a life.
 And in his surplus heart it starts snowing.

Room with No View

Waking in darkness, I heard a voice.
Mine, calling for stars:
'Come on in, find a window!'
But only some dusty mirror looked up –
strained for an image, misted over, sank back

Every breath was saying it was time to leave;
the room was heaving to throw me out
I summoned *dhāranis*, drew yantras, fingered keys ...
with devotion. It froze them to walls –
then a door closed; snapped everything up.

By now my mind was on fire.

Police took up a watchful stance outside.

Through the smoke came the bailiffs.
They took out the couch.
Then potions, smartphone, shotgun, stuffed bear ...

One got engrossed in scooping up relics;
the other ... when I asked him to stay,
he collapsed under his weight.
There are hazards in trying to repossess space.

So alone, with my mantra:
'Let it be, let it be'
The wind and rain blew through;
their muttering shaped the dust into streaks.
Should I clean the mess up? Form literary tropes?

So a doubt crept in, small at first.
But hungry. Saw no-one home and ate the floor.
Growing bold, it crunched joists like breadsticks.
Then munched a ceiling – got so big it burst the roof.
That brought the sun in. *Oh-oh! Trouble!*

Was he mad!
With a lion's roar and rays like swords
'Whose house is this?
WHOSE HOUSE IS THIS:??'

My mind sprang open –
but all that came out was a cloudburst.
'Ah,' smiled the ocean, *'Your very first time!'*

The Selkie

I keep just enough shape as can hold a voice,
knowing now that voice is just a skin,
like the rags of land and 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 under your fleece,
nylon and flannels. Let it rust there;
the cord is already rotting. 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.

Learning came when I was caught 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 a silence folding itself into echoes.

No mind, just a quiet 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.
You'll moan like the sea when I'm gone.
In that, our children will learn how to swim.

The Journey East

Forty days on foot; then all figuring fell apart.
Records and route-maps left to rot in the rain. On:
clinging to goat-trails, clambering over crags so cloud-drenched
they sourly baptised us. We steamed and stank; the slimy
days dripped. Like guilt driven too deep for the purging.
Two translators – one sick, one in terror – turned back.
Then hellish jungle. Howls, hurled through its canopied heights,
stabbed the heart's shield. Screams slashed at sanity;

two more broke down. The rest battled on, a blood-boon for
flies; kept going, grasping hope's glow, with grunts
that all trouble's a truth-test – and that, yes, tomorrow,
through pluck or through prayer, we'd push into pure land!
Then guides – cowards! – crept off, courage drained by the coos
of sly genies. That jasmine fragrance; this jewelled jungle
where trust is throttled and betrayal thrives ...! Three then,
we held fast – biting fists, cursing fate ... and fumbling spells

as our wits dulled and dissolved in doubt's dark mire. Then froze
when it spoke: *'Seize six dawns by their subtle ankles;
the seventh will whisper the way – to where the world ends.'*
Crazed, we squeezed senses dry, for the sap that kills sleep –
who'd guess we'd wake demons! A whirl of flames ... then ash,
just ash. Heroics felt hollow. Heart became husk, blown
death-drifting, mere dust. Gone, I dropped, beyond mind.
There a storm seized me. And visions! Of souls spinning

out in a daze – with desire a deluge to drown in,
reason a slippery rock. Where instincts rattle and race
around pain's waving stick. Willpower a whip. While '*Onwards!*'
throws lives through a loop – leaving dry laughter for feedback.
Ah, speech slurs; a slave's tool. But if silence holds
meaning ... when mind meets its end, what matters? How then
speaks the sacred? My quest hit stillness. And stopped.
Now I weep – for the fallen, and for friendship's failure.

But we're here. Nearer than the far leap to freedom,
here where the wise heart rises. Its quiet eyes shine a
torch. See! There's an orchard beyond changing fortune,
where earth breathes its beauty and warmth through all things.
Seekers now greet us, steeped in dreams of bright deeds:
no answers arise; but our silence is dancing with light.
And we offer an urn, of juice for the journey. It turns
around presence, beloved, a ground that's resounding with welcome.

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 wait 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 cities, is their nurse, and confessor.
River of silences, of presence, and passage.

May it help me to stand at the hub of a world
with no rim, and give thanks. For gods whose indifference
entices the spirit to weave our shared breath –

so a net is conjured, cast and hauled in. O river!
While a cool, clear music pours over it like milk:
laughter and murmurs; the mind's swell to word-play;

then the rippling that tells us we're here. The surface
stays cool, and from the depths we haul only water,
but each throw is scattering a thousand suns:

scattering senses, body, and time-tethered mind –
scattering us all into galloping drops.
This day when my 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 –
whose tail-flourish opens my fantastic wings.

After the Age of Kings

First, a hunter awakens. In the clear morning,
his body knows the sound of a snapping twig.
In the afternoon, a shepherd trails by, attending
whatever finds itself strung out in the hills.
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 bright-voiced phones that thank you for calling;
an old cannon, an anchor, 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 queen rises up through my throat.
She presides over pathways I wish I'd known.
Her rich voice is belling out the record of terror,
backed by the weeping of a long-necked guitar.
I try to strum out bright chords of our history –
but the anthems slip away at my touch.
The strings that remember the slaves and the gold
speak and unravel. 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 six mountains
forming around where I sit
on the mountain I just don't see.

It's the clouds. Three I can name:
one is a mass of thunderheads;
one is cirrus, wispy mare's tails;
one's a dense carpet, denying the sky.
Their colours change with the light;
moods are swung by sun and moon.

But six mountains still stand out:
One way above me is a snow jewel, ethereal,
where among light and ice, distance got born.
Its slopes pull away from the volcano below.
Down there, in here, it's juicy, we're cooking ...
but with each eruption of steaming unspokens
the sulphurous fumes blot out the sun.

So I wheel to the South, where wildlife roams.
Here giant sun-birds soar and swoop down
on the water-snakes we used to play with;
here apes act out what it's like to be human,
and jewel-eyed frogs, rich-voiced, peer
through the foliage you thought you'd grown out of.
When the days fall apart, you can dream yourself here.

North Mountain. It's where the tablets of law
were carved. People get carried there for purgative cures,
in the hour when work grinds things to a halt.
Enjoy! Any time you can taste the over-breathed air,
hear the drums and the horns, be part of the singing.
The mood is lifting with the whoops of the healers,
helping our All merge into their One. *Sing up!*

Time and again, I've been rescued from those.
But the two tallest still draw me;
I see my profiles stamped on their slopes.

An unconquered mountain still holds the East.
Halfway up is a tent, with strong sweet tea;
by the stove you can hang out, swapping tales

of the lake where wish-fulfilling crystals form.
There, the air's so sharp, thoughts can't take hold.
Instead phantoms appear that snare climbers' wits,
whisper of a summit, then lead over an edge.
Survivors say that's the point:
go out misty ...! Plummet into vision...!
Every year the mountain seems to get taller –
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 rubble, icons and discarded finery;
they'll gladly give you a hatful of flowers.
With these and a loan, you can make an offering
to the polished idols looking down from above.
The top is flat, scrubbed clean and defended –
so we're free to choose which one to vote for.
But by the time I get there, pushing through
the websites, speeches and slogans,
I'm dizzy

I just want to find a way down –
to where the ground will keep opening beneath me.
From these lost valleys comes my mountain's strength.
Out of these, I know my river will rise.

The House at the Edge of Silence

In our house at the edge of silence
the headlines are fading, the statistics dissolve.

Here what's arising is another tide
where insight flashes on the breaking wave.

It illuminates a mirroring sky
where 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.

Sitting back, 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.
And always someone else we could blame.

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 she conceived an idea.

It was smooth, white and perfect.
She studied it, perched amongst lofty thoughts.
It was egg-shaped, in a dry place – but alone.
And so cold! It seemed all would be lost.

But for Old Man Lizard. A dream stirred him up;
he twitched and flicked her egg into his backyard –
where sitting in the dust were me and you;
we were working out deals; all 50-50.

Then this other rolled in,
with a call for love and understanding.
Things got messy, smoky, heated ...
(took Old Lizard's tears to cool us down).

She breathed out and smiled –
and the jingle of her earrings was heard through the cosmos:
in that bottomless stew, her child was hatching –
sharp-eyed, fire-proof, and ready for battle.

Spring in the Timeless City

Whenever spring can move through this tall-walled city,
the winds bring with 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 name
will land, form a nose from their dust ...
or, if they hold out a socket, their vision grow roots.

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, commands, seduction and tears;
requests to be met, or just to be seen –
all supple and close-fit. Till the skull peeks through.

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 distrust any witness.
(As if I could form, deface 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 true name –
nestling in a backwater amongst the reeds.

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 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

Godzilla's Hotel

In Room 602, dreams slide through the gone days.
You can let them shuttle, like boats that cruise
without mooring. Place gets blown – to a sky

where the clouds disown me. I need to get down –
or wake up ... or fly This hour must choose.
Better pause ... and listen to the lower floors.

On the fifth, it's cornets, applause, dark suits.
Rose-petals are scattered, and plaudits galore –
but the bards rattle on like doors in a storm,
too dazed to inspire a goodbye.

In 404 a bruised soul mourns. You try;
you sympathize – but her owl's in your face,
her cries screw your bowels: you've got to get out –

but how? When beauty sours, the cure is power.
So cue some abuse and sound battle-horns!
A few brassy notes should rouse the hormones –

enough to get fighting ...! Then some pious bore
drones on about grace. Heard that one before?
The patter's so worn, even angels groan:

'Praise? This priest's just a clown!'

In the lounge, juiced by Chateau Margaux,
they peruse rates and loans with creamy smiles,
and sigh; then mutter into their glowing phones.

The deals are obscure: futures, cocaine?
Matters of state? Or whores? *'Working 18'*
is the line thrown home – *'with luv'* ... of course.

That hum? Cleaners natter over their chores,
as vacuums graze on the litter the dawn
can't ignore or erase: brown flowers, stale porn;
silences that wrap the alibis;

and stains where we clawed at each other:
the first floor. Here raw reds ebb into blues ...
and letters: *'You need to apologize'* –

so they'll be mopping this maze forever.
Their streetwise chatter soothes the nests
among the neon tubes that are blazing out

our stuttering sign. Where 'Godz ... Hot ...',
or '... ill ... H..el' lights the town, small birds coo.
And in reception, where I prattled to guests,
how sublime were those tones –

as I smiled (all morning) or dealt out flattery.
(Or oozed excuses, laced with white lies.)
Now I'm portrayed – up there between Krishna

and Mao – fists full of glittering keys. *Aach!*
Hotels are phoney – you're already a room.
You want to go home? Go explore your denial:

you crowd the corridors while bemoaning
the clutter – but who owns all this?
On what foundation? In the basement
the shutters draw back: *there's no ground.*

Lights glaze, thoughts confuse; but the pure view
is unfettered: a knowing like space.
Which the gone days, like dreams, go sliding through.

Lizard Hits the Tune

Among these wandering worlds, Jupiter is King.
His fat 'I am'.

Behind him, sickle-wielding Saturn –
with chains of work-slavery.

Behind him, Uranus, lord of sky –
torn from bridal Earth.

Neptune: his long-bearded poetry
drenched in purple rant.

Crack-ups? Transfigurations? No-one talks about them.
Must be Pluto's.

Us, we choose and measure our king.
By his inflated red eye.

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

The breakdowns, exiles, asteroids – they can smell it.
In here, somewhere.

Old Sol knows, consumed and consuming.
But he can't say.

Out of all that no-say strolls ... Old Man Lizard.
With his penny whistle.

Blew Old Sol a tune, jaunty and triumphant.
The kind that tweaks your spleen.

Got Sol to shine and heat us rabble.
Made us play and dream.

Then bashed our musing on a cold hard altar;
sparks sent us skitter-skatter –

got feet to tap and stamp and kick –
so our fragments found their roar;

singed us with love, sorrow and death,
'til we shrieked our messy truth.

Lizard was right behind us, committed to the cause.
Coughed on a borrowed cheroot –

so attention swung way out of orbit
in the wild hunt for Jove:

pierced the imperial gaseous mantle;
frozen demons weep –

knees knocking, losing skin –
voiceless mouths a-flap.

Now we bite into our spinning worlds –
feel heart regain its blood.

Old Lizard's still looking on.

Up and down. A throne or the road?
No throne, no road.

Unlike a planet, a star, or even space,
a lizard can throw us out of gravity –

out of that dark, a scaly tail flicks your face.
You're no longer here alone.

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 knelt by a lake
whose ripples played all of my faces.
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 Water Harvest

No-one can know – who could conceive? – the wild ways of water.

Yahweh himself only gazed at its face – and sighed out the Word. Thus our day: led by a flood of blind naming, with notions whose juices pour out – and then drain us, dry in the doom of implacable night.

But water – what source? And what end? Minds pivot northwards, eyes far-gazing: past home-fires and wolf-lands, starstruck and onwards. Where roads aim like lasers, straight-cutting the meanders of dreamscape. Bright lines become vision, questing the absolute, eyes locked on ice.

No horizon, no centre; only cold aspiration.
No reckoning outside of weights and fixed measures.
Sheets smooth and glazed. Ice, only ice, ever-extending, unfathomably certain. But throughout its eternity – as surely you'd guess – there's plenty of swirl.

And with cold biting down, comes a shiver ... a bristling to break out of a winter that's far more than a season.
Rebellion ...! Rhythms entrain a life-axis –
and out worms a probe. Tentative, soft, raw with needing,
one end digs in, the other sucks sky

Thus, they say, things began forming. Pulses grew thirsty
and a lust for rich colours ripped the unknowable
Life peeped out shining. There should have been glory ...
instead, with abstracted Time denying what's timely,
sans warmth, *sans* play, spirit congealed.

Nothing could dance! So pulse became passion, got twisted,
claimed darkness was light. Shadows jumped up, phantoms
grew solid Things! They bullied the void, running riot
Cosmos splintered. Identities, like bergs amid brash-ice,
drifted in chaos – ‘*Where am I?*’ ‘*Who?*’

So thought was made chief. His glitter blinds wisdom,
his swipe's like a razor's. Took a breath, hot and steamy –
but speech choked on his tongue when the truth streamed out,
so deep went that probe. Time opened and stretched: forwards,
backwards – history popped up. It yawned ...

and groaned: ‘*Here is the debris of your monstrous hunger:
mess deemed buried; rotten gods and their slaughter;
oil drums of promise and nuclear waste – your profile,
frozen right here.*’ The ice stores it all, forgives nothing,
creeps on. While we preach to the moon,

its feathers and fingers draw pale sheets over – covering
squabbling streams that froth and bite their reflections:
me, them and it, in swirls that congeal, get firmer ...
till they form enough skin to feel bound by. Embodied,
they cry. The knife cuts, the blood binds –

as death interlaces with love. Birth floats a shared ocean.
Its cries braid and merge, weave a nest in the wreckage:
Come, place a prayer there! Dream, so a soul-scanning comet
may plant its pure fire – on ripples that shine through the cosmos.
'That all shall be whole ...!' Sounds quaint? Well ...

bring on the tall ships, crammed with cargoes of wonder:
*'Bargains! Here's tea and tobacco, pet dogs and porcelain,
and, in smoothly shaped bottles, perfumes and gin ... Yes!
here's limitless credit, ministers ... contracts'*
But our harvest sinks deals. Nothing's owned;

just this wide mouth's gaping. Behind it, a vortex. Listen,
then widen, so the heart can open – into gulfs of wide mercy;
accept wish-cloud and tears, rip-tides of madness,
forms of no known beginning. With no conclusion but I –
of questionable body, but streaming; I, the triumph of water.

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.

Dumbbells, bench-presses and cross-trainer;
then push-ups, ab crunches, pilates;
followed by stretches and headstands,
then back-flips, asanas: lotus and fish.

Some lizards 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,
Even if he lashed his tail and shook his head,
he could only come out with a croak.

It was enough to make a vulture weep!
Some hailed this new teacher.
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.
The land did seem to get more mellow,
but the crows just kept crawling.
Said Lizard should get back to work.

Therapy? But his shadow personas
were smarter than him; saw right through
the scales, claws and endless scurrying.

Something in him wanted to be human –
that crazed and slippery thing!
A shockwave crackled through the grapevine.

The sand started heaving;
saguaro tried to sprout leaves;
looked like it might even rain.

It was all too much.

And he collapsed, twitching and broken-backed.
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

This lifetime, she's stood lording it over us.
Birthed us, drove, bowed and buried us.
But at the end of each sigh, there's a turn.

Time. She could only sneer at trees:
green, then hardening; wintered and lopped ...
but their roots yet know a deep life.

Earth ...? In an orbiting trance, all changes;
now dark, now bright ... but belonging.
To what? Time sensed a need to shift gear.

Always pushing, onwards ... always hungry
for new lives to chew Shiva's pet:
glorious face, ignorant heart.

'Who called me, who made me?'
Who cares?

So she's wriggled under my skin for a hug.
Where endgames cease, and death shatters shields –
here my flesh wraps around her.

Sweetheart, here's how it feels:

blood's circling through us, sticky and hot.
From cradle to grave, it's the long tide to nowhere:
let that widen your precious jaws.

Chew it all up, demon – come gobble my hopes!
Gnaw the bones of my dread and failure;
get fat; sail serene into vast aimlessness

Then together we'll spread our mystic wings:
I'm an eagle, an albatross, a walker of skies.
And you can unfold to a now you can't kill.

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 in deep 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 staging 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 stretched to contain them;
then taking a breath, gave up sun and moon;
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.
We who have grabbed and sold every gift;
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 Doing Time

At the edge, a sea opens. It's ready.
But the boat in which we once dozed the days
is still creaking and stuck. It was built
before the world 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 pull.
It sucks me out on an image-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 digest what washes through me.

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 into void
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 these lives can take a break,
as – out of the compacted silts of mind,
the stubs of memories, the fading tracks –

another intention bubbles up.
And, embarrassed by the touch of light,
rides the roll of outgoing sea roads.
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 –
we can float in a time 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 formats and much of his work can be downloaded from the following websites:

ajahnsucitto.org
cittaviveka.org
forestsangha.org
dharmaseed.org

Ajahn Sucitto also assists in the supervision of the Dhamma Moon poetry website at dhammamoon.org and keeps a blog of ongoing reflections at sucitto.blogspot.com.

A Note on the Cover

Sandra Berman writes:

The medium is alcohol ink, very fluid and difficult to control. And that's the beauty. The technique involves initially coating photo paper with isopropyl alcohol. Alcohol inks are then dripped onto the alcohol. When the paper is tilted in any direction, the inks flow their flow. Multiple colors meld together in fascinating combinations, while singular inks find their way from transparent to opaque. Various techniques can be utilized to influence the flow of the inks, but it is the fluidity and vibrancy of the inks themselves that produce these magical images.

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