Poems
by
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*
Another Spring

Without you to consult about it
I have chosen a shade of blue
to spring-repaint the salt-blanched window-frames
around what, all these years, were your favourite views.

And now the full-grown rosemary-shrubs we planted,
dancing in the rough April wind’s renew,
sun-reflection-rippled at high tide, bee-haunted,
are also flowering blue.

Another spring is moving over these dead old leaves,
but this time, for the first time,
I see it without you.

Pontac, St Clement, Jersey
5.4.2012
Vaisey Verses

My rabbit won't retrieve thrown sticks
or swear like ill-bred parrots
but she does know some conjuring tricks
involving vanishing carrots.

***
Some think good conversation means
an endless stream of piffle
but the best conversationalists
just look at you and wiffle.

***
Woke up this morning
All bleared and woozly
Rabbit in kitchen
Nose in the muesli

***
Twitchy whiskers
Wiffly nose
Greedy rabbit
Dribbling on my tose

***
When depended-on friends go round the bend
Or bog off to watch Buffy
Then heaven sends a more dependable friend
Who’s small and grey and fluffy.

***
When all the time is out of joint
And everything’s gone crazy
Click on a calming manatee
Or cuddle up to Vaisey.
Skipping and dancing
Merrily prancing
Watching the morning unfold
My little Coney
My little Coney
What does the future hold?

(At this point my children threatened to move out, so I had to stop)

3.9.13
Disenchanted

When you are young enough
all is light-haunted
dazzling stars shoot each moment
enchanting delight

Now you are old enough
to see disenchanted
but here’s the illusion:
it was then you saw right.

31.1.14
Trapped between armies on the unwatered plain,
days hid in dust-ditches under the thirst-sucking sun,
bullets to barter with, but no food remains.
Theirs skies are empty and their hopes undone.

Cowering in crowds that the CCTV surveys—
blood-bright posters proclaim their rulers’ benison—
behind blank wary eyes, is it one in a thousand prays?
Theirs skies are emptied and their hope long-gone.

Lost in our shopping, caught in our latest craze,
cheated of what we can be by what we can own,
neither famines nor tyrants press in on our half-awake days,
yet still our skies remain empty, our hope unknown.

A young girl in tears, confused and lost and ashamed,
not sure what happened, but sure that she’s three months gone,
knowing her innocence, knowing she’ll catch the blame;
imploring the empty skies, holding hope alone.

A sordid shed where unclean animals graze,
a peasant-boy born—no silk sheets to lie him on;
squalid and base to all reasonable onlookers’ gaze.
Aren’t these skies too empty to build any hopes upon?

And yet we have seen these same skies explode with praise.
Though the heartless years still roll by and find no home,
this same shed has been filled by the Ancient of Days:
if our skies are emptied, that’s because Hope is come.
Before an icon

How little changes. Delight is always there, waiting for us to fit it to our grasp as it awaited her. And suffering is unending; the contours of old pain etched in her face are new in ours. Prayers of healing, implorings of release cannot go out of date so long as birth and death are still our boundary-marks; that long the Holy City, the beautiful, the forsaken, will still remain a ransacked ruin behind us, will still remain a perfect dream ahead.

And the frightened soul like a sparrow that flickers in mid-air suspense over an infinite drop under an infinite height

Chapel of the Icon of Mary the Mother of God
Great St Bartholomew’s Church, West Smithfield, City of London
December 2 2008
Two pets

The power of human sight. The hanging hawk
Is only awaiting prey, but turns, observed,
To picture, image, symbol; becomes framed.
The power of human focus, of the rapt attent
That constellates the sky and names the species,
That populates the peaceful empty fields
Quiet with cow-pats and the small life of birds.

Or how a blank-eyed pebble-turning fish,
Bobbing in plastic weeds its simple scales,
Or furtive exoskeletal invertebrate,
Six legs and mouth-parts, stalking unawares
Within a human ten-year-old’s arc-light awareness,
Is turned into a burning-point of love;
Is seen and by this concentration made
Something very good.

For Róisín and Thalia, pet-owners
February 28 2011
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
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
Ash Wednesday

As humans do here what they've so long done
the bitter spices burn in silver mists;
around the grandmother's knees the toddler twists,
warm hands playing candle-shadows on cold stone.

The two-thousand-year-old pain is here remembered
that stands for our earliest and our latest wrongs:
in the stillness remade generations-long,
offered foreheads, lined or smooth, are crossed with embers.

And there is time while a tall taper burns
to look along the pews to left and right,
to ask how long yet each of us still might
remember we are dust and to dust return.

Some of us present can remember when
they wore this lent ash sixty years past or more.
How many times have I done this before?
How many times will I do this again?

Exeter Cathedral, February 22 2012
How the light gets in

The light of all lights dazzles in our dark; we shut our eyes.
The truth of all truths reasons with our hearts blocked by our lies.
The joy of all joys asks us to dance, but we prefer to grieve.
The king of all kings waits on us, but we’re too proud to receive.

Why then was he born in a cowshed?
That’s where there was space.
And why was he born to Mary?
Because she said yes.

25.12.11
I say to my black dog Ponto—off we go!
And I walk in the woods, in clothes to scare a crow;
I walk in the great woods, reading in old books:
In winter woods, all frosted haggard hooks,
Or summer woods that laugh even in dawn-showers,
With all the grass one widening riot of flowers;
I read Froissard, Montluc, or Tacitus on their times,
And as I walk I chill at glory’s crimes.
My God, the horrors everywhere, even among the best,
The sleepers murdered by those who cannot rest,
The best men’s hands, my God, always blood-clad,
Caesar lost in his orgies, Alexander drunk and mad,
Charlemagne in his massacres—Didier, Vitikind—
No better a man than the lowest sins he sinned,
The fish fed men’s flesh in Cato’s aquarium,
Titus impaling the whole of Jerusalem,
Even our chevalier sans reproche Turenne
A sordid murderer prowling Germany’s fens,
And Jarnac hamstrung Châtaigneraie “in a fair fight”,
And Carrouges ran Le Gris through “which proved him right”;
Tongues that slandered French kings tasted red-hot iron;
Milton was Cromwell’s fool, Calvin Servet’s pyre.
Glory, how many pale spectres must haunt your rest!
Mankind, I turn away to where nature’s pure,
And as I think “All traps, all imposture,
All lies, all injustice, evil in splendour dressed”,
Ponto waits at my heel.
A dog is goodness made
Not close, but as close as can be, to human ways.
Dog Ponto watches me with his honest gaze.

26.11.11

PONTO
Je dis à mon chien noir : — Viens, Ponto, viens-nous-en !
Et je vais dans les bois, mis comme un paysan ;
Je vais dans les grands bois, lisant dans les vieux livres.
L’hiver, quand la ramée est un écrin de givres,
Ou l’été, quand tout rit, même l’aurore en pleurs,
Quand toute l’herbe n’est qu’un triomphe de fleurs,
Je prends Froissard, Montluc, Tacite, quelque histoire,
Et je marche, effaré des crimes de la gloire.
Hélas ! l’horreur partout, même chez les meilleurs !
Toujours l’homme en sa nuit trahi par ses veilleurs !
Toutes les grandes mains, hélas ! de sang rougies !
Alexandre ivre et fou, César perdu d’orgies,
Et, le poing sur Didier, le pied sur Vitikind,
Charlemagne souvent semblable à Charles-Quint ;
Caton de chair humaine engraisant la murène ;
Titus crucifiant Jérusalem ; Turenne,
Héros, comme Bayard et comme Catinat,
À Nordlingue, bandit dans le Palatinat ;
Le duel de Jarnac, le duel de Carrouge ;
Louis Neuf tenaillant les langues d’un fer rouge ;
Cromwell trompant Milton, Calvin brûlant Servet.
Que de spectres, ô gloire ! autour de ton chevet !
O triste humanité, je fuis dans la nature !
Et, pendant que je dis : — Tout est leurre, imposture,
Mensonge, iniquité, mal de splendeur vêtu ! -
Mon chien Ponto me suit. Le chien, c’est la vertu
Qui, ne pouvant se faire homme, s’est faite bête.
Et Ponto me regarde avec son œil honnête.

Victor Hugo
Marine-Terrace, mars 1855.
Buskers at Dusk, 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

Most Hills

Most hills should be climbed quite alone.
Could I do what cannot be done
and climb them alone-with-someone
then quite obviously you’d be the one.

23.4.11
At nought I was your hidden signature

At nought I was your hidden signature,
the knotting in your side,
your clotting pulse.
We needed no communication
being a single thought.

At flailing four
you answered all my questions.
At self-consumed fourteen
I stonewalled all of yours.

At twenty-four I left.
We met to talk, but sometimes telephoned.
Later we telephoned, but sometimes met.

And now at forty-four
a knot is in my side,
a catch is in my pulse
that is not you.

What is you is a ten-year dust of ash
in the roots in the straggling nettle-grass
in a garden itself to be burned.

Yet my phone still promises you on the other end
if I could just find the number.

27.5.10
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.

8.1.00
Father to Daughter

I drive you to the station.
I unpack your bags for you
(you’ve packed too many)
I see you onto the train
you go away.

If there was more that I could do for you
then I would do it
but in so many ways you are on your own.

13.3.10
Seawood

Close up the house. Strip coat- and key-rack clear.
Enshroud in dust-sheets the cracked chandelier.
Break stiff carpets from new-echoing floorboards, break
the wandering webs old cellars and bookshelves make.

Close up the house and count in every key.
Throw out the greyed and paled photography.
Peel bleached stickers from kids’ windows. Turn the lock
the last time on the sun-porch and the silenced clock.

Close up the house and in an envelope seal
the keys to fifty years of thought and feel.
Now all we dreamed here, everything said and done,
goes north of the north wind, west of the setting sun.

Seawood House
Kent’s Bank, Lancashire
1959-2012

9.12.9
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_
Meum est propositum

When I die, I won’t die dry
In cold teetotal bunk;
I’ll sink round the pub, where I
So many rounds have sunk.
I’ll expire inspired by choirs
Of angels singing “Nunc
Dimittis, Lord, thy pity for
This reprobate old drunk.”

Meum est propositum
In taberna mori
Ut sit vinum proximum
Morientis ori.
Tunc cantabunt laetius
Angelorum chori:
Sit Deus propitius
Huic potatori.

30.4.09
Not To Miss

Why do so many pretty girls
dress as much like boys
as it is possible to,

preferring drab grey serge
to frilled silk’s noise
net petticoats’ frou-frou?

If you could taste such clothes’
transposing joys
why wouldn’t you?

19.8.06
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
Wherever you walk

Wherever you walk
I’d be the walker beside you;
wherever you travel
I’d be the guard on your train;

whenever you sleep
I’d be the angel above you,
guiding your dreams
past the sheer cliffs of fall in the brain.

If I was God
I’d not let you out of my eyesight;
if I was God
you’d never feel lost at cold midnight;

if I was God
I would de-booby-trap every portal;

but I am not God,
I am only another lost mortal.

Off, then, on your journey
where I have no business to go;
off on your way
to make friends whom I’ll never know;

your life will be different and yours
and mostly not about me;
my main part in it will be just
to be a good memory.

8.8.8
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
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
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
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
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
St George

Heraldic-taut white-shining-armour knight
over a honey-stone font.

Mailed foot pressing down on the neck of the vanquished beast,
a leaning twist on the righteous skewering spear:
one shafting thrust ends the triumphing hero’s hunt.

Thus is the slick gross leathery-wingèd dragon
poison-green and stone-cold-eye malicious
stamped out and erased
extirpated and excised
by our purified Christian Perseus
freed from sin.

So what is it Andromeda’s temporary saviour misses?
How is it ice-chill heart and fire-lust rage
live on within?

St Michael at the Northgate, Oxford
(so not in fact St George, but never mind)
April 23 2014
Sidlaw Benediction

Blessed be God

\textit{Blessed be God for ever.}

Blessed be God on the burnsides and on the braesides
Blessed be God on the bramble-track, and at the ruined tower
Blest be the God of old kirk and of older abbeys
Blest be the God of hill-forts and stones of power
\textit{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
\textit{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
\textit{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
\textit{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
\textit{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 foresigning 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
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_

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
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.
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.

4-5.3.98
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
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
Published in New Blackfriars
June 1996
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.

30.11.96
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
The Cross Dresser

Men get coarse black jeans,
Scratching catching-crotched,
B.O.-armpit suits,
Boxers, sweaty socks.

Women get silken skirts
That rustle and flow from the waist,
Sheer stockings, cream-cotton shirts
Soft with shimmering lace.

For boys there’s the winded jockstrap
And the rugby boot’s muddy cleats;
For girls the miraculous tutu
And tennis’s frills and pleats.

But taboo says do not complain.
Even cross feelings are banned.
You are stuck in the stubble-chinned strain
And the drudge of being a man.

16.11.03
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 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
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.

16.5.87
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.

20.5.87
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.

28.5.87
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
Sunday Morning, Edinburgh

Scrubbed Calvinist whinstone, grey as a Sabbath suit,
Erupts (but in orderly fashion) into washed skies;
A wet dark stone, with a dour glint
in the sunlight.

Empty the spaces for cars; the foolish parking meters
Stand idle, unprofitable; locked are the comfortless pubs;
The blinds on the notary's office
bounce sunlight.

But below on a bistro pavement in the Grassmarket,
Loud voices and Dayglo colours and avid movement
Where Italian teenagers gulp down espresso
and sunlight.

Castle Hill,
Edinburgh,
12.3.91

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.
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.

20.2.87
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

13.4.95
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.

27.1.89
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
Bride

In the selfsame point that the soul is made sensual is the City of God ordained to it without end

I give you my virgin white:
My blue-shadowed snows, my walled gardens,
My blank pages whereon you shall write
When I give you my virgin white.

You give me your spectrum-white:
You kaleidoscope all my colours
To one simple vision of light
In your prism-, your spectrum-white.

I give you my bridal white:
White, silk-sheened, frill-intricate lace
Grace has broidered for your desire’s sight
In our ache of delight face to face
When I give you my bridal white.

May 21-22 1998
Aeschylus, *Prometheus Vinctus* 887-907

A wise man he, a wise man he indeed,
who first weighed in his mind and spoke this truth:
that love of like to like most answers need,
that a poor man's love of a rich bride breeds—reproof,
that the slave should never seek the hand of her master,
that a god's seed mixed with a mortal's brings disaster.

Never then, o never, Fates, bestow
on me the trembling glory of Zeus' concubine.
No bridegroom high for me who am below,
for my slight self no Olympian lord divine.
For look at Io, barren, lost, unmanned,
unwombed, unhoused by Hera's hard command.

A well-matched match is well. No fear falls for
those who avoid the hot gods' resistless gaze.
Only there is the one unwinnable war,
the no-way-out that barriers all our ways.
For what would he turn *me* into, once seduced?
Yet who can escape the marriage-plans of Zeus?

*March 2012*
The disconnect absolute

You wake up not knowing the time
you wake up not knowing the date
you wake up not knowing the century
or which of all these is your body,
forgetting the taste of yourself
and the reason the minotaur grief slinks through your cellars.

Blindly you move to the window
shake through the pall-thick curtains
blindly you drink up outside
you drink up the bone-thin moon and the ghost-blue garden
you drink up the silver track on the scales of the sea.

The stuck record that fills your head with angular noise
plays on regardless of you.
The machinery of pain that you are involved in
it has no off-switch.
You do not notice
how you get back to bed.

The disconnect absolute
the bone-thin moon, the blue garden
all this will be gone in the morning
but not your loss.

26.12.08
Travesti

Delight, then dread. Epiphany, then farce.
Crushed by his guilt at being the she he asked,

lost between masks for all his thirteen years,
his lonely compass fixed on his hated error,

a boy in a dress and his self-murdering tears.
The peacock’s beak stabs at the reflex mirror.

27.12.07
In memory of too many kids who killed themselves
one of whom could too easily have been me
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