

## **Poems**

Timothy Chappell

## **The Exiles**

*Still the blood is strong*

There every foot of field-end matters,  
each river-pool is itself;  
every stone is a sacred standing stone,  
every hill a *sith* of the old ones;  
here each street is the same  
for mile after mile.

It only feels like what they had cannot be lost.  
It only feels abiding unchanging home.  
The bulldozer and the eviction writ,  
north and south, work the same.

They walked into London's sameness  
with heather-stalks still in their socks,  
the plough-callus still on the insides of their thumbs,  
the mark of the sheep-tick still fading behind the knee.

*Kincardine O'Neil, Aberdeenshire, 7 July 2008*

**Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 1264-1278**

Attendants, take him up. And pity on me,  
Pity and compassion on my plight,  
All while the unpitying gods indifferently  
Watch these things unfold under their sight.  
They make us and they claim the name of fathers  
Then stand afar and watch our suffering.

No one knows what the future time will offer;  
The present time, for us, means suffering,  
And for the gods means shame;  
It means worse than any human suffering  
For him on whom this doom of anguish came.

Girl, come away, and leave this house behind.  
New shapes of enormous death now fill your mind,  
Novelties of agony, pain beyond all use—  
And nothing in all this that is not Zeus.

26.6.08

## **Sunday Evening, Dundee Law**

In dusk-glow at the War Memorial  
dazed smokers lean on churning lurid cars,  
review the week.

Beyond the huddled smirr-grey tenements,  
amid the ancient chaos of the sea,  
the Bell Rock starts its blink.

The Chinese lantern of a rain-fat cumulus  
mirrored in still River  
flows on by.

Always comes the rainbow, always, after storms,  
the washed-clear and forgiven  
cloud-lit sky.

9.3.08

## **Boxing Day Morning**

Yesterday the feast  
today the penance

yesterday the spree  
today the dearth

yesterday reunions—ex-wife, ex-child, ex-brother—  
today we lick new hurts,  
old lovers who know too well where to wound each other.

The hint-gift tracksuit waits, but it's too wet to bother.  
A sea of wrapping-paper stretches door to hearth.

But lift your wine-furred eyes above the earth,  
above our lost cold dawn, chill-drizzle-dim,  
see Christ enthroned among the golden seraphim.

*26.12.07*

## Christmas Wishes

By popular request

Captain Hook will replace his hook with a tickly feather duster  
and pass around the gobstoppers with the Lost Boys.

As a seasonal gesture

the Daleks will change their war-cry to “Have a nice day”  
and The Joker will actually tell one.

By popular request

global warming will global cool

and the beef-farms of the Amazon will be turned back into rain-forests.

As a seasonal gesture

entropy will take a holiday in St Tropez

and dropped toast will consistently fall butter side up.

By popular request

and as a seasonal gesture

lost children will be found

and brutal feuds be ended;

the inconsolable will be consoled,

the outcast and downcast be welcomed in,

and something unthinkably and invisibly vast

will pass into a space

invisibly small.

If you only make one wish this Christmastide

make sure it's for something impossible.

*18.12.07*

*The desire of all nations shall come*

*Haggai 2.7*

## **Buskers, Buchanan Street, Glasgow**

To grey-suit minds set on trains  
in grey-suit business streets  
silky jazz unfolds from the sheets  
in shimmering scarlet skeins.

Jumping the bars of the notes  
transgressing performance space  
a wee girl hides her face  
as she donates.

14.12.07

## **Dundee September Haiku**

The echoing choirs of the geese  
unseen in a weeping sky  
return announcing autumn.

18.12.07

## The Box

My love met me within a darkened wood  
where no light was: I knew her by her hand:  
but my grip slipped, her presence vanished, and  
till dripping dawn I waited where I stood.

I saw my love upon a city street,  
amid a thousand others gave her chase:  
I found her longed-for look in many a face,  
ten-score half-echoes, but not one complete.

I woke and washed and worried at my error,  
a looking-glass behind me and before me;  
ninety-nine times repeated there I saw me—  
and then *her* image in the hundredth mirror.

But my quest and her trail alike turned cold.  
I've put my memories of her in a box  
to hide inside a drawerful of socks  
and finger through when all grows stale and old,

and I have lost the living patterns of  
her stance, her grace, her glance so once adored;  
have settled for sure less not dubious more,  
have lived as if I was not made for love.

When I began so filled with venturous fire  
how comes my world to dust and grit and sweat?  
Is real-but-paltry really all we get?  
How can we live so wide of heart's desire?

9.12.07

## **The king is dead**

Another day, another execution,  
another round of routine suffering.  
What could a corpse solve by its dissolution?  
How could a tortured dying mean a king?

The priest-king who fought off, in Nemi wood,  
eternally recurrent suffering  
kept memory of his predecessor's blood  
just till another killed him and was king.

The Roman road once forested with crosses  
where rebel slaves hung parched and suffering.  
Did that world stop to register their losses,  
or when one died, cry out "Long live the king"?

Each day we take another paper's weight  
of crushing slow unspecial suffering,  
nor will our tired old sun discriminate  
an ordinary dying from a king's.

Yet still today we bless one who, accursed  
for hanging on a cross by hell enringed,  
by dying once all dying has reversed.  
The King of Kings is dead; long live the King.

*Easter Sunday 2007*

## **Keep away from Buses**

Given the overlapping  
of our living that has happened,  
Given there's no reshaping  
the once-only we're still making,

Given all my bearings  
would swing lost without your northing,  
Here is what I'm asking  
you're not gambling or risking:

Save the lives of spiders  
Don't walk under ladders  
Don't change plugged-in fuses  
Keep away from buses.

22.7.06

*The Children's Cemetery, Balgay*

Parents' sentences on marble;  
mildewed dolls beneath grown trees:  
O you who mark the sparrow's fall,  
did you not notice these?

25.8.06

## **Glen Living**

A river can run a thousand years through rock  
not altering its course but only deepening it:  
not so on the aimless free-meandering plain.

A farmer can lose a decade on one slope,  
sink in one gorse-choked scarp a half-century's sweat,  
yet not grudge the son who left all his random gain.

Think then how deep this glen goes in those who home here,  
whose thought's this forest, this skyline their subconscious,  
whose dream is this buzzard's wheel on this heathered moraine.

*Tarfside, Glen Esk, 14.9.03*

## News

The change comes on so suddenly  
the moment of transition  
the phone or letter butts into  
the same old stale position

you pick it up quite casually  
not knowing what is in it  
while clock-hands drag and dust-motes float  
life changes in one minute

8.4.06

## **Allt a' Mhuillin, April**

For the first time, the birchwood *not* by night,  
path-bogs not sealed by corrugated ice;  
for the first time, pied wagtails in the corries.  
Pink sunshine slants through innocuous sleet-flurries.

Here on the Hut's rock-seats, snow-stripped, sun-warmed—  
was it here we half-froze in the January storm?  
Where the crampon drives through slush to brown-baked scree—  
was that our icefall-route in February?

Did we tread here a snow that none had trod?  
Did we glimpse here the hidden face of God?

8/4/06

## *The Vision*

Do not expect it in the green of May.  
No cleanness in that growth that parturition  
as pure as clean as death.

Nor in the bland and flyblown August sun,  
in hot banality upon a balding lawn,  
in non-event of sweltering desiccation.

Ignore October's blustering warm winds,  
rain-rotted fruit let clog the orchard paths;  
it brings no insight eaten.

But when the bloodline's thin as mercury  
when ice flowers white on wood and stars the stream  
then head up through the beeswarm of the snow  
then climb the Hill of Vision.

## **Sidlaws Benediction**

Blessed be God  
*Blessed be God for ever.*

Blessed be God on the burnsidies and on the braesides  
Blessed be God on the bramble-track, and at the ruined tower  
Blest be the God of old kirks and of older abbeys  
Blest be the God of hill-forts and stones of power  
*Blessed be God for ever.*

Blessed be God with the incense of resinous woodsmoke  
Blessed be God when the sun makes the wet gorse steam  
Blessed be God in the silence of fox and buzzard  
Blessed be God in the silly pheasant's scream  
*Blessed be God for ever.*

Blessed be God from heath-hills to barley-fields  
Blessed be God for wild strawberries in half-tame gardens  
Blessed be God in byres and dung-misted farmyards  
Blessed be God at the firesides glimpsed through curtains  
*Blessed be God for ever.*

Blessed be God for the airs that are over the Sidlaws  
Blessed be God for the waters that run through the Sidlaws  
Blessed be God for the rocks that lie under the Sidlaws  
Blessed be God for the land and for those who love it  
*Blessed be God for ever.*

Blessed be God in Eassie and in Nevay  
Blessed be God in Auchterhouse and Flocklones  
Blessed be God in Kincaldrum and Tullybaccart  
Blessed be God while the light lightens Black Hill's stones  
*Blessed be God for ever.*

Blessed be God for the sacrifice of creation  
Enormity of subtraction from Himself  
Rending away, as a rib, from His fullness of being—  
Self-gift, self-abnegation forsigning Eucharist—  
By his own null-black absence making Space  
That grace and savagery, danger and delight  
Might co-engender World:

The gift of Him Who Is  
This something not Him  
He who is all in all  
And will re-call at last this Other Side  
Immortal Bride.

Now, in this one time and this one place,  
Break pace:  
Breathe in, and know yourself  
Immensely loved.

*Blessed be God for ever.*

15.1.2006

## **I am a mirror**

I am a mirror  
faced towards the wall  
I bounce no sight

I am a mirror  
angled into earth  
I give no light

I am a mirror  
stained and cracked and smeared  
my glance is dim

I am a mirror  
point me at my source  
and I blaze Him.

This is the famous glass  
that turneth all.

16.1.06

### **Carse of Stirling**

For a moment of roadside relief just past Thornhill  
you clunk from the car and you hope nothing else goes by:

and there on the verge, as the first frosty inklings of dawn  
groped at the giant flat fields and the stands of Scots pine,  
you watch as the curlews sweep and the lapwings spiral  
out of the night-chill's thigh-mists into the sky.

Then you jump back in and you blow on your trembling hands;  
you slam in a Waterboys tape and you make the car fly,

shooting the corners like rapids to where Ben Ledi—  
brindled by snow-melt, pastelled by soft morning rain—  
comes sudden a gift of vision to the eye.

And so you keep going.  
You have been heading, you are heading still,  
towards these very same hills  
for all of your life.

1.2.04

*Faith*

Not the comfort of fantasy  
but the stinging salt of the true:

not what you would have asked for  
but answers that question you:

not the armchair's complacency  
but the tightrope's uncomfortable view:

exactly what you wanted  
and yet you never quite knew:

the utterly unexpected  
Who has always expected you.

11.01.04

*Haiku: Christmas Tree*

Through the winter house  
seeps from where the presents hide  
scent of cut spring sap

10.01.04

## *Leaving Dundee*

We build lives where we can: in factory towns  
or willow-hollows on the dusty Downs,  
in sandstone's gold or brick's suburban browns.  
Roots anywhere are preferable to none:  
your roots grew best beneath a late-night sun.

Mountains on one side and multis on the other,  
harsh in its welcoming yet brusquely kind—  
home of the friend sticks closer than a brother,  
town of the tunes stick longest in your mind—  
this is where you were kicked down, then recovered,  
hope-enticed on, then tripped up from behind.

You know the line's first bend will end the scene,  
your River and your wooded hills be gone,  
your living places turn to what has been.  
The diminutions of the South  
are coming on.

*19 December 2003*

### **Prayer at Baldowrie Symbol Stone**

The Holy being still with us though unknown,  
To keep your ever watching listening care  
Over indifferent lives and living air  
Set a strong good angel in this stone.

*Baldowrie, Strathmore, 27.12.03*

### ***Handy Christmas Tip***

Dogs can't see in colour,  
So for Fido's Christmas gift  
Buy him a *black and white* TV;  
He won't resent your thrift.

23 December, 2003

### **Parenting skills**

*Bad* parenting:  
you go out of the house  
so you can ignore your children.

*Good* parenting:  
you stay in the house  
so your children can ignore you.

11.11.03

## Highland Envoi

Before you sleep for good, remember this:

the moss-soft bridge within the dripping wood,  
the wild catch of sea air blown on high;

night-climbing up, through ice-storm, to the cornices,  
the starlit snow-peak shining in night sky;

the slopes you charged, when young, because you could;  
the summer's sunlight on your hills of bliss.

2 April 2002

## Beethoven, Opus 69

The dim church was unwontedly full:

with the chess-precise step of a piano,  
with the ballet-hard glide of a cello:

with the secret unspeakable movements  
of a mind from the year 1800;

with the hushed and attentive longing  
of a hundred quite secular listeners.

Is then the truest religion  
nothing but silence and music?

1.11.02

## **Goldfish**

I'm glad to be a goldfish, me  
Around my bowl I swim  
Each round's a total novelty  
It does help to be dim

21 December 2001

## **The right train**

*For Claudia*

I've done some bad things and I've done some mad things.  
I've done some things that got me in the stew.  
Many of my options are not for sane adoption;  
but I did a good thing when I married you.

Some people's choices are based on hearing voices.  
Some read the stars, or the leaves in their Typhoo.  
I treat life's junctions with minimal compunction;  
but I took the right fork when I married you.

We have shared the sunlight, and the sudden-failed umbrella.  
We have sat out winters that stormed out of the blue.  
Warmth drives branches upwards; cold pushes roots deeper.  
What would I have done, if I hadn't married you?

Life is all alternatives, but hopeless information.  
Unmarked and unsignalled, and too many for clear view,  
trains line every platform through the vastness of life's station;  
but I caught the right train the day I married you.

Sept 24 2001

# **Breakfast in Bed**

*for Claudia, 27.8.99*

Is eleven years' length too long for a conversation?  
After so long, has every good line been said?  
Does our contract need undecennial renegotiation?  
Believing not, I bring you breakfast in bed.

Is every steady a frozen situation?  
Are stones of indifference hardened from gift-bread?  
Does love, in short, know time's devaluation?  
Believing not, I bring you breakfast in bed.

*1 September 1999*

## **January Sales**

In the sales you mustn't miss  
at the prices you can't beat  
buy the things that you don't want  
with the money you've not got.

1.1.99

## **The new *Genesis***

In the beginning was the physics  
and it was good

then there was biochemistry  
and it was good too

then there was some zoology  
also good

followed by palaeontology, archaeology and history  
all excellent in their ways

and currently it's autobiography  
better still,

except that what follows  
is autobiography becomes history  
and then there's only more physics

**29.12.98**

## *By this time of day*

By this time of day, perhaps, you are  
combing your hair.

You are pouring your morning tea  
in another city.

And I stranded in this one  
watch for the post.

## Nostos

*Get thee out of thy country... unto a land that I will shew thee*

Leave your homes here for your truer home.  
Leave your hills (their mists around your heart)  
for those hills whence your mists of longing start  
though you have never come.

Mist-lifting day  
will turn your face toward the homeward way.

Leave your work unfinished.

There is time,  
where you are going, for the weaving mind  
to make and remake reasoning and rhyme  
a perfectness remaining undiminished.  
To find as diamond what is lost as clay  
turn your face and walk the homeward way.

And leave your friends.

One only you require,  
that lover whose fierce heat etched in you's fire  
that moulds your melting gold to bride-ring bends.  
From marriage known to Marriage none can say  
turn your face and take the homeward way.

Estranged by this sweet sudden discontent  
shake off all exile-lands. Your time is spent  
of wandering the mazes of life's Lent:  
Easter calls you straight from every stray.  
Rejoice and turn your face the homeward way.

## **In the Gallery**

Our looking has worn out the famous pictures,  
cut them down to our small, weary size.

So swap them. Bring

new startling innocent colours  
fresh and new to startled innocent eyes.

21.7.98

## Bowland

Winding slowly northwards, vaguely lost  
in grey october country, through the midst  
of smoky indistinctness of the hills.

Though mirror-river shape the slickskin beech  
arching leaf for leaf,  
reflection spills

till out of blurs and shifts  
comes clarity:  
the sun on the road to the sea  
upon the hills.

Cycling from Whitewell to Lee Fell,  
26.10.97

## Shakespearean Limericks

- (I) Juliet's family's strife  
didn't stop her from being Romeo's wife;  
it was surfeit of suitors  
and ill-advised tutors  
and doing for herself with a knife.
- (II) Ant was playing sweet duets with Cleo:  
their *thés-dansants* were *molto con brio*.  
But to Julius' clasps  
she preferred little asps,  
thus preventing him making a trio.
- (III) Henry the Sixth's holy heart  
lacked the courage a crown should impart;  
yet his reign wasn't brief—  
it endured past belief,  
till the Yorks cut him into three parts.
- (IV) Henry Fourth (the First Part) said, "That's that!  
Get a life! Be a prince, not a prat!"  
Hal replied, "Sure, don't worry, Dad,  
but where is the hurry, Dad?  
There's your whole Second Part before that."
- (V) "Let's sit down," said Richard the Second  
as Bolingbroke's destiny beckoned:  
"My holiday in Eire  
makes my last hopes threadbarer.  
Still, being King's worse than he's reckoned."

## *A Prayer for my Daughter*

Pour upon my daughter's face  
all the rainstorm of your love:

while she shapes, blind oceans deep,  
the ink-black element of sleep,

though the whirling earth may move,  
cast a stillness on this place.

17.7.97



## Ghoul

On a clear but moonless night  
(midnight blue between  
black shapes of undrawn curtains)  
I will slide into your dream.  
Do not attempt to move.  
My smile is pallid, formal, shows my teeth;  
my soft laugh is a dry, well-mannered cough.  
I smile because  
as I am sure you realise  
you're trapped.

Yes, do turn to the wall if it will help you,  
or (to be more exact) if you think it helps;  
do wrestle the heavy blankets over you,  
to draw around your head and (ah) your throat  
the dulling warmth of slumber.  
Then, absolute silence seems your best chance.  
Like a game: the first one to break it is out?  
But, you see, you lose  
because you breathe.  
Nor will your blankets keep out  
my fingers  
my teeth  
insubstantial.

And now it is time to begin. First, reactions.  
Perhaps you can reach the light-switch on the wall  
(you know where it is, you can see it in your head)  
perhaps you can reach the switch before I reach you.  
Perhaps: but, as you're aware,  
The light-switch is  
behind me.

## Scan

My waving hands and arms  
are caught in your searchlight's throb  
they paddle away from the whiteness of your noise.

I am inspected by echoes  
I am found in an attitude of prayer  
my spine my signature tune.

So you may hear my picture,  
you may see the sounds you bounce  
off my bones or the four palpitating  
chambers of my heart:

shadowy prognostics of the day  
my monochrome thin frequencies  
will bleed themselves into your roar of colour

## Oxford out of term

The reckless heartfelt alliances, the smart things said,  
the coffee-euphoric, late-night theories mastered:

in the intimate space between two bending heads  
in a solitary breeze in an empty cloister,

on green baize staple-pierced, behind glassless shutters,  
the last of last term's students' posters flutter.

## *Music Recalled*

Music is what gives forms to the unconscious:  
forgotten music finally played again  
decodes from subliminal shapes a thought and a feel  
I had not remembered having;

it reopens a scent-capsule of experience,  
freeze-frames for good one single carriage window  
out of the blurring rush of the storming train  
of months and weeks and days and hours and minutes:

it fixes, uniquely, how it smelt and sounded  
to be then, and to be listening to this.

The past is an abstraction, and past's self unknown;  
but beating now and here, in this same music,  
the laughing heart of then and there is caught,  
for one moment of pure precision, in pin-sharp focus:  
delightful the tricks the human mind plays on us.

24.12.95

## Assumption

*Mother of all on high, pray for us yet*

Nothing is left. The world's a corridor,  
vacant, echoing the great ones' passage through.  
It is closed doors in rows: behind them, murmuring  
of a second generation's other businesses.  
Nothing is left me here.

Once I felt the kick of God within:  
nothing else seems great once that has been.

Your will is done,  
and henceforth I will be  
a silent smiling lady in a tapestry.

Your will is done,  
and henceforth I am known  
as a painted tiptoe figure in a pointed arch of stone.

Your will be done:  
henceforth I watch with all  
God's heroes in their sad unsleeping vigil  
for earth's ball.

3-5.3.96

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June 1996

## The Last Temptation of Peter

*Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat:  
but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not.*

Between sentence and execution there is time  
to wonder if it will hurt, or feel like anything,  
to wonder what of me will be left behind-  
snapped into the promised light, or some pallid un-death,  
or merely into a fatuous nothingness?

Between sentence and execution there is still time  
to ask whether any will follow recalling me,  
to set myself at last my own life's riddle:  
was I right when the cockerel crowed; or was I right  
when the silver dawn overflowed the stone-grey garden?  
Am I a rock, or a shadow?  
Who has betrayed whom?

Between sentence and execution comes the time  
of cock-crow, but  
comes also the time of the seeing and the remembering  
his face in that silver dawn, so long ago now;  
comes the time for my last and for my first  
doxology of the Risen.  
No more. It is time to pray.

14-15.1.1997

## *Song for Winter Rain*

On the black hill and the brittle wood  
on the draggled heron by his unwatched mere  
on silent henhouses and unlit farms  
the rain pours down tonight  
but not in here.

On the oily roofs of locked-up factories  
on the steaming flanks of a ghost-train-vacant bus  
on potholed lanes orange-shadowed by springing trees  
the rain pours down tonight  
but not on us.

On blackhorse breakers no one ever sees  
on what the storm does solely for the storm  
on the empty decks of midnight's groping ships  
the rain pours down tonight  
but we keep warm.

So rub but briefly at the clammy pane.  
Spell jokes and songs; refill the cups again.  
Pile high the crammed log-basket: stoke: and let  
black hails hiss out their spite in our golden grate.

### **Spring Shower at Tulloch**

The sun's emerging spreads  
warm pungency of wet dog-rose  
slantwise across the sleepers'  
creosote airs.

Tulloch Station, Glen Spean, Invernessshire  
19.7.96

### **Cue music, cue eagles**

The moment when the cloud unveils the moon,  
the moment when the mist unveils the lochan,

the slate-blue rain-light on another hill,  
the rainbowed waterfall above the rowan,

the summit-shattering winds and the hammering heart:

Cue music. Cue eagles.

30.6.96  
Carn nan Gobhar,  
Glen Strathfarrar, Invernessshire

### **Cycling at night**

So smooth the turning  
wheels still earth cannot keep pace  
only leaping moon

Stand Hill, Radcliffe, 18.11.96

## Slaidburn

Pennine rain and Pennine space and light  
on vacant wet and brindled Pennine moors,  
on damp woods ghosted over by Pennine mists,  
on the curving clear steel muscle of the river,

in sunlight's brief extravagance defined  
the shapeless heather endlessnesses

as suddenly and for one moment *mine*,  
fully mine and fully mine alone,  
my Northland,  
my own country

11.11.96

Cycling from Slaidburn to Cross of Greet,  
Bowland Forest, 4.11.96

## Elsewhere

In Elsewhere rolls a river you do not know  
down to an ocean you will never see.

Elsewhere's huge cities (nameless in your mind)  
ring with a million arguments you're not in.

In Elsewhere a stray dog barks, but you don't hear it.  
Its tautened nights, lit with ambiguous light  
from the other side of your moon, are nothing to you.

But unconceive yourself,  
and Elsewhere's *here*.

28.1.96

## Rabbit tracks

The white wood is woven with rabbit tracks:  
with traces there all the year, but told only by snow.

Where panicky hearts that beat three times faster than ours  
streaked underground away from huge vague threats  
smelled instant in the wind,

see a lopsided cross, constellation of four dabbed prints,  
repeated repeated repeated;

and think what standing sharpnesses,  
what spaces of acute experience  
othertimes buried from sight,  
we their unknowing giants bring roofs crashing in on.

Earlham Park, Norwich,  
21.2.96



### **Start the Day**

Begin again. From radios reconstruct  
the murmuring beat of synthesised Today,  
teeth brushed and laces tied and shirt-flaps tucked.

"Think hard: today responsibilities ducked"  
(so counselling radio-rabbis blandly say)  
"begin again."

Thus radio reconstructs

your earthly freight, your world news, and your luck,  
it clothes the naked night in work's serge grey  
with teeth brushed, laces tied and shirt-flaps tucked.

Night's dreams were a child's chaos, were thumbs sucked  
for comfort from the fear of yawning day  
begun again, a radios' re-construct,

where pointless thoughts and tameless wants are chucked  
like yesterday's pyjamas, for the day's  
teeth brushed and laces tied and shirt-flaps tucked.

Though hope's a child that won't grow up, its rucked  
And shaving-mirror face, forty if a day,  
Begins again, to radios, to construct  
teeth brushed and laces tied and shirt-flaps tucked.

12.12.88

## Adrenalin

Sitting here thinking  
but not about work.  
Scribbling untidily  
but not essay plans:  
poems, initials.

One ante meridian:  
last dribs of the traffic  
Monday night drinkers  
hes and shes arm in arm  
laugh past my window.

Mental flash of her! Quick!!

I grab at it drowsily,  
miss,  
return to reshaping  
the sinuous curves of her name.  
I don't forget those.

Breathing faster,  
chilled, exalted, trembling slightly.  
I'm assessing progress so far.  
I'm weighing your words.  
Tomorrow? Day after? Saturday? Ever?

You've got my adrenalin going.

15.11.84

## The Uncanniest Stereo

Passing tower blocks at night, from below,  
all their windows open,

or jumping down the steps  
in some Hall of Res.,

your eye, your ear may catch  
what goes through us all

like universal truth:  
the uncanniest stereo

of all those televisions  
showing, shouting the same in perfect sync.

### **Local Government Triolet**

"West Midlands", "Greater London", "Tyne and Wear":  
new counties' names with an ugly urban feel,  
not (like "Middlesex", "Rutland") sweet to hear,  
"West Midlands", "Greater London", "Tyne and Wear";

names that in dim bureaucrats' minds congealed,  
phoney as "Lymeswold", "Thamesdown", to the ear.  
"West Midlands", "Greater London", "Tyne and Wear":  
new counties' names with an ugly urban feel.



## **Indispensable**

How will they manage without me  
when the off-switch has been switched?  
When I'm not there to ensure its smooth running  
will my company stumble and fall?  
Where will they find another one like me?

When the off-switch has been switched  
how will they manage without me?  
What will they talk about at all those parties  
I was the life and soul of?  
Where will they find another one like me?

How will they manage without me  
when the off-switch has been switched?  
What will my friends and relatives do  
when they've lost me to the dark?  
Where will they find another one like me?

When the off-switch has been switched  
how will I manage without me?

## **At your distance**

When June's reduced to a palpitation  
in the vagueness of my brain's  
November mirk,

and sunless we turn to the gas  
and playless I at your distance  
am lost to my work

when bright photos ring my walls  
like pinned-down butterflies,  
gold turned to lead,

your voice no more than crackles through  
vibrations of a filament, then love  
hangs by a thread

30.10.87

## Phaedo

Changeless like Plato's certainties,  
the permanence our minds impart  
to a life that is contingent as  
the beating of a heart:

we feel remote from doubt or chance,  
we act as if we knew our parts;  
we mean it metaphorically when  
we talk about our hearts;

forgetting ends and origins,  
and that the others all depart-  
as certain as that each begins  
the failing of each heart.

Thus I think, listening, head to chest,  
"Your faint-beat rhythm had a start,  
and one day there will be an end  
of this your fragile heart,

though changeless Platonic certainties  
seem permanence to minds apart  
from a death that is as simple as  
a stopping of a heart."

Assurances of mind abandoned,  
the contrary, uncertain art's  
the unseen hope that in mere flesh  
God will rewind the useless heart.

21.1.89

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## Horace, Odes 3.15

Chloris, old Ibycus' wife  
(and him on his uppers as well),  
at your age, d'you think that your life-  
style ought to be that of a belle?

Although you've one foot in the grave,  
the other one's still minuetting  
in Rome's smartest sets. Your behav-  
iour's a cloud on its star-silvered setting-

you, a grandmother, clinging to Fashion!  
Inch-thick make-up, one-upping Pholoe!

But watch her ransacking men's passions  
with her dark eyes, dark hair (yours is snowy)

and consider. With you, they're- polite;  
with your daughter, they're at it like rabbits;  
yet you flirt on gamely, in spite  
of your manifest need of changed habits.

No, Chloris dear: take my advice:  
bowls of roses, night dances, don't fit you  
nor drinks drained right down to the ice.

Your gaiety's no longer nice.  
Take up knitting- and try it in situ.

## **Given**

You  
baring yourself  
learning to remember  
what, once, you wanted to forget.

Me  
in part-time hiding  
remembering what I thought I wanted  
scared by the more of you.

The games I played alone were safe:  
I could keep myself to myself,  
ungiven.

11.5.87

**Catullus, 11**

Furius and Aurelius, comrades of Catullus,  
whether I go as far as the ends of India  
where Ocean's shores, louder-sounding, thunderier,  
boom with their breakers;

whether to soft Arabians or to the Caucasus,  
to the Scythian savages, the archers of Iraq,  
or where the Nile, septuplet river, turns dark  
paddy-field marshes;

or if I climb over gelid Alpine passes;  
step in the footsteps Caesars and Hannibals made;  
cross the Rhine into Teuton forests; wade  
to world's-end isle Britain--

wherever time might, at the whim of their heavenly highnesses,  
decree me for exile, I know you would also dare;  
but all I ask's this. Go to Lesbia; bear  
this brief, not good, message:

that she stands condemned to her Pretty-Boys' Club and her  
fantasies,  
entangling them all at one time, three hundred in number,  
loving not one of them truly, yet member by member  
screwing them senseless.

And let her not sigh for return of her former love's gentleness.  
His love's like the poppy that edges the meadow-side last,  
stands like the poppy-stalk after the rust-blunt plough's passed  
ripping the flower off.

## *Middle Earth*

Witches lived by the pond in the Forestry once:  
no bomb-site then, but ancient, unplumbed, elven.  
Those summer-meadows' hay, those stands of spruce,  
tangled and dry-scented, were our warren:

filled with our stealth, held monsters and sharp wonders,  
strange painted devils for the eye of childhood,  
held magic, black or white, or of as many colours  
as Saruman's cloak in the story.

So for us  
green hills and hillsides, Lancashire rain and wind,  
gained faces of our fantasy, were turned into  
the battleplace of armies long ago:  
and chimneys, roads, and rooftops there below  
became a makebelieve scarce worth our glances  
while marvellous the runes and cognizances  
of intricately-patterned dense-wrought shields  
shone and flashed upon our empty fields.

## Cartmel

Old white limestone fluted by fossil seas  
surprises as grey walls to Cartmel fields,  
as thin irregular houses, and the Priory:

jackdawed lantern-tower and angled nave  
with blunt grace like a castle's, Borders-strong,  
seen round each corner, high over roofs in the lanes.

Sharp-lined hills stand northwards, south the sea,  
over the fell-top, down the six-foot stream.  
Blown from the Bay, watch the curtains of oncoming rain.

## Horse Meadow

One night in dream I stand in a moonfilled field  
Panting like an animal in flight  
Toying with recent pain and what to do with it.  
Grass like a tide damp to my knees with dew,  
the profusion of the fragrance of stamped nettles,  
silversheen light, white mist in the lower air  
to shoulder height.

Words stick in me, blades; mistakes return.  
I am waiting still for something that won't come.  
Disorder is in me.

The orange tower lurches into the sky;  
chaotic drunken sounds of closing time  
carry across the river from the bridge:  
noises twist and fight surrounding silence.  
Around, in me, disorder, and words stick in me.  
I am waiting still for something that won't come.

17.6.87

## **Arnish**

Salt Atlantic breeze and sunlight on rowans,  
a Landrover track through marsh-grass, moss and tormentils:

white walls, a red tin roof roped down with stones,  
chicken-wire garden gate and rusty generator:

if this is the rim of the world, forget the world.

Arnish,  
Island of Raasay  
2.7.87

### Villanelle: Miser Catulle

Hopeless Catullus, stop hoping for reprieve,  
and recognise that what you know's died's dead.  
Her sunlight quickened you, and now you grieve;

when she was loved like no one who has lived  
you gladly followed where her bacchics led,  
but now, Catullus, hope for no reprieve:

your childish games—the sweet-smile make-believe  
you asked of her—at least were not gainsaid  
while her light quickened you: but now you grieve.

Her soft Yes, now hard No beyond retrieve,  
should harden you as well, barred from her bed,  
hopeless. Catullus, don't hope for some reprieve;

be flint! Be steel! Don't beg what she won't give,  
don't lick old wounds; outstubborn her instead.  
"Your sunlight quickened me and now I grieve,

but, Lesbia, it's Catullus who now leaves:  
he tired of you before, but never said.  
Lesbia, hopeless, stop hoping for reprieve!

Bitch, what life is left you, when I leave?  
Who will you find who'd choose to fill your bed?  
My sunlight quickened you but now you'll grieve:

You'll never kiss me sleeping while I breathe  
your name..."

But oh, I bled, I bled, I bled:  
Your sunlight quickened me, but now I bleed.  
Hopeless, Catullus. Stop hoping for reprieve.

### **Waiting Room**

Sitting with the drill  
while a fly dies on the pane up there  
colour supplements say nothing to me  
I'm waiting for the Chair

28.7.87

**Iam ver egelidos refert tepores**

As spring recalls its warm and thawing breeze  
that scatters winter as the days' lengths grow,  
and April's silver whispers through the trees,

these parching Phrygian plains Catullus leaves,  
and sweating fields that turn men dull and slow.  
For spring recalls its warm and thawing breeze,

and in its breath, Catullus' longing breathes.  
Feet wander all roads once it's time to go,  
though April's silvers whisper through the trees

soft hints of stories I still half-believe  
of Priam's golden town, an age ago,  
as spring recalled its warm and thawing breeze.

Au revoir, not adieu: each one who leaves  
our circle here will be in Rome, we know,  
when April's silver whispers through Rome's trees,  
next spring, recall this warm and thawing breeze.

### **Stories for Boys**

There's a thing that sucks your brains out through your ears  
rabid centipedes that leech away your skin  
decapitations and mass murderers  
sex-crazed animals that tear you limb from limb  
by his bedside lamp the Mickey Mouse clock's ticking  
books lie open, covers upwards, bright and cheap  
and little Johnny's tucked up fast asleep

31.7.87

### **Citizen Kane**

Bleared and tunnel-visioned I  
glares out at the grabbable world  
How much more must I buy  
before anything's mine?  
Not getting I's way is unthinkable  
Getting all I wants is I's misery

9.8.87

### **Good to be true**

The flip-side of marvel is this-  
that though I'm aware  
that the links in the logical chain which leads  
to You are all there,  
and each beyond question,

the whole proposition of You,  
the depth and the height and the love,  
feels too good to be true

10.8.87

### **Cheese**

I've stapled the past down:

it's firmly collected into a book at home.  
There it all is in black and white,  
Agfacolours and Kodachromes,

3D colours in 2D prints,  
sometimes catching thought's fine movements:  
other times awkward poses, paperflat smiles  
merely conceal.

Time's focus slips the pain and blurs delight,  
the vivid colours and confusions  
have all faded.

I can't remember much about these, now,  
except the when and where.

21.8.87

## **Enlargement**

The world's the space of wills. Irruption into it  
Will be new space, imperiously shaped  
By some still hidden daemon, for itself,  
The absorbent playing vulnerable self  
That was not there before. And pinks and blues  
And frogs and ducklings all await its call.  
Stern small feet kick-press a stomach wall.

5.9.93

**In a moment**

A cemetery  
A tomb  
A place of death

Is suddenly  
In a blinding moment  
A place of life.

Shalom.

7.10.83

### **Love Poem**

My Lord draws me  
A reluctant beloved  
Down from surface turmoil  
To the still depths of his heart

17.1.84

### **The First Haiku of Spring**

Haiku haiku hai  
  
ku haiku haiku haiku  
  
haiku haiku  
ku

25.9.89

### **Haiku, Kent's Bank, January**

Out of greybrown mudflats  
woodpigeons coax  
roseflushed peachdowned  
highsummer

15.1.92



### **The Damage**

Maybe we should do one another more damage.  
I can't remember when I last left you crying.  
Domesticated, love's grown middle-aged;  
Young, feral violence once came without trying.

14.1.89

## North

Decommissioned  
from drudge and strive and travel

Pouring uphill  
through moonlit warmth of gorse  
and smoky summer grass-scent

Red-eyed alien  
tail-lights wink on/off at lane-ends in the Vale

And some plane  
ploughs its sad silver furrow past the moon  
freighting one more luckless load of losers  
back down to Ugly Land

Hampsfell,  
Furness,  
13.4.95

## Another Pair of Eyes

Another fortnight  
one more inch of size  
another week passed and  
faint flickering butterflies,  
messages from a dim beyond  
within;

another month  
another doctor's visit  
an other growth  
an other sentience in it;

another springing life's  
first traces, like spring's first green bracken-tips unfurled;  
blank-slate innocent, glistening in the dark,  
another pair of eyes,  
another sizeless viewpoint on the world.