

Michael Ayres



Recent Poems

First published in 2003 in the online Shearsman Gallery series at:
<http://www.shearsman.com/pages/gallery/ayres/home.html>
and as a downloadable e-book in PDF format.

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Published by Shearsman Books
58 Velwell Road
Exeter EX4 4LD
England

<http://www.shearsman.com/>

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Orpheus

to Si, Jo and Louise

What do we ask of the word?
That it be strong, and fine, and straight
like a flute,
that it may bear us
as light as music
across the silence?

What do we ask of the word?
That it be true? That it sing us to sleep sometimes,
and sometimes wake us?
That it will wait for us
like a nightingale in a fairytale
in an opening in the forest
and lead us
home when we were lost?

What do we ask of the word?
That it be real? That it remain for us
after all the silence of life is over
and a new, dark noise begins?
Or that it shape us to our own images
cool as a mirror, as mysterious, and as depthless?

What do we ask of the word?
That it may love us? That it may understand?
That it may remember us
the way a score remembers music
so when the new musicians play
we are revived again
warm, where the lips touch the flute?

What do we ask of the word?
That it do our bidding? That it move with us
like a Lord or a song?
That it give us power? That it carry us
the whole distance across a child's smile
or an ocean, seamlessly and with no obstruction?
Is this what we ask of the word?

What does the word ask of us?
That we be like itself —
shy, impersonal, endless, and free.

Coriolanus

What shall we do with the people?
What shall we do with them,
who make an alien of our time, my love?
Whose axle is a dinosaur star
faking light from lost, abyssal blue?
Who flinch like sea anenomes at even a tiny
bit of thought? Who put their eyes inwards
when it's raining, and who hold
the diamond of their blindness tight?;
who are lazy like murderers,
whose purpose is molten,
and who lodge their affections
in places which are not worthy of them?

What shall we do with the people?
Who make a gaol of their own liberty,
and who are aggressive and desolate,
defending themselves from enemies
people are: what shall we do with them,
my heart?, these people who work so hard,
who are stressed, and burdened, and driven,
and who then sell their souls
for a handful of trash,
thinking it can get them
through even one more moment of their own life
when it can only ever take them
through the thousand empty moments
of endless other empty lives.

What shall we do with the people?
For whom my love is a nothing,
and my heart which I have spent so long making
a comprehensive thing
is a bit of tittle-tattle or a mocking remark
or your next footstep
inevitably away from me.

I imagine soul destruction can be quick or slow:
or perhaps the soul destroyed takes time
to realise it is destroyed
turning on itself in habitual apathy
it takes for rain or moments of desire,

or the possibility of a new love,
a better or a different love,
when it is impossible
although the rain is still beautiful
and it falls.

You disappoint me, and I know I have disappointed you.
And what will I do with the people now
we have disappointed each other?
Look for another person?

The light, well, I've seen that before.
What can I do with a people
for whom my voice is a variation of silence,
and who know better?
And what can I do with my love
which is probably just a variant of hate,
proud like a kind of pain,
and sombre, useless for life?

I could raise my voice at this moment,
and speak as no one else can,
but even as I do it, I choose not to.
I only believed in souls when I was young
and could imagine someone with my name
lasting longer than a footstep
or a moment of desire in the rain.

I disappoint you, but the way
you are disappointed is so trivial
and alive, like a lie
which you know is a lie
but is far more exciting than the truth
which takes time, and kills everyone
right at the moment they're born,
at the moment they become one
of the people.

When the clouds drift down on King Street
and the sky is on the edge of rain
iridescent blues and greys
I have time and I take my time

the pearl and the mother
of pearl; and you laugh, and we drink some beer,
kill an hour or two before an appointment
rain on the edge of the sky
and you on the edge of my eyes
iridescent greys and blues,
and a kid playing among the cigarette smokes
and the mouth a fuzzy zoom of words, forming
on the rim of tenderness:
I did not let you go, I have never
let you go,
and then we split the shells of pistachios
order more beers,
under skies uneasy with their own beauty
and you with teardrops in your lobes
the slowly dropping tears of pearls
shining for their mother
as I let you go, and I let you go
forever
as the clouds drift over King St
itinerant with rapid showers
easy with our beauty —
too easy with our beauty...

Scuzzy rains on petrol shoals
shark fin and accelerators
my lips dried flowers short toxic summers
fed to light of alcohols:
I watch your mouth and I kiss your mouth
and the words you spoke, I kiss them too,
and all that literal
intimate history
of your lips I kiss,
the word Daddy, the word sapphire,
grease with radiance spines and skulls,
locust, flesh and petal, deer,
to all that ancient wire of sand and towers
I go connected like a mothering child
spiralling in overture
a music like an electric wish
to feel the pulse of the shy universe
a vertigo of unknown life

lost in lips to kiss the kiss
to kiss the loss
and fall and fall

Two moments and a jolt of years,
train carriages, like soul commuters,
the hodgepodge and the bother of it,
the fudge and the erosion,
the eroded honey of it, and the numbing,
ice transfusion in a snowscape May,
the yaw and yelp of it,
the backtracking and the long disgrace,
the eke of sidling and lies,
the fulminating spark of it,
the passionate stubborn bloody dismay:
I dream of such lucidity
the world is zenned and floating loose
the snowdrop and the ant
bear up the sun
and they are both exactly
one universe long...
Fall in loss and fall again,
a Coil remix, James Stewart's eyes,
that blue of dizziness and July
panting lovers locking
butterfly elevations
and drags
slipped into muzzy cocooning, you know
I used to care for you, but now
I just don't care anymore —
Christ on a wafer to a quick cough lozenge,
yes, Christ on a wafer to a quick cough lozenge —
darling, I guess I just don't care...

Maybe I could say
hold on to a word, hold on
to a word once spoken: hold on!
But even then it's the pale, aphid green
of cold snap frost and then ephemera
imperative like a heart, and like a heart
imperative and ephemeral:
ant, snowdrop, universe,

they take their time and they take my time
as the clouds drift over King St
still with unmoving showers;
and I say your name —
it's just a word but it's enough
to start a dream; well,
and maybe I could say, hold on...
When the clouds drift down on King Street,
hours roughened me to this,
ziggurats and cluster bombs,
rains and overseas,
grammars of flesh dispelled
to a spray of ghostly atoms,
pistachio shells and oyster showers,
and their lucidity dreams of me,
of one, of us, of one of us:
I use a match to light a cigarette,
it's just a flame, but it's enough
to start a fire —
love, it's just enough...

What shall we do with the people, my word?
And what shall they do with us?
Who are loved, but do not need love,
who are served, but only want a slave?
Who wear the pearls, and forget the mother?
What will they do with us, my word?

Smoke winds above Middlesbrough,
city where it will always be December,
December where it always snows:
smoke rises above Middlesbrough,
the flower of a desolate heat.

Middlesbrough made us; and now we are leaving.
We are turned backs. We are closed eyes.
We are already memories.
Steel is poured in Middlesbrough,
the heat of a desolate power.

Snow falls over Middlesbrough,
city where it will never be December,

December of a metallic fire:
snow falls over Middlesbrough,
the petals of a desolate flower.

Middlesbrough made us; and now we are leaving.
We are turned back. We are old fires.
We are not even memories.
The wind blows in Middlesbrough, and your eyes
are the colour of desolate flowers.

Grey smoke rises into grey air,
meeting snowflakes falling.
Smoke and snowflakes in the wind
drift out to sea.
The sea is grey, like a metal,
and the sky is like a metal, too.
Steel is made here, in Middlesbrough,
and steel is strong.
Smoke rises over Middlesbrough
and I am like a metal, too,
I am strong,
and you must be strong like a metal
when the sky is grey like a metal:
you must be strong to bear
snow falling on water.

Middlesbrough hurt you, and now I am leaving.
We are thrown back. We are cold fires.
We are losing our memories.
Smoke rises over Middlesbrough,
the flower of a desolate heat.

Middlesbrough made us, but now we are leaving.
Steel grows on beneath the rising smoke,
metals cool beneath the falling snows,
strong, strong, strong.
Middlesbrough made us, Middlesbrough bore us,
and now Middlesbrough leaves us
as easily as a gardener throws
to the wind the wet ashes of a burned rose.

Lily-of-the-valley and not another flower:
lily-of-the-valley and not another flower.

What shall my word make of these, my people?
The clouds drifting down on King St,
twelve years and an instant away
and Jack is in his corset, and Jane is in her vest
on one of those days I'm dust-free
and superhot, so
anything can be done to me
by you,
my love. What
shall my word make of this, my people?

When the cars drift down King Street
they're enough to star a lust,
the graceful keg of a pregnant girl
gazelle and grief and labour
to make a radiance between two graves
carries the flower of life
like a teenage daydream suitor
Ziggy on the radio
and urban cherry blossom in the air
a high street glam stomp of fairy godzillas
she is his thought and he her will,
he her pain and he her hope,
necklaced on a naked bed
Pinocchio and the donkey boys
in idle goldmine darkness
potencies and latencies,
all whirled up in telegram kisses,
soft cables of ourselves
sent twisting sexually in flight
and the city drifts in pollen light
and skyscrapers are fireflies

Dustless and wracked by stars
I climb into my corpse and go
snap my fingers at those kiss-red lips
start a car like a mafia scene
the dead in garbage to the gorgeous lines
of *Layla* liquid and visceral

the gunshot wounds like roses:
the hero is a bitter one
the axis of a decaying wheel
turning on itself like lies and flies
while all the time
as cars drift down King St
people with small thoughts
are busy making smaller worlds
smaller and smaller still
ground the spiritual to
material horses' hooves
pounding in a funfair ride
are merry dizzy making machines go round
grinding coffee beans to a caffeine jag
round and round a universe
of asteroids and nebulae inside your head,
galaxies and planets
of gold and lemon in the dark
where I have ox-eyed daisies like a sheath
of dragonsblood and orange supernovas
and I'm peeling paint, faded off a wooden post
on the ramshackle fence
of a deserted coastal garden
positionless and supercool
beside my friend, who is the beautiful
one who suffers and is kind,
the flaking coat, washed-out azures
of what was made to protect
but was not protected, and hence
did not protect
against a breeze made of salt and time
against the futility of the people, my heart...

The battlements of symbols, Dharma, wheat
of theories, needs and stone
as the clouds drift down King St
I guess I just don't care.
There's no one at the wheel now, love,
there's no chauffeur, no driver,
some people think of the public good,
some chafing of their own desire,
but me, I just don't care.

The cars are greedy on a phantom power,
a metal father, half Oz woodcutter,
half cybermotive child,
I have time and I take my time,
light a cigarette and dream:
the core is to endure but no one dares and no one does
flower to the ghost of a tyrannical summer
it is too hurtful not to be
better fold dying petals back into the bud
shelter me from abrading light
and summon thorns like dumb crusaders
thorns for dawns, then more, more thorns,
growing dragon miser, to ring in fear
a great city of our wish
to be with towers and walls of rampart power
stout and mute to be real but
how do you defend yourself against the nothingness inside
guarding the void with all your might
in case it moves,
it's not enough to make me care,
abuttred and redoubted, visored, kept and crenellated,
against the rat gnaws of people
grain which rots to a rich starvation
I watch them as they feed and squeal
skating aloof on frozen pharmaceuticals
across the darkness where a soul might be
seeking a beauty which I may be
but find instead
a boredom with virtue and society
a disgust for things so coarse and greedy
our pain deserved who swilled in luxury
and wept for more while a world went crying
who used up their world, then wanted another,
one was not enough,
but there is no other world,
and it's not enough
to make me care, until

one day stupefied I drift into your life like rain
where clouds tumble slowly over King St
and the sound of my voice closing on your name
or of cloudbursts glimpsed from a moving train —

it's enough
to startle us: it's enough
to start a love —
sweetheart, it's just enough...

I imagine soul destruction can be quick or slow.
Maybe the soul destroying takes time
to realise corrosion,
acid what it took for balm,
glancing on a dinosaur star
taken for still burning,
rusts and flaws what it takes for strength,
fatigues what it needs for care,
and goes out, surprised
to be dying in a summer shower,
with everything around it green,
although the rain is still beautiful
and it falls.

In shining graves of limousines
the powerful on patrician cool
make their stately way, dependent on petroleum,
the shared narcotics of opinion.
Me, I have my time and I use my time,
to oxidise and to atomise
my soul, to find
myself startled by a Tyrannosaurus light
glaring in my skull and teeth —
how sudden-seeming collapse occurs
though it has taken millennia to arrive
its fatal sap slowly arising
to burst in loneliness upon the public streets,
the streets a flowering loneliness.

Fakes and fools rule this world,
as they always have, as perhaps they always will.
But no one rules the people.
They are too full of soul.
To destroy that, I imagine, must take
an infinity of words, or maybe just
a single one.
Snatched up in a dinosaur star

in April, in scalded azure,
some may strive for a Lucifer hour
dropping through themselves like fire,
some may build immense towers
to justify the sky to other men
or merely to impose their will
upon the inanity of horizons;
some may cry for love or water,
for pleasure or salt, to be free or to be real;
me, I just don't care.
I've seen that light before
and I know: it's beautiful
and it falls.

The Disappeared

*They think that you have detached yourself from me
simply because you were born*
— Alaide Foppa

Of the four — plum blossom, your lips, your mouth, tomorrow —
if they could strip one out, extract it, suppress it,
perhaps it would be the plum blossom.

They'd have to leave your lips and your mouth;
and as for tomorrow — isn't it always there?
Your mouth, your lips, warm and integral —
even before the word 'ore' is formed by them,
the word 'ear', the word 'air':
we couldn't do without those,
but the plum blossom is inhuman, repetitive,
and, in the end, expendable.

But they would be wrong.
Even though it was far off from us —
a XIII Century retina, an obscure mountain in China —
and a silky MiLord never laid eyes on it,
nor even a wanderer — still, the plum blossom
is the foundation of this world.

'Architecture', she said. 'Child's eyelid.'
I poured champagne in a train, which was a shoe.
'Play — play by the rules of the game', he said.
And there were candles in the garden.
This was several years ago
before the arrest of Pinochet.

And what was left out of the four — the fifth —
I believe they would also seek to suppress that.
They'd think it might be the key, the crux, the essential part.

Your mouth rests on plum blossom:
you move your lips, and there's darkness
which opens, like petals, my lips.
For a moment, I'm balanced on my eyelashes.
We're poised — we're not slaves —
we don't need to ape midnight, which only
occurs when it's told.

We're not angels, either — not midnight,
not angels — though in tradition we may comprehend
the faculties of angels. We're partners —
which is to say
light, blown, dust.

'Jasmine,' she said: 'white jasmine'. Alfred and Chrysler.
And the hole blown in my forehead —
nothing romantic came out of it.
The spring breeze had 40 clicks to go.
A sampan and night-fishing with lanterns.
'The rings of Saturn', I said.

Of the four, yet at the limits of the four, there was water —
big water. As they sought to exterminate one,
to control three, their concentration was intense,
bigoted, almost total.

Of the ocean — in this instance, the Pacific —
they took little cognisance.
They were on the trail of Japanese plum blossom.
By determining and uprooting the trees of that logic —
the logic of kisses and, above all, of mothers —
they would terminate us, locally.
We made no sense. And that made no sense.
'Put some logs on the fire', she said.

They were seeking to administer us a summer
like a kind of general anaesthetic.
But that day, the waves were unruly.
The milky chaos of the spume blown by the wind
reached our feet in spattered coolnesses
as we walked in faded espadrilles along the shore
counting our Napoleons.

Of the sixth and seventh, they remained unaware.
But our mouths and our lips, warm and integral,
spoke of them.

Who are they? Themselves: themselves. We should fear them.
They're seeking a kind of stillness, beyond repose.
They put a wave in a museum.
I was speaking of the power of power,
and of something which consents to power occurring.
And the month was May — sweet and permissive.

Of the blue, they knew nothing.
It was the first blue, not Indian,
not Mesopotamian.
It was the first dawn of human eyes,
and no glaze could contain it.
It stirred the child, and it stirred my death.
It was dawn for the first time.
But of this, they knew nothing.

This belonged to the lovers.
You poured a flame into my mouth,
and the root of that flame — beyond an oasis —
was a spray of plum blossom
against a pale blue sky.

Who were they? They were the masters of nothing.
But they killed, and the killing belonged to them.
The lost was certainly lost.
The vanished were certainly vanished — if uncertainly.
'Hello,' she was saying, tiredly: 'It's me. I'm on the train'.

They tortured, and the torture belongs to them.
They broke, but the broken did not belong to them.
Indeed, they are the breaking. They are the dead.
And she carried a mobile phone, a Nokia.
'Hello,' she was saying, tiredly: 'It's me. I'm on the train'.

They, not we, are disembodied heads and secateurs.
They gave us the unbearable, and so we ceased.
But our bodies were human bodies,
which is to say,
the spring still delineates them —
and they are delineated in the spring —
May — and, before, English plum blossom.

Of blood, they knew much.
Of the pliability of children, they knew too much.
Of testacles and nipples, and of the chain of command,
they were expert, and of transforming the sensitive
portals of pleasure and generation
to sterile sites of pain and ending
they knew everything — except, of course,
the pain.

Who were they? They were the masters of nothing.
And what was borne, they could not bear.
We are the overcome.
We are the snuffed out, the blown away.
The lie belongs to the liar.
Cruelty belongs to the cruel.
But the poem — what could be borne of it —
belongs to no one.

In the end, I think, they might grow desperate.
And of the four — your mouth, your lips, plum blossom, tomorrow —
they might seek to exterminate three,
leaving only tomorrow.

And our lips, and our mouths, heavenly and integral,
would be stamped out,
but not as Rainer Maria's flamenco dancer
stamps out the flames of her dance.
The process of reduction which began with that useless plum blossom
on which our mouths depended,
would end with the determination of a voice
endlessly shouting commands.

Obviously, we couldn't speak of Rilke then.
Or of bread, or milk, or honey; and the spring breeze
could only blow tomorrow.

Of the voices that blow in the wind,
of the so-called scattered and lost voices,
of the apparently dismembered and the ghostly voices,
they know nothing, they can recall nothing.
'Meiji Restoration', he said. 'Zen text.'

Only the human can recall the lost.
Only we, through the lost, say: 'remember'.
Only the separate can kill. Only the separate can die.
'At five o'clock', he said. She said: 'Architecture'.

Who were they?
We cannot remember them.
They didn't belong to us.
And we, light, the breeze-borne, the so-called lost,
certainly never belonged to them.

Because, without going the way of the plum blossom,
they couldn't tell the veins of lightning from those of silver.
They would have to come the whole way
without distinction — which would be, for them,
quite literally, unthinkable.

Who were they, who appeared like this?
They severed the breeze.
I don't remember them. I simply can't.

Sometimes the plum blossom makes the spring,
and sometimes it makes winter.
And my mouth, and my lips, warm and integral
... were blown out, like a flame.

I'll call you tomorrow.

Total Eclipse

I want to be with you when the darkness comes.
So that in the darkness I am not alone.
I want to be close to you, in my thoughts,
so the thought of you shelters me
beyond the desert, the ashes and the psalms.

And you will be my solace, as you have been my tenderness.
You have been my example, my template.
And when I moved with my violence
through the flaw in your eyes
it was the flaw I loved in you, and when I saw you
more vulnerable than all Achilles,
you were stronger than me, who could not be hurt.

I'm not frightened of the world as long as you are living.
But sometimes, you have to go towards the source of danger.
You have to welcome it in,
because danger is a guest, and a guest
who may be staying.
And I want to be with you when the darkness comes.

Shelter me with your eyes, and with your children.
Shelter the guest in me,
with all my fearsome strangeness,
and with my cool, seagreen gaze
in which there is not a single flaw.
Shelter me with my darkness, think of me
beyond the silence, the shadows and the stillness.

You are the greatest kindness life has done me.
You were my heart and you are still my heart.
You were my poem and you are still my poem.
I was your words, and I am still your words —
please, speak me, when the darkness comes.

I am frightened for the world because you are living,
and because the world hurts you.
And if I must be these vicious words again, I will be:
I'll hold my guest's eyes open,
but they'll sense the eerie steel in my voice,
with its curious background hiss, almost inaudible,
a faint whiplash you may not even hear,
yet can't stop hearing.

Whoever hurts you, I will demean them.
I will leave them to die into themselves,
I'll smile at them, but there will be
no one in my eyes as their life gives out.
I will watch them die,
because I have been the guest of love.
And, for a few, rare moments, I made love my guest,
and I was peaceful.

They were your moments — I gave them to you
because you asked me for them.
No one else asked me the way you asked me —
they were full of answers, and already beautiful.

Shelter me from this poem. Shelter me from the weakness.
Shelter me from human beings.
I am still your words.
Say me against myself, against my violence.
I want to be with you when the darkness comes.

They still don't understand.
They can have my eyes, and my dead, psychopathic gaze
on which the driftwood rises and the driftwood falls.
They can pull up a chair, make themselves at home,
though I never invited them in,
and they can listen to the sea.
I don't want to be with them when the darkness comes.

I don't want to be with them.
They have no sense of terror — not even
of the terror they are, and bring.
They can't hear the strange, ancient sound in a human voice
like the quick whistle of steel
moving through the air:
they're listening to a lullaby.
And they make themselves at home,
as if I cared for them, and even though
they are not my guests.

So, if they hurt you, and they will, I can't demean them.
Because I am your guest —
even as the darkness falls.

And if I must be these gentle words again, I won't be.
You asked me to be the fraught kindness of this world —
but I hear steel when I hear a lullaby.

I don't want to be with you when the darkness comes.
I'm full of dirt and ghosts.
Sometimes, you must run from the source of danger.

I love you, and I don't want to be with you when the darkness comes.
Because I am the darkness.
I am the words: I love you.

And if I must be these gentle words again —
I won't be.

Partial Eclipse

I can still feel you on my lips.
When I kiss, I feel you.
When I laugh, surprising myself.
When my mouth is a crescent, I can still feel you.
When there is no moon.
When I say the words, 'rise up'.

You are tired out with the struggle,
and I am a long way from you.
There's a moment which is quite still,
and you might say it's the moment before the decisive action begins,
when the quality of things grows magical
like the light of a thunderstorm —
my hands should be taped like a boxer's hands,
the bout is about to commence,
I need protection.

I am thinking ahead to the day we separate,
and I have to say the words, 'rise up', to thin air.
We fought our way deeply into the night,
we left it no defence at all,
and there was a moment when we paused,
and looked at each other —
and we laughed, because there was no more world left to conquer,
and then, for the same reason, we cried.

There's a moment which is quite still.
When you kiss deeply, and the breath in your lungs
belongs to your lover,
that stranger you have fought your way through to,
fought off, fought for,
and whose intimacy is like a god's,
invisible and embracing, humdrum, made of words,
authorial, made of days, made of scents and tracks,
made of the first glance in the morning,
made, above all, of a gigantic, regal absence —
there's a moment which is quite still,
in which the fighting is over and the god is dead,
and you love more deeply than you have ever loved before
because you are not loved and yet you love,
and there is no world left for anyone to conquer,
but you must still watch them, fighting their way

ever deeper into the defenceless night,
which hurts them, unbearably, with the sunlight
of what has passed, and what can never pass.

It is a sunlight like a moonlight, cool and chaste,
and a round darkness when the birds fall quiet
and for a little while
the earth grows cold,
and you feel the eerie magnitudes of the planets moving
under your feet and around your head
when the stars fall silent like the birds
and the sun is like a bright-eyed raptor hooded,
and your life and your world
passes into shadow.

They are moments when you may sense
the axis of all things turning,
and the mighty engines of a spinning wheel spinning
creaking on its spindle,
a car coughing, not starting,
the grind of a body's hub against its axle...

When the gravity cuts and laws are suspended,
the rumbling, juggernaut routine trembles to a halt,
in a moment between trains in a provincial station,
on the end of the platform where a lark is singing
and michaelmass daisies grow between the sleepers,
there's a moment when one world ends
and you could know me by a different name,
a stronger and a sweeter name,
know me by the trail of the burned and the wounded,
by the ones we could dispense with,
those we could forget, those we never even knew:
then my indifference is almost divine, almost universal,
and my love a tiny absence,
like a lost glove, a hair on a pillow,
or a call reverse charges.

I can still feel you on my lips.
When you kiss, I feel you.
When I laugh suddenly, surprising even myself.
When my mouth is a crescent, I feel you.

When there is a new moon.
When you say the words, 'rise up'.

There is such duress in this world.
You and I, will there ever
be peace between us?
There's such pressure in this world,
sometimes you sense you're not using
your whole name.
There is such duress in this world.
There is such brilliance in this world.

When the skyscrapers split and the metals failed,
the pressure was an abyssal blow,
like punching thumbs through an eggshell,
the hull too thin, the skin too frail,
the fall too far, the gravity too real,
when the clamshells, suckers, opened in the heat,
when love was made,
then we understood anew
how Nature abhors a vacuum,
and how the luscious void
lies inside us,
a child with only one glove,
a delve in a pillow where a dream was felt,
a call reverse charges.

There is such brilliance in this world.
We were on the pavement by the busy road
when a derelict saw your children and
impulsively, with the money he'd been begging,
lurched over into the grocers,
bought the children a bag of strawberries,
then staggered off to rejoin his friends,
incoherent on spirits.
When he came towards us,
we grew quiet and uneasy,
as if he were carrying a grenade.
The children jittered and flinched
and fell quiet,
it was a gift.
I wondered what lay, deep in his memory,

spurring him to do what he did.
But we fell quiet, like birds at an eclipse,
when he came towards us.
There is such duress in this world
it will break us all.

You are tired out with the struggle,
and I'm far away from you.
We'll never be at peace, you and I —
you're too far away, curled up
in a corner in my smile
and in the automatic darkness
when my eyelids eclipse my eyes.
We're never at peace, you and I,
but I don't want to leave you my war —
I will not leave you my war.

Words, perhaps more loyal than us, may stand guard.
Love wore us out, but nothing will wear out words.
They'll stand guard over us, the people we never were.
They are calmer than time, impassive,
faithful right down to the last human voice on earth.
They will witness our lives,
even as we sleep they will watch over us;
they have seen my shame, my lies,
they possess an intimacy greater than lovers',
or of two boxers, one stood over the other,
both with eyes that are like torn strawberries,
and they form in our mouths: rise up.

And the people we never were will guard over us:
they'll know, love wore us out,
but we could not wear out love.

Sometimes it is better to break than to remain whole.
Only then may you survive.
Only, when you are broken, you must try
to bear your broken name.

And the people we were will forget us.
They won't know about love, and they won't care
love is as fickle as a word,
and words are futile as love.

You will know.

You will forget.

Rise up.

Human

I gave you my eyes.

And you took them — but, still,
it wasn't enough.

I gave you my hands,
and all they had touched,
and all that had been touched by them — but, still,
it wasn't enough.

Can you remember?
My eyes were the colour of two seas
which no one would ever name,
or of a spring that would never see another spring again —
but, still, this wasn't enough:
we weren't complete.

You were — frankly — restless, magical, infinite —
no one knew where you were going,
and they still don't.
But you were so ordinary too, so dangerously finite,
you chafed against yourself,
calling this a lover's name,
but a lover you didn't love:
and you noticed the way clouds formed in the evening
above the rooves, when winter meant nothing to you.

I gave you my mouth,
and with my mouth I gave you
every word I would ever speak,
those hot, luminous things I couldn't bear to keep quiet —
even these words, which I'll give to you
and no one else.

And I kissed you — it was
the peak of my life — but, still,
this wasn't enough:
you didn't have everything,
and we weren't complete.

I gave you the rain — the cold, new rain
of my days, autumn when the sky
is milk and cataract, or a summer shower
like a birth at noon
on the dirty streets,
among the monoxide, aphids and butterflies
of my boyhood town,
laying the dust.

You took all I offered,
and you kept on taking.
I gave you the cast
net of my flesh,
adolescence of acetylene and horses,
eel dreams, the pink ghosts
of ink in water.
I gave you my unease,
the limping dog of my sympathy.
I gave you the fillings from my teeth,
and the sugar and sloth
which gave them to me.
I gave you plum blossoms
blown between speeding trains.
Still, this wasn't enough,
and we weren't complete.

I gave you my distance,
and you moved through it,
all that numb
azure where people drift away and no one
feels them going;
you slipped through those crowds,
Asia and sampans, roosters in cages,
and I saw you,
I asked you to wait —
but you knew that was childish
and you laughed, and kissed me, brushingly, on my temple,
and then didn't look back.

You took so much:
you couldn't stop taking.
I gave you more distance, more space, wheatbelt and airliner,
my own indifference when I am serene
and empty, like a river
with a sky floating upon it,
and when the sun's glare
turns the water to molten platinum
and flows on, anyway,
having lost the sky —
days when you were hungry,
and used me easily, without a thought,
and I let you use me
because I was the nearest thing to you, and didn't care —
distant like a river, narcotic like knowing
never to look back...

I gave you that river,
and I watched you go;
I didn't look back,
I gave you a lost life, casually, as they are.
I gave you so many things —
both those things which belonged to others,
and those things which could only belong to me —
but, still, it wasn't enough:
we weren't complete.

I gave you everything, and sometimes willingly,
sometimes against myself, in a tearing way,
I gave you the finest things I could be —
yes, and the worst.
I gave you my proud dirt,
my time lying on the ground,
the shining animal worn loose from its mother —
my death, always raised like Abraham's knife —
even the real night by the shore when I was alone,
when the wind swirled the sand and moved through the Martin's pines
which first seemed as if they would shout,
then cry, then break,

but which just shimmered, shimmered, shimmered —
still, this wasn't enough,
you were still somehow alone
by the Tasman Sea.

I loved you, and I gave you these words again:
they were the colour of young pine shoots,
of a spring that would see another spring —
but this time, you didn't take them,
this time, you weren't enough,
and, naturally, we weren't complete.

Winter meant nothing to you, autumn, it meant nothing to you —
you were frank and translucent,
something roiled in you insatiably
like a fire on the ocean bed
even in the cool of the evening in September
when the sky is flat and serene and settled,
and you noticed the clouds in a herringbone formation
from the attic room among city rooves —
something rose in you incessantly
like a fire burning in water,
and it was always a night approaching,
and it was always a child.

Naturally, I gave you myself —
what else could I do,
who else could I give myself to?
I gave you back myself, and those little stints of breath
we'd performed in my nostrils;
and I moved in you as if in an element,
like divers in water,
or the morning in a new lover
in November, with a scent of woodsmoke in the air.

And still, we weren't complete,
it wasn't enough.

You took and you took — and if sometimes I hated you,
that was simple, it was because I wasn't enough.
And you were so phenomenally generous
you took my hatred, easily,
you were much greater than that;
and you were greater than my love, too,
which I never was.

You took everything I had,
and then you kept on taking.
You took my emptiness, and my turquoise truck,
my castle, my terminal fatigue.
You took my last words —
the final ones, the ones I didn't write when I was young
but which had all my youth in them,
words I would tie myself to,
words with you in them and which, like a Russian,
I could address to the whole crowd of time,
the night, history, the stars.
You took my death, and the silence I'd beaten out
like a tough metal for so long.
You took my dreams, and all my waking thoughts;
I gave you my love, and you took it,
sometimes like a thief,
and sometimes when it really belonged to you.

In the end,
you took everyone I cared for.
You took my mother, my father, my brother,
my beautiful friends.
I gave you my hands, my mouth,
fingertips, nostrils, tongue; I gave you the sound
of the word, 'undefeated'.
You took everything I cared for.
I gave you my word.
I gave you my eyes.

You give me your eyes.
You give me the great darkness of my life.

You took everything — but yourself,
you couldn't take.
You give me everything — and, for me,
this is enough, it is more
than I can bear.
And still we're not complete.

Once again, I give you my words.
I give you my hands.
I give you my eyes.

Open them. Close them.

Open them.

The 20 Sleepless Years

If I spoke your name out loud
it would take 20 sleepless years
to say it.

But I want to sleep.

And if I sleep...

And if you wake...

I woke early this morning, my German friend had to catch a bus,
something out of the *Arabian Nights* for you.
I remember it must have been spring at the time of recording
because it was warm enough to wheel an amplifier
through the streets of New York.

You know, and I wanted my life to begin again,
as if I was walking through the streets at 6 a.m.,
having just left my new lover.

I was smoking by an open doorway, I was blurred,
too much alcohol and not enough sleep,
I was listening to *Loaded* on the hi-fi,
something out of Hans Christian Andersen for you:
it was one of those days when two seasons meet,
summer and autumn, the air was subtle, teetering,
and there was something indefinably moving in the quality of the light
in which I felt I was and was not,
and then the music ended, but even though I was shot
from the long drinking and the smoking
I wanted to put on another track again
just to cling to the sound of those harsh and sweet guitars
for a few moments more before sleeping.

And if you sleep...

And if I wake...

And if I spoke your name out loud,
if I had that courage and that privilege,
if I had to walk right round your name
— at, say, 5 letters per second —
it would take 20 sleepless years.

And I don't want to sleep, I want to hear the music.
And I don't want to sleep, don't put me down.
But why did you have to change things so?

Do you know who I am anymore?

I was in Germany once in winter, it had been snowing,
and there was thick frost; but there in the frozen dazzling streets
of Hamburg, the white air was suddenly filled
by the odour of cinnamon being unloaded from the warehouses.

And when I was a kid there were these Charles Atlas ads
'Before and After', I was the seven-stone weakling,
but I remembered David, and Goliath,
and I thought of Shakespeare and eternity.

Shall I tell you what you were like before you were born?
A little again about the crushed starlight and the cinnamon,
the subzeros of the U-bahn,
five countries in a bag, your lips, bullish and butterflyed,
that had never kissed sexually before,
and the first beat of your heart, like a stone in David's sling,
and the second beat of your heart, like Goliath,
and the last beat, like star-defying Romeo,
star-accepting Juliet, and like a star, its cool light
finally reaching us, one morning in summer,
just a moment after we looked away?

I'd tell you my story about the New York station,
and how my life was saved by rock and roll —
but there's a change in the air.

You were a promise made to the world,
and I tried to honour you.
You could attain your own eyes like an altitude,
but never keep it.
And your own heart threw you out in the streets,
and sometimes you had to lie to get back in,
and sometimes you had to tell such a truth that
even when you stepped back in
it was strange, and you remembered the quality of the starlight at dawn

when you were 15 years old
and how you looked up, and made
some kind of promise.

I have spent 20 sleepless years saying your name —
but it isn't the name you call yourself.
I spent 20 sleepless years, now you want me to sleep.
But I'm not tired. I'm still young —
but I hear you calling.

What have you done?

I looked up from my book, as all people must.
But I never once looked away from the word.

Oh, sweetheart, what have you done?

Does it matter anymore that you can still
hear me saying
I will always try to honour my promise?
But you — you have looked away from these words.

And now you'll never hear that fine, fine music,
you'll never turn on that New York station.
Your life won't be saved by rock and roll.

It was one of those evenings when two lives meet,
and you're proud of love,
something out of Atlantis for you.
The air in the streets was supercharged by the spring storm,
when the hail had popped and blipped against the cars
and a stillness seemed to enter me
like the stillness that forms before the word,
a stillness that is homage to the word
and which the word beats against
with every human thing there has ever been
both the torment and the peace,
both the bestial rage and the bestial tenderness,
but above all hope, both the realised and the futile:
and I was proud of being in love
because it humbled and defied me,
and she swept through my life like that spring storm

had swept its way through the city
drowning it in moments — but not like Atlantis.

But you — what of you?
What have you done?
What have you done with the storm?
What have you done with the spring?

If I spoke your name out loud
it would take 20 sleepless years,
20, 40 sleepless years
to say it.

And if I had to write your name,
to wall it round with letters,
I would spend 20 sleepless years
to encircle you with your own heart.

But you want me to sleep...

And if I sleep...

And if you wake...

We are out of the Sirens and the Lorelei for you,
like a wet nurse out of Chekhov,
like a slave who loves you —
although we are not slaves.

And we were between the apes and the angels,
something out of a Persian spell,
something out of a dream sequence for you,
a few words from an old song
which has no author, and is not written down.

And you left us so long ago,
you left us to ourselves,
to our raw violence and our magnanimity,
to our smooth violence,
to our disturbed sleep, our broken and restless sleep —
you left us
to our beauty and our sea

and to a spring morning — it must have been spring
because I remember, it was warm enough
to wheel an amplifier through the streets of New York —
you left us to rotting to ourselves,
garbage and light,
and perhaps we deserved this.

Now, do we haunt you with cunieforn and kisses?
Do we swim in your dreams with the shapes of crustacea,
or with morbid, stickleback eyes?
Do you dream at all?

Are you serene like ice, like bodhisattvas, with eyelids of stone,
with minds in tranquillity, statuesque in unmemory?
Or do we still sometimes disturb your sleep
with those uncontained sounds,
those screams and those sobs
which have no home, and raise goosebumps, and chill, and beckon?

I will love again.
I will love with everything good in me —
yes, and with everything bad as well.
I will love till I'm broken, and if I'm not broken
I will love,
something out of Tasso for you, out of Dante,
the Greeks, the ocean, out of Auschwitz for you...

I will not give up my innocence,
my ragged fury, my fused and earthbound
struggle to give this world a home,
and I will never, never look away from the word,
because I know it is there for me,
charged with bliss and outrage, and with the tenderness
of a young girl whose friends have left her
crying, alone, on the steps of her house.

I put on the Afghan Whigs, *1965*, man that was the coolest sound
I ever heard.

And I know, I am one of those charred and turbulent things
whiplashing and frightened, electrical, eel supple and writhing
with eyes that know pain and have given pain.
I am one of those dying and scintillating things,

burning and shocked and boring,
I have a head full of summer
and a city evening which glides and switches and glimmers,
sudden with ends and sparking touches,
something out of *Gilgamesh* for you.

And if you die, will you die like us,
haunted and stupefied,
in shit and silence, chafed and wracked,
will you be so puzzled, so stunned, so wry?

Perhaps you were right to leave us, I don't know.
Because we are dragons and mermaids for you.
Do you regret our passage and our flight?
Do you regret at all?

I'm trembling. Won't you hold me for a moment more?

Ah, I'm sleepy. But if I speak your name out loud,
if I had that honour and that discovery,
if I had to love your name — at, say, 5 letters per second —
it would take 20 sleepless years.

I know, I am one of those incriminated and insolvent things,
and my purity is violent,
I belong among my kind,
and our rapture is haloed with the burnt light
of those we let fall, burning and without time,
without space to hold them.
I am a guilty but a rearing thing,
mule-headed, Miranda in the daylight, far from Milan.
I'm succulent, and I click my tongue,
sass and swagger and nightingales...
Sugar, I'm the one.

What have you done?
Oh, sweetheart, what have you done?

We were the music and the fire.
We were the drive-by slaying, gun to a temple,
priest aflame, doused in gasoline,
we were the moment and the opportunity,

we were Buddha's footsteps, the smile and the flower,
the fumbled division of everything,
we were the pornography and the sutra,
we were the chance taken and the chance missed,
we were signs of unknowing, guerillas, ambassadors,
we were dangerous and ludicrous pioneers,
a drunk, lost boy, puking up in an alley:
we were Prospero's goodbye.

I must look up from my book now.
I am one of those flawed and sleepy things.
But if I sleep... And if you should wake...

I'm tired. Won't you tell me a story,
something out of Galilee or France for you?

I loved you
for 20 sleepless years,
and more.
For 20 sleepless nights.
For 20 sleepless skies.

I loved you
beyond reason or rhyme,
20 sleepless reasons, 20 sleepless rhymes —
but you left us:
at 5 letters per second
you walked away from us,
and they were blows, those letters, each one
against the universe.

You walked away. But you can still,
after all this time,
lay your child in my arms,
and I will sing her a lullaby...

I will sing her a lullaby
the willow more lovely than the rose
and the storm a child too,
rocking in my baby's arms.
I will sing her a lullaby,
the wind that shakes the trees and blows

all night by the river and the willows
in the morning will be a memory:
I will sing her a lullaby
until the eyelids of the rain,
one by one, close.

Bring me your child,
I'll sing her a lullaby.

But will she hear it?

And if she doesn't hear the lullaby,
tell me, will I be singing at all?

The willow more lovely than the rose,
I will sing her a lullaby.

Rain, close your eyes.

Jasmine

I have waited for these words for so long,
and I'm grateful that you've brought them to me.
I don't deserve them — but you deserve them.
I waited in the glance where the rain falls down
when there seemed only falling rain;
now, the rain of such long waiting is over,
you bring these words to me,
and I am grateful.

We are running out of time.
Lullabies, alarms — it's a moment of decision.
We wait in the glance where the love runs down.
And of the hard universe, we break off
just a little piece — jasmine, or the way
forests grow on around us when you close your eyes.

Are you angry for Lot's wife's sake, do you pity her?
It's too cruel to be punished for a backward glance.
Though safety lay in the arms
of a ruthless god, all the past in ashes and salt...
Down the burning ladder of the fireman heart
we go, holding on and holding:
these are the lion words of summer,
and the lamb words of spring;
and they are gentler than I have ever been.

We're running out of glances.
And the waves crunch on the shore, an aqueous press
publishing so little we can ever read.
Among the five secrets of daybreak,
one is an anger of flowers,
one is only ever told to others —
and one is never told at all.

We're running out of texts, of secrets.
Say, we're holed up in this beach house,
on the run from the Law — tins, guns and cigarettes;
oil lamps, empty magazines and a bible.
The Law is the Flood:
you hear it in creaking whispers,
water under the veins — wolf water, such big eyes.
And how do we defend ourselves now
but with ourselves,

or with each other —
all we are left?

Axle grease and sapphires — we're low on them.
And the dapper gangster, threatening the Floridan hurricane
with his rod — Xerxes with a handgun...
Around us a weight of doom like a desert
grows, spider finger by spider finger: pressure on the cranium, and
dust...
Disaster ticks, tiny, Death Watch, slow, eroders...

You are the greatest tenderness life has given me.
The flame wavers, and I look at you,
molten with darkness and more beautiful
the longer you are stretched out,
the fewer reserves you possess,
the more there is of you,
as, with every moment, there is less:
and I don't know how we bear this —
perhaps only others must bear this.

And Dorothy and little Toto, Ezekiel and Odysseus,
Orpheus, Noah, Hansel...
Deep in the woods was an edible house;
high in the whirlwind was a turning house;
under careless stars is a magnetic house,
and the fragile magnets of insects... Of lovers' hands...

Outside, the wind is picking the air clean,
leaving us short of supplies,
and our lungs grow sharp, like the blades of knives,
our breath seems to carve straight into bone —
one second — two seconds — three.

We're running out of space.
Out of diamonds for drills, out of land, water, stories.
Atoms of oxygen lie sparkling around us,
and the sea could still quench any journey —
but our kiss, the width of a throat,
must live on millimetres, oranges, darkneses and caffeine.

We are running out of memories.
Do you pity Lot's wife, are you angry for her sake?

But the desert is the place for prophets and dreams.
Behind us, in the distance,
there are destroyed cities, towers ablaze, walls down,
smoke eclipsing the sun —
and you walk towards me, small against the horizon,
the heat rippling flaking eucalypts — and I remember
a mystery of temperatures,
how some trees only shed their seeds
when they're on fire.

Your eyes are a quietness of light between two storms.
And then we, the love, are the storm.
And of the hard rain, we break off
just a few drops — acid, or the way
the line scored in copper prints one day as green,
the next as Java brown, and the last as crimson.

I pity Lot's wife, I'm angry for her sake.
Upon our shoulders, all that is burning begins.
The desert is the place for prophets and dreams,
and for us, the shining flood is the Law now.
Descartes' Arab is haunted, crossing the bright, wide sands,
looking for an earth in which to bury,
safe from harm, the shell and the stone he carries,
Euclid and Poetry. Deep in the dream,
he's searching for a grave of the human heart:
but should he find it,
who will find it?

We're running out of space, out of time,
even out of death.
And we thread the pearls of air through our lungs,
atom on atom, breath by breath —
but no one else will ever wear this necklace, and even we
will never find the clasp which closes it.

Acid and space, shorelines, moments and oranges —
where will we find shelter now?
Where on this earth?
We're running out of rain, out of words,
even out of love — and yet still we go towards
the source of danger — jasmine, or the way
forests grow on around us when you close your eyes.

The Ambassadors

To write something beautiful.
To open a gate to where
my childhood still waits for me
in sheepskin mittens,
gathering all the people in the world
to his small breast,
and holding them to him, expectantly, there.

Is he gazing at the snow: is it 1963?
My father — my splendid father —
in galoshes, working with a shovel
to clear the path:
he writes something beautiful.

The troll who loiters in the shadows
cannot come closer while my father works:
that wild one, he waits for the glimmers at twilight,
when dreams begin to swell
and Jack Frost scoots from window to window
only moving when we are blinking
so that we don't see him — not ever.

He must move more quickly than a thought —
even the one
which connects lightning with spiders.
Sometimes, I don't want to sleep,
but to stay awake in my life
for one more hour,
to wring from my smoky eyes
one more moment of you —
and then another.

To write something beautiful.
To extend, into the darkness, my hand:
to touch your face,
and feel my loneliness
against your skin, to feel your lips
moving softly, your lips and no other,
specific and gentle and unrepeatable, to caress
that opening mouth which holds
all the secrets of the world
in the fuzzy, unadorned labour
of a struggling mother.

Is it 2001? — I'm looking at stormclouds.
You come close to me, brush against me,
I feel the distance between us
glow, and move, prickle like pine needles, deepen, and then
open as you stand before me so clearly
as if there is not one
iota of me in my seeing
and a path has been made lucid
for you to move upon,
being someone beautiful.

Then the world grows cloudy and lyrical,
beset with tensions, spotted with peace,
and we feel like we are ambassadors
as are all lovers
sent out
from a disturbed country
and an unknown people,
the boat beached and your hand
parting the pine branches, extending, into the darkness
our lit bodies, feeling as they
have never been before,
slipping down and away from the submarine mirrors
of a strangers' room, bearing
with seasalt footsteps through the sand and shells
the representation of man.

And who will receive us in that place
but other lovers, speaking caresses
in another tongue?
This is the embassy
of late buses and trains, the formality
pauses and delays between awe-struck young lips
make of a ferrous and a bone-laden world,
turning it to scriptures
beginning will always adore
and let fall, suddenly, blindly, kiss-struck and a shooting star
melting over the night sky
above Sanur,
the universe up on tip-toes,
and its mouth open
about to say... 'Oh!'...

To write something beautiful.
To look into your eyes, to hold, between my hands
all the gentleness I can bear
of your face;
to tilt your chin, to turn your mouth to where
deep in the eye of the calm
of the whorling storm's black
core of my eyes
a boy in a lambswool hat
chases his spooky breath
in Dorset, as my handsome father —
far more handsome than Lawrence of Arabia! —
works with a spade of steel
to shift off the drifts
and the compiled crystal layers
which are blocking the way.

It is not that the snow is ugly,
it is just that my father must clear it
to open the path
for my mother,
so she may call out
that it is time to come in now
from the troll-haunted shadows Jack
Frost glimmers between, leaving only
the glistening echoes of his movements
frozen through ferns, in forests of white quiet:
he writes something beautiful.

And my mother must roll and turn aside
the blood of her labour —
my frail, stupendous mother
Hercules idles beside, looking ashamed:
it is not that
her agony is easy — far from it —
but that she must sign off our umbilicus
in a milky emptiness
where birth and loss are one:
she writes something beautiful.

I come to you because
I cannot sleep, Marlboro and the fingers

of hands which have held psalms, and held
those poor hands, palm to palm, where on the back
the veins went brittle,
now the air mélanges spring and green difficult passages
and the dumb surges and rollers of the 11.15
taking me late at night from the city, glancing up for a moment,
someone with a book in a hazy, travelling mirror
as in two minds I Shakespeare and you
rising above the shouting waves
where Sebastian and Viola went drowning,
you always drifting into my thoughts, my thoughts
always returning to you, my finer thoughts
still open like my eyes and as my words
still reach into the sands
of a salt, realising Illyria
reborn from the storm as from an angry, turbulent chrysalis
as a kind of survivor,
as a kind of ambassador.

And the walls
of all our houses grow insubstantial,
it's Michael singing, and he asks
if his eyes look empty, he says
he's forgotten how this feels —
to write something beautiful.

Did you think
I would forget you
when you and you alone
stand upon the path which blisses out
the cold-shouldered snow and the pelting light
of a falling star
I still reach for, and hold upon my hand
when I turn to kiss you: all melts,
and the walls of all our houses
grow insubstantial
for Michael's singing.

I still believe
in both the lion and the lamb.
I did not let go. And if we,
if we could remain awake

for one more hour,
if I could wrest
from my fatigue
one more moment of you,
we could stay up, late, into the dawn
and catch a glimpse
of Jack Frost alighting
from the steps of his carriage, rig
confected from icicles, points of dazzle, shimmering
in the fir-blue shadows
under the pines
before morning
turns all to substantial fire
erasing something beautiful.

Did you think
I did not love you?
No. Sleep will burn away
this day's falls,
but I will try once more
to be your ambassador,
to represent you
through this shining dark,
through this work of a man:
to write something beautiful
I must clear away
all the other phrases —
it is not that they are ugly, far from it,
but only
that this is the phrase
which brings me to you.

And all the people,
all the people in the world,
I'll gather them to me,
clasp them in my arms,
against my small breast,
to write something beautiful
I only have to hold them, here, close, tender,
struggling
to my word.

The 43rd Spring

My time will come.
Perhaps, because it's spring, I feel like that –
serene, you know, and with my work
rising like a wave.

Of course, the time to come cannot belong to me —
how could it?
That would be like saying
'this powder-blue sky is mine'.
Owners are so foolish, aren't they, Love?

There's something dusty about this spring —
that first dryness, you know; and the warmth:
something you've sensed before
which when it wakes wakes memory, too,
a memory of the wide openness
of a single morning,
a memory of the possible which
is a young man, looking impossibly cool,
a glass bowl of roses, still just buds,
a scratched desk, the early *Poems*
of Pablo Neruda.

Something... And it's not what's in the book
but in the phasing, powder-blue sky
and the quiet streets,
Sunday empty,
as if the town itself had yawned and swallowed
then grown attentive, trembling,
waiting to be inhabited.

No: the book's closed:
what moves out there, beyond the dusty window sill,
something more waiting than moving, perhaps,
has not been written, yet —
and it never will be:
how could you horizon round
even the tiniest moment
of all there is,
a life indefinite, the sweet, elusive
nature of the possible itself?

He's just a hazy boy, really —
zealous about himself, of course, but still
unable to detach himself entirely
from the shimmering, urban spring sky,
a polluted lavender,
or from the sketchy, crayon electric buds of coral pink
or from the hand which holds the pen and which
a few hours ago
stroked his girlfriend's hair
and still not sure
which is the first event, the one
he obscurely feels he came here for.

Destiny. Vocation.
What became of him?
Perhaps he never wrote the poem which would
align the universe within his dream —
maybe he thought too much about himself,
or about the alphabet,
phonemes or rhyme schemes,
semantics or the vernacular,
performance or the supercool, sugary cliques whom he mistook
for readers, when they
were the braid on a uniform
the officer himself hated, in the end, to wear,
and yearned for the evenings
when he could bathe
and be naked with his wife.

Or perhaps he wrote the poem,
and did not see it, put it aside.
Or wrote the poem,
but did not feel it.
Or perhaps he only ever really wrote prose
that medium of propriety
and never understood
words do not own the world
but are in love with it.

Constructed

Beauty must fall. It is just
how it must be. We try to shelter
with hand or mouth love
it could happen at Hed Kandi, @ Pacha,
usually at Rouge but
it is like blossom and it must flower, that is
its form of passing grace.

I call this poem *Constructed* because
before this, it was not.
Like an igloo from the snow,
like a word from silence
it is raised. But
it is not a dwelling,
and we cannot stay here,
not even for a moment.
Nothing, indeed, dwells here, yet
it is not ghostly, and not a ruin,
no more than a kiss or a moment of sympathy
haunts or fails, lingers or falls.

The ache is terrible, sometimes, and sometimes, literally,
unbearable. Who loves seeks to hold,
that's natural, and tries in squirming reaches
to protect with caressing this
that other life,
combing lice from our children's hair,
recording a casual message on voicemail,
making electric shelter
for syllables, for what
is more fragile than a human voice?

My sorrow at this time — November, 2002 —
is dimensionless, and I cannot bear
the news of suffering, the way we grow
cannibal with necessity.
So much beauty will go down, it is like the Greeks
or Nagasaki, like Stalingrad in winter.
One must be formal with such wasting,

find a ceremonial container,
and to the ceremony and the form adhere —
cling, really, when the new dying begins.

An electrocuted bull kneels, its blood
still moving inside it, and the tapeworm
survives in the gut. And it
is like this — we found it
endlessly. Once built, what can a tower do
but fall? Once spoken, what can a word be
but silence? And yet,
I call this poem *Constructed* —
and it suspends
the fall of beauty as nothing.

Where is the ground of our glance, our eyes
moving on a moving page?
Show me it. Where is the base
of thought, where is the home of silence?
And how can a love be sheltered
when the sheltering hands and mouths
themselves are homeless, where they want to be?

Forgive me for the hardness of this poem,
it is difficult to write of such things.
Certain things can be said simply; others cannot.
I write this humbly, wanting to be honourable,
and without affectation — bare, essential, like rain.

Then let me be explicit.
If our foundations are in power, control,
exploitation, possession, material mastery,
this poem will not be constructed,
and silence will roam here
among swaying weeds.

False power is greedy and despises
moments. And it dwells here in *Constructed*,
evicting the truth. It is unjust:

it is like Kafka's mole, endlessly
at risk, imprisoned
in the very place devised for its security.

Does the tyrant trust his own bodyguard?
The tyrannical, towering aspiration
to dominate and to endure like light
against the fluttering moths of lovers' hands,
and night wings of soft voices,
is doomed like this:
power so conceived must fall —
how could it not? —
founded as it is
upon us — founded as it is
upon others.

But I ask again:
where is the ground of our glance, our eyes
moving on a moving word?
Show me. Where is the foundation of a love?
In this hand? In that hand? In this way,
or that? In my desire? Or in your desire?
Or in desiring, which like the wind
is seen in its effects, but never seen?

I ask, for the first time:
where is the ground of our glance, our eyes
restless on a restless word?
Show me. Where is the foundation of this love?
Recall: this poem is called *Constructed*.
May beauty rise with it.
And may it be a beauty of yours.

Show me.

Do You Believe in the Spirits of the Mirror?

You are dead.
And if the summer thinks it can steal you —
well, that's cool.

I'm alive.
They're trying to fabricate my life for me:
all summer, for a handful of Elgars —
two times a day, LIEBHERR, MABEY:
MABEY, LIEBHERR.

You're dead, and I'm not going to mourn over you —
not with a single, precious word.
You gave your words away as if they were nothing,
I won't countenance such surrender.
You had your chance to speak —
you could have broken this world asunder,
you said nothing.

You just let the silence pour into you,
it wasn't even your silence:
you could have made yourself really something,
you could have cried out your life,
they couldn't stop you:
they stopped you.
Why did you let that happen?

I'm alive.
And I was counting on you
to be my friend.
They want a table on rats or *Drosophila*:
that's fine — I'm on it.

Fox Ultra Captain King Eros Romeo Starfish —
why did you let them take your soul away?
It's gruesome, Hammer.
All that long, soul-snatching summer,
when your body was living,
and they were zombies in the shopping mall,
out-takes of George A. Romero.

Their theft is seminal, too:
they stole your meaning,

but you left the door open:
you helped them to steal yourself —
you could have called out,
where was the cry for help
when such a cry would be noble?
You're dead, I can't help you, now.

Christ, how wonderful you were.
Orpheus, Persephone —
all that 2-trains summer, and Underground signs:
your kiss was greater than Ovid and Homer,
the Taj melted on it like sugar,
LIEBHERR, MABEY:
MABEY, LIEBHERR.

You are dead — you're so fucking dead
you shame death.
And you were wonderful, I wanted to kiss you
because I wanted to live,
live deeply, wound life with your loveliness,
scar it, scare it, make it run —
now you're just a mirror over my shoulder,
dumb,
and I won't look back for you.

Do you believe in the Spirits of the Mirror?
What a strange life they have, subtle and eerie,
floating in their glass dimension — mutely.
Do you believe in the poem of the mirror?
What an obvious death you'll have.
I'm not looking back at you.

Cocteau, cocktail:
one should be brutal with mirrors,
slay every moving thing in them.
Mirrors? Telephones to dial up the dead —
go on: you know that it's good to talk.

So, let's talk.
There's no need for a trench of sacrificial blood
or anything mythical:
I'm living, you're dead —
call me up, I'm here.

I'm here.
Speak — say one, precious word.
A word that belongs to you,
a word for which you'd give your life:
please, don't remain silent,
don't let them fill you with silence:
raise yourself up, say a word.

Spirit, I command you.
I'm here — speak, little one.
Tell me about the weather of your eyes.
Tell me what the sun is like up there,
in the land of the living.

Why were you never shocked by words?
Why didn't they call you?
Why couldn't you feel how rough they were,
how irreducibly strange, how magical?
You thought words were easy, smooth, charming —
didn't you realise they were killers?
Killers, and Christ, and hammers:
all that 2-trains summer,
when I kissed you,
and you died?

In a moment, your lips will be sealed.
And there will be a life between us.
I'm just a man: I'm no resurrectionist.
You let them fill you with silence.
Will you let me fill you with words?

Will you honour them,
and their brilliant, hermaphrodite labour?
They're so strong for you.
They'll bear you.
Come on: raise yourself up
to the power of words.

I am a sign.
I am dead.
Someone stole my life away,
and imprisoned me in a mirror.

I cry out, but my cry is a mirror cry,
no one in the world of the living hears me.
I float like an angelfish in a tank:
can't you see me?
I'm real. I'm in here. Let me out!
You! You out there! I'm calling!

Did you hear a sound?
I thought I heard voices.
Can't you hear me?
I thought you were my friend.
I'm here. It's real. It's really happening.
What is? Did you hear a voice?
Did you see a sign?

You're dead. The summer has stolen you.
You're abolished, like presence, like the soul.
When you kissed, the Taj Mahal was a waste of time,
and tomorrow was an afterthought.
But now you're dead.
They drove a spike of glass through you —
right through your heart.
A spike of glass: a spike of silence.
They stole your shadow.
Now, you're vanished. You'll never return.
And I won't use up a single, precious word on you.

I'm alive.

Athlete

I want to be beautiful for you.
And so I write this poem, which is more beautiful than I can ever be.
I can't write it forever, but I can write it now.
I want to be beautiful for you.

Sometimes the words frighten you, they're so faithful.
You turn away and leave them, come back,
they're still waiting, their patience is immutable.
You speak, and they obey; you're silent, and they concur.
They will never betray you, although they may
follow the harsh course of your betrayal
which you make out softly
in pale green leaves against the mist,
and a kiss which is half rescue, and half drowning,
half darkness, and half star.

You have tried to lift a world, both its yes and its no,
and you're tired.
All day, you've struggled to be a human being.
And for this, I write the poem of your eyes,
and of your thin arms,
of the almonds you break every moment:
we can't struggle forever, but we can struggle now —
you're tired, but the poem never tires.
And what we fail to achieve today,
we may delegate to the poem:
and for this, the poem opens our tired eyes,
and asks us to be beautiful.

Who will close the eyelids of this poem?
I am half darkness, a hemisphere, afraid.
I'm afraid that my words are not worthy of you,
and I'm afraid that my patience is mutable.
All the time that we kissed,
Judas was wordless, and Lucifer a falling star,
and the sea was dangerous, and pliable:
against this, you asked me to be beautiful,
and, for the length of a poem, I was.

You have tried to lift the world, all day,
both its yes and its no.
And the strange, childish superman of the poem
who can lift buildings and freight trains
but not my human voice
raises my human voice to the note you call for,
and holds it, purely, forever.
And now no one can sleep:
no one but the person
who will close the eyelids of these words.

And the bloody, heavy foundries of our hearts,
aloof and yet incarnate within us,
we must leave:
and if he is so strong, how is it
he can't keep me close to my heart,
but leaves it, here, beating,
and sustains it, purely within the poem?
Because that is the sound of his voice,
that sweet animator, part Cupid, part Hermes,
part silver, part ore.
And now I can't sleep
until you close the eyelids of this poem —
and neither can he.

I want to be beautiful for you.
And so I write these words, which are green with home.
I can't love you forever, but I can love you now:
and I do. And for a moment,
I will be beautiful for you.

Barents

You know,
my writing would be nothing without you.
I mean this prosaically — quite literally.
I couldn't write the lines about how my words
are linked to that someone
who will cry the last tear on earth
without you.

Really, my writing would be nothing without you.
You made the difference in my life
we can call poetry.
I believe you understand that now.
And I hope you understand why this poem is in so larger a part silence —
why it's prosaic.

There are certain things between us.
We have, as they say, a history.
(They say so many stupid things.)
But I love you like the rain
which envelopes the town as it moves on through it
and which touches so many things with one touch.

There are certain things between us.
An ochre car, a desert and, today,
a hundred miles of silence.
And I may be wrong, but I still believe what I once said to you —
that between us, from now on,
things will always be totally cool.

You probably don't know those lines by Pasternak
which roughly translate as:
you took down from the shelf the book of my life
and blew the dust from the name.
Well, the book is still, in some sense, lying there,
and my name blows in the dust
but your breath disturbs all that is best in me,
and carries me away from myself
across a hundred miles of silence.

A hundred miles, a hundred silences — and a word.
There are certain things between us.
I say so many stupid things,

but this, at least, is true:
you made the distance in my life
that poetry calls me.

I've seen beautiful things.
But you know, they would be nothing without you.
Of course the day would be a day — that is endless.
But it would not be the same day.
The night would be a night,
but it would never be this night —
it would not be this long, inescapable night.

My biography is relatively unimportant to me.
I claim no power for myself
except a power over words
to write truthfully about certain things,
and about things which are uncertain
to write ambivalently.

A power over words is a gift.
It's impersonal, like the rain.
Sometimes you walk through it, sometimes run from it.
You know things could be a different way.
But, like the rain, I love you:
eventually, doubt becomes irrelevant,
and if you're a puzzle, you're a puzzle to which I'll stay faithful
for the rest of my life —
you and I, we're totally cool.

You will not be the last person I love,
and you weren't the first that I loved.
But you changed me —
took down that book of my life from its shelf —
and made love possible.

There are certain things between us.
The Barents, the Pacific, the English Channel —
literal distances, at times, only a metaphor
could surmount. But we had the metaphors,
or, if we didn't have them, we made them.
And in this case, I know what those metaphors are called.

Now, you're cast up to where
you always wanted to be —
but the sea is still moving.

And you know, perhaps more than anyone, the colour of my eyes;
and how if I'm to be truthful,
I'll recall that any gaze is a metaphor.

You give me the simplest things — a desire
to form these words in line from left to right
or, with a Zen simplicity,
to be through the whole day
a single piece of the day.
And you have made of me
something slight and irretrievable
like the passing of a shower of rain
over the silence of a hundred miles.

Simone Weil said 'Separation is love'.
Forgive the prosaic nature of this poem
and the fact that it is for the most part silence.
At its base
the last human tear on earth is forming.

Maborosi

It is very still, and often she looks through the window:
but he does not come back, but neither does he explain
why, that evening, he walked along the tracks
and didn't stop walking even though
there was the sound of the train's klaxon and the
heavy sliding squeal of the coming
locomotive braking.

It is a subtle and an elegant film.
One may call it a meditation on loss.
Several times one sees the fume of a kettle
in the foreground or the background:
I didn't hear boiling on the soundtrack,
but I saw the vapour,
and I thought of the spectral nature of process,
of real events which we don't notice,
except sometimes, when they form our heart.

While I was being streamlined on the train that day
I was reading the paper.
I had a copy of *El Espinazo del Diablo (The Devil's Backbone)*
which I wanted to lend to my friend,
Claudia. An oil tanker had broken in two
and sunk off Iberia, and I read about
flags of convenience and greed and oil;
later I saw a photo of a white seabird
only its head and upper neck not slicked in crude,
and I thought how beautiful was the metallic blue
of its round eye, staring out at me.

'Espinazo' I assume shares a root with our English 'spine'.
In the same *Independent*, I saw an article on the launch
of a new game, speaking of unprecedented depths of immersion.
The piece detailed pinnacles in the rise of games,
a desire to move beyond shoot-'em-ups and brain candy,
and these things floated in my mind in Guillermo del Toro's film
with the ghost who the children called "the one who sighs";
I noticed, too, how a certain game was described
as the killer app for the Nintendo Gameboy.

The paper, and time, and the train, and words, and skies
drifted on that day. There was information

on Glock pistols, a carnage of paparazzi, Heckler & Koch,
but I thought of Santi, the murdered little boy
in *El Espinazo del Diablo*, who walked everywhere
with a fumerole of blood floating upwards
from his broken cranium, his skin very white
because his body lay at the bottom of a watertank,
and his eyes remarkably similar in quality
to those of the seabird all glutted up with oil,
a strange
mismash of tar and feathers,
as if we had taken revenge upon it
for collaborating with an enemy.

My work that day was to be
anatomical drawings for *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*,
and Renaissance sepia paper and ink studies
superimposed themselves upon my memory, and marine creatures,
crustacea with their shells, and vertebrae,
bone, and dream, and organ,
until the weird loaded rose of the brain
upon its thorny spine
holds up my head, and my mouth, my un-kissed lips,
through which trains are moving
diesels and electrics, freight units, as if
out of a raw tunnel. You know, it is my belief
a poet does not merely reflect reality,
but constructs it.
And this is where beauty comes in,
and the freedom, not to change things, but
to set them free.

In my novel, *Dustless*, my child hero, Zysoshin,
dreams of a place which does not move
and in which he can store
the moments he loves. Well, Zysoshin's fate
is a terrible one, but I imagine one may understand
his desire to secure some domain
vacuum sealed and unmoving
to which he may venture always
and retrieve
the delicate conquests of his being,
the times he was beautiful,

when he in his life was good, and in this,
of course, he is like me.

Alas, it is a naive wish, impractical and if you
think of it a moment,
entirely unfeasible. It is not for human beings
to achieve stillness, because life is not still;
not even death is still, I'm afraid.
The closest I can imagine to realising Zy's dream
of a perfected memory, a house for beauty,
is inevitably dynamic, awry with drift,
like the candles put in little paper or wooden boats
and floated on the river, lit,
to commemorate
Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

I mean, I suppose, this —
we know nothing, or rather what we know constantly
eludes us. Once, I wrote about love, and a summer,
and how at that time
I thought like a river. Now I am dry,
my thoughts are dust. But I cannot
grieve over that because grief itself
is also dust, and as dust
is blown by the unowned wind
free and without destination.

Even to dream of stillness is to be dreaming —
mobile, and with the illegal
happenstance of dreams. The oil on the beach,
and Santi, the “one who sighs”, they are our natural
nightmares, and belong to us.
When the rain falls, there is no one there
to collect it; and when the thaw comes
no one can really, truly, remember the snow.

It is my ambition
to set the world free. And this poem, *Maborosi*,
is both my attempt to engineer that liberty and
the mark of my failure. Only for this moment
can it be numbered among
the undestroyed. Memory

is an outpost, a buttress, a child
watching *Thunderbirds* or *Stingray*. Zysoshin's dream
cannot contain Zysoshin, the boy himself
is inside the dream inside him, there is no
end to that, one falls
ravaged and cruelly salient through all the fragments
of plum blossoms and chattering trains.

It is less fantastic, in a way, to believe
in ourselves than to believe in ghosts.
Thoughts haunt us, and one speaks
of a haunting beauty. Those irradiant ones who despite
our laws
persist — we might say, unnaturally —
who are they? Destructionless,
the river destroys,
and leaves no footprints,
but is dotted
and speckled
with moving blossoms.

And those irradiated ones who according
to our laws have died
what possesses them
to maintain their hold upon us —
we, the innocently and unspeakably greedy,
whose very kisses
are stolen on the breath of others?

In the film, *Maborosi*, she seems to walk upon
her own reflection in the water,
with a lavender sea sky above her
and a fire with fume of black smoke
similarly duplicated in the tidal pool
at evening, when the day
mirrors the night.

In such reflections, one may perceive
a kind of symmetry, but the film
is very deep. And of course,
it is only a story. We know the woman upon the screen
is not the widow of the suicide,

but the actress, Makikio Esumi, who
has taken on the role.
She will not be a widow when the director cuts.
And she was never, anyway, the widow
of *Maborosi* — was she?

Yet it is serene, precise and
without affectation.
There is another scene which is simply
a light bulb, placed there by an unseen hand,
rocking beside a clock upon a drawer
towards stillness.

But what of those — those innumerable ones —
who do not move
phantasmally, upon the screen?
What part will they take on,
who will they be
yesterday, tomorrow and today?
Will they be us? And will they
play out the nightfall, the scent of thyme, and the stars?

Siberia

I know tonight that I'll never reach tomorrow.
And I won't meet you there.
And so the poem becomes unendurable, and I write it.
Tonight, I know that we won't meet tomorrow.

I love you because you are unprecedented,
and because your loneliness is incomparable.
While the rest of us sleep,
you are the only one who stays awake
for the morning to come to, and be,
and you feed it from your small breast
as if it was your own child.

I can't share in your loneliness,
not even with one of these words
dipped in milk and silence.
No one has been you before,
and the sound of their human voices falls like rain.

I have run out of warnings,
I have almost run out of shame.
I feel drugged and torpid and stupid —
sometimes you become so tired from sleeping
when you wake, it's just like another dream.

On Venus, the snow is metallic, and it falls constantly.
But on Earth, the ground is warm, and rises like bread.
I love you because you are so slender,
and because — unlike a thirst — you cannot be slaked.
You cannot rest and not be yourself,
and even the ocean will come to you, asking for peace.

The night is never alone now.
Someone is always looking up, watching fading stars.
You are a dawn that aches not to have broken,
you are only a dawn, and that's why I love you —
you cannot but break, and the wave of you
is always travelling through fresh space, making it new.

I've seen the darkness of the light that rests against you,
flows over your skin like smoke,
and sometimes I want to cry out a warning —
but how could I warn you against your own beauty
or order you not to be beautiful
or the storm not to be a storm?

On Venus, the snow is metallic, and falls constantly.
When the poem is endurable, I won't write it.
On Earth, we survive nothing: we are the only alone.
Night drowns in reflections of lime trees and traffic queues.
There are cars in the rain, and the flowers of headlamps on glass
are like sea-anemones, or fireworks
molten in prime.

I know tonight that I'll never reach tomorrow,
and that we won't meet there.
Sometimes you become so dead from living,
when you rise, it's just like another death.

I've warned you, and I'm ashamed.
On Venus, the snow is metallic, and falls constantly.
Even as the poem, I can't be your beauty —
I can't be your loneliness, you are so alone.

I love the plain emptiness of my life in these days —
a Siberian openness —
my life is sweet and unbearable,
so when I speak, only you can bear my words,
not bitterly, to another world.

For us, the sun will never rise again.
The stars won't rise or set.
There will never be another dawn.
Tonight, I know that we won't reach tomorrow,
or meet there.

Everything will be lost, nothing will be replaced —
this is why I love you now,

under these great, open skies of time.
The storm will be a storm,
the wave will fall as a wave,
and you will be beautiful.

I know tonight that we won't meet tomorrow.
I love you because you are unprecedented,
because you walk through us as if through the day,
and around you, our human voices fall like rain.

Goodnight

It was such a beautiful evening,
the spring dusk,
the softness of the streetlamps,
and the way the street led me
to a 17-year-old boy
who had light in his veins,
and who gazed into that pale,
white-haunted indigo
feeling the air open up,
tender and red, the dark
gash, where the lips
of the future
kissed him.

Those lights in his veins.
And I am so very tired tonight,
I have — what — maybe another hour
of wakefulness to write in.
After the sea of the world
has washed me up
here, serene and exhausted,
salt in my hair
and all the past
drying on my skin.

It is not that something is missed, or lost:
it is something which cannot be gained, or found.
It cannot be possessed, or owned,
conquered, or won.
But it grazes the heart, sometimes:
and the heart grazes it.

In a world all touch,
who is left untouched;
in a world all loneliness
who is not alone?
I speak of something which is not
to be captured, or enshrined,
it is not literal at all
but as I say:
there was salt in my hair,
and on my skin
the past was still drying.

Forgive me if this poem seems abstruse:
it seems an odd way
to celebrate so lovely an evening
with a line of words so hazy
their subject melts, like the streetlights
in with the moonlight,
and my path home through the dusk
can only be suggested.

I am so tired,
I have only minutes left now.
And yet, I want to write, and write.
And you might ask: of what?
What is it you want to write?
What is your subject?
But I would simply reply:
he had lights in his veins.

Perhaps there are moments when all of life
hangs and drifts in a loose solution
or when a person
prickles with revelations,
and the spring evening
gathers around, like guests at a party,
listening to one of their number
who has hushed them with the promise
of something worth hearing
but is yet
to speak.

The dead are formed, but the living
rush by them.
Perhaps it was a moment
like Pierre, or Prince Bolkonsky —
(was that his name? —
Prince Andrei's name?) —
I forget, or am unclear) —
but a moment
so fresh,
the dew still on it,
when the soldier lay down,

on his back, in the grass,
and the shipwrecked woman, on her belly,
rose up
out of the seaming foam.

There is a Madonna of the fishermen,
a statue on the ocean bed
who waits among the currents, arms outstretched,
gathering the tides;
and on a certain day
divers garland her with flowers,
a figure who may be reached
by prayer or scuba.

On every other day of the year, I guess,
she is unseen
but stands upon the sands
like a heart.
Well: so he had lights in his veins.
And at dusk, one spring,
he thought he was walking home
through a white-haunted
indigo darkness.

What happened next, I cannot say —
a life, of course.
Now I must sleep.
For any person
a moment is a grave.
And I hate to leave
the Prince lying there
in his so-Russian rigor —
but I'm so tired.
In the morning, I will wake,
and rise, and work.

And for those who wait
for the luminous conclusion
I bid you
goodnight.

Notes on recent work

These poems are all post-*a.m.*, with the oldest of them dating from 2000. It's probable that most of them are not in a 'final' form, and so I apologise to readers for their provisional state.

In one way, I think a writing life – any life – is seamless. I suppose, for myself, I create a myth of organisation (a system of priorities and objectives) which plays its part in encouraging me to write. It may be quite arbitrary, but it is effective.

In terms of this myth, then, I look at *a.m.* as a book which clears the ground for other work. Looking over the poems I've selected for this section of the website, I would say some of them build on the poetry of *a.m.*, attempting to deepen and enrich it, while others signal the opening up of new paths.

I associate much of the poetry of *a.m.* with a kind of compositional intensity. They were fierce poems to write. Technically, many of them were built upon the statement and restatement of themes, the repetition of phrases, and the rotation of themes and phrases through different semantic planes. In my own experience of the poems, this writing process gave several of them a kind of heaviness, a mass – *Ronin*, for example, or *Pacific Union*, or *26 Letters*.

Some of the poetry written after *a.m.* seeks to extend and work out this 'heavy' mode of writing (*Human*, for example, and *Total Eclipse* and *Partial Eclipse*). Other recent poems respond quite dialectically to that heaviness, and are atmospherically much more relaxed and lightly moving.

In terms of possible collections, I am accumulating work which (at the moment at least) seems destined for at least two very different books. One of these books exists more in terms of my desires and ambitions rather than in realised poetry. Very simply, I want to write a book which is extremely positive about humanity, which is meant to inspire and encourage – an idealistic book, which is relaxed about pleasure, politically open and optimistic. I have no definite title for this rather spectral book, but *Radiant* is a possibility...

I am planning a more realisable collection, to be called *Metropolitan*. In very broad terms, I view *Metropolitan* as a return to the theme of cultural malaise explored in the unpublished *Dash* poems. I'm thinking of dividing *Metropolitan* into two sections (and possibly even two separate volumes) – *The Politics of the Sublime* and *The Politics of the Mundane*.

I had hoped to make one of *Metropolitan*'s substantial poems, *M81*, available to visitors to this site, but for reasons of length and other considerations have been unable to do so. However, I am able to make available other poems currently earmarked for *Metropolitan* – *The 20 Sleepless Years*, *Do You Believe in the Spirits of the Mirror?* and *Coriolanus*, for example.

The germinal event of *The 20 Sleepless Years* was an article I read on the publication of work on the human genome. The title refers to the notion that if a person were to speak all the letters which make up the genetic code describing the human

genome, it would take 20 years without sleep.

At around the time of the publication of the human genome, there was a lot of debate, and somewhere I read a statement to the effect that the genetic sequence of the genome provided us with the most complete picture of humanity ever recorded.

The 20 Sleepless Years has a rather science-fiction premise. The notion is that a genetically engineered post-human will arise, and it is to this coming post-human that the poem is addressed.

Coriolanus is interesting to me because of its quite symphonic form. It develops three distinct registers. This allows for an element of ironic counterpoint. All the different 'movements' of the poem were heartfelt – it is only when the poem is seen as a whole that the schisms between the impulses which inspired each movement can be seen.

Do You Believe in the Spirits of the Mirror? has a theatrical, ventriloquial element to it which I like.

Of the other poems, *Barents* is one I feel is important in the development of my work.

One aim of mine has been to achieve a greater plainness in my writing. This is probably dependent on a particular frame of mind, which has to do with a certain serenity and acceptance, and a falling away of self-consciousness. (There is a great poem by Mayakovsky, written shortly before his suicide, in which he seems to achieve a moving stasis, and he writes: 'In hours like these you get up and you speak / To the ages, to history, and to the universe.' The mood of Mayakovsky's poem is really unique, I know of nothing else like it: I suppose he was about to bring his life to a conclusion, and this led him to write conclusively. I love the bareness of that poem, its wryness, tenderness, the way it arrests itself at the end with those lines I've quoted)...

If plainness has been one aim of my work, another is musicality. Unfortunately, apart from *Coriolanus*, I can't share any other examples of poems which develop musically – no others are in a sufficiently finished state. By 'music', I mean a singing quality to the lines, a rhythmic energy, a heightened attention to sound qualities, an acoustic playfulness – as against, say, *Barents*' simplicity and essentialism.

Music – particularly pop music – has been one of the great inspirations of my life, and I hope to incorporate more musical elements into my later work.

Several of the poems in this section are love poems of one kind or another (*Siberia*, *Total Eclipse*, *Partial Eclipse*, *Human*, *Jasmine*, *Barents*). They represent a different impulse in my work to many of the poems which will go into *Metropolitan*.

I would say that there is a certain violence in my poetry, a violence which the poetry at once feeds upon and seeks to escape. The spirit of violence I'm discussing is onerous, it wears one out. It is only liberating in a restricted way. It is difficult to imagine violence as generous. One immolates problems, including the problem of oneself, in violence: or that is perhaps the dream of violence.

I suppose I see the violence as something one must pass through. If you don't encounter violence, serenity is diminished; if you experience violence, or experience

violently, then serenity (if it comes) is amplified.

The poetry I'm intending to go into the first section of *Metropolitan (The Politics of the Sublime)* represents one end of my writing – a violent, critical, antagonistic, poetry in which the individual is seen as menacing and terroristic – a consuming and a self-consuming thing. The individual grows sublime, which (to adapt an insight of Coleridge's) means that the individual destroys any means of comparison with itself. *Coriolanus*, with its strand of despair and nihilism, a desire to disengage, and *The 20 Sleepless Years*, too, in its own way, embody an unease with this consumerist individual – a type of individual which at all times bears the conditions of its own crisis within itself, and which also brings a kind of fatuous doom in its shadow.

Poems like *Barents* and *Siberia* move towards a different end, or move at least in a different way. While I hope all my poetry is a form of contribution of one kind or another, my own belief is that a poem like *Siberia* forms an inherently greater contribution than a poem like *The 20 Sleepless Years*.

Fortunately, however, I will never be and can never be called upon to make a decision over the relative worth of my poems. Even if the world could be reduced to a situation of 'either/or', the poems don't belong to me – they never have done, and they never will do.

To whom, after all, do poems belong?

Michael Ayres, June 2003.