

ROGER BLENCH

POEMS 1969-2006

[PREPARED FOR PRIVATE DISTRIBUTION ONLY]

My love, I can compare you to the ground-squirrel, quivering in the grass.
In the alleys of the goldsmiths,
you go after every bright thing and come back disappointed.
Take coffee with me on the terrace,
uncurl your long body from sleep.
Rich with desire, your beauty follows me when I'm alone.
And if it rains, shelter with me under the wine-palm
water will trickle through its fronds
but we'll ignore it.

Nairobi, 18/1/86.

Now that I've met you in this corner of the economy
and we've both traded our politics for silver pieces,
love me anyway.

There's few enough of us around
whose wrists and ankles aren't manacled.
In this era, suspicion is a luxury.

Kano, 5/2/86

Beneath the untidy flowers, small beetles await their prey,
crocodiles lie on the sandbanks
and I'm here in the garden waiting for you to come.

Kaduna, 21/1/86

In our landscape, there's wreckage in the foreground
blacksmiths pillage the broken cars for hoe-blades
herdsmen unwind transformer coils for bracelets.
Uneasy pyramids of refrigerators, disintegrated televisions,
stand on every street corner.
Magicians and fire-eaters swallow broken glass.

*

Behind are the stone hills, where the hyraxes live,
cactus on the starved plain
and before, all the people of the world,
tempestuous and untidy
praying for the rain that never comes.

After the grass and the shrubs die,
when the last deranged person
enters the palace of metal
Only a kerosene tin will remain to prove that
anyone ever lived on this planet.

Kaduna, 24/9/85.

Small Voices

In a century where images are of contempt
they pass unnoticed.

When you use hatred to tie a black flag to yourself in the vortex
and bitterness is the panacea for anonymity,
simple drifts go uncomprehended.

Alcuin hears a nightingale outside his cell
and we wonder if his intention was political.

Martin Luther threw his inkpot at the Devil -we can understand that
the passion for no roar or meander to go unremarked.

Cabeza da Vaça, a man of no account, wandered five years across an unshepherded
America,
and finding him, they marvelled that he would sleep only on an earth floor.

But now, if we have any pretensions to virtue,
our sympathies lie with the oppressed.

We can safely applaud their violence
hatred leaks from one to another like the souring of wine.

We smile a children taught to gasp for nation-hood,
and politely decline the sufferings of their parents.

But if you do have ambition
beyond the career of a rabid dog,
you learn silence and beneath the silence
you can hear the workings of the world.

26/6/80

Our ears are full of mechanical whispers
sighing and souging,
coercing the solar wind.

Satellites read our possessions,
and because photons have no morality,
our poverty is evident from space.

We construct reality from millivolts,
charged particles impose on the imagination,
empires in the invisible air.

As each year turns and the interminable hope of revolution
glimmers again, is there a chance this time
for justice without electricity?

Paris, 21/5/85

Salvation

I.

The rumour is, salvation will sell like fresh bread.
 we can all lay claim to offices in heaven with just a signature.
Its honeycombs have spaces enough,
 -their sugar will sparkle on our tongues.
Our special curiosity has been to care which way the world ends,
 to set interlopers on the construction of the future,
 building bridges on an unknown river
and highways in an empty land.
 to know what is and what is not
 and to assume that nothing lies between the two.
We have uncovered the passive theorems of extinction in our history,
 looking for somewhere to locate our comedies of the rich and the moral.

In constructing an enchanted archaeology,
 our own gardens have run wild.
For a thousand armless sculptures and a gross of battered books
 we learnt to break the cycle of the year,
 perform miracles on barren fig-trees,
 and turn the clouds backwards in the sky.
For tearing the pages from the Book of Hours,
 we are engaged to forced labour on the highways that run between our temples.
For the golden trace that we suppose
 runs through our affairs
 -and leaves its mark on the forehead of our beauty.
 we are held to ransom in our lifetimes.
Philosophers are arrested
 but their manuscripts contain only prayers.
Madmen are set in state above us
 and their decrees recited for poetry.
The churches are full of science
 automata of the Saints chime the hours at an ever-increasing speed
 their candles are never extinguished.
Our journey to apotheosis is paced by an ass,
 the milestones engraved with out indifference.
Our deities are hidden behind grammatical figures,
 their praises recorded in unknown scripts
 -their parables have no meaning.
Wisdom we steal from others' shrines -but cannot use it.

There is no language that we cannot learn
 yet none that we can understand.
In our fear of the dark we send armies across the world
 with disease and electricity.
There is no music in our songs our hands are cold in any season.

II.

And this in the fear and hope that there is no choice,
that beyond the coloured smokes and tedious ironies
there is only machinery, grinding brass wheels and clanking cams.
anger and disillusionment are the sides of a spinning coin
and humour just another drug.
We have found so many anagrams for Armageddon,
it must be repeated indefinitely.
We labour under the curse of a satirical demon,
connecting atoms with a crazy ruler,
blocking imaginary doorways
and reading us extracts from the library of Babel.

III

The past lies all about us like patches of coloured sand
we only have to draw it together to set our image in the mosaic
to scribe a line and set ourselves upon it.
Everything is possible -finally.
All our actions are reflections of one another -mud swirling and resettled.
Our ambition is always to capture a minor chronology,
imagining events keyed together like the columns of a Greek temple.
-and only immaturity prevents us laying out the future like a garden and walking in it.
-or hoping that some unknown Euclid will conjure it into existence with present axioms.

IV.

But if we have no time for high cosmogony
and allow the minutes to twist and shimmer like fish
our ancestors will decree us only a token obol.
If we always have praise for the open road
we will walk lamely to death.
Respect the mirror uncloud its reflection
Untie the hobbles untrammel time.
Behind us and before us are the paths across the planet
and we can as easily find a way to the end of the world as to our neighbours.

Undated

the cracked man with the balalaika
on street corners
and perhaps even he believes that truth is somehow embedded in lies.
and only alcoholics
know that lies are found in other lies like fossils.

Undated, 1984

Canticle for Santa Maria

Holy Mary, pray for us,
Our chests are sunken and our hearts are liquid with timidity.
 though no voices mock us as we sing.
We chatter like an ape at a terminal
 still, our little imaginations cannot reach up to you.
We're blown about like a leaf in the cave of the winds
 -there's no restitution.
and when all the lamps have been extinguished
 you return us the same kind of platitudes.
If Alfonso the Wise believed you could make curdled milk fresh again
 and shoeless beggars lords,
 so can I.

Mokwa, 31/10/80.

Deus absit

If you count up the rococo disasters
 that have overtaken us,
 rich war and frugal peace,
drought on the savannahs and aridity in the mind,
and the ubiquitous cacophonies of the half-sane,
you might conclude that God
 had departed for some more salubrious universe
 or taken refuge in the roof of one of his cathedrals.

* * *

Lovers have no need of God
 who most possesses souls visited by emptiness.
When they kneel before the altar,
 bemused by cancer or the inept theorising of the philosophers,
 certainty can overcome them, like the smell of grapes during harvest.
Then they are most dangerous.

Paris, 21/6/85

Geckos

Surprised and intent, climbing the wire netting,
 exposing their white bellies.
And we're writhing,
 thought and bodies contorted
with the pervasive abstractions of our time.
Religions grown into polygonal chains
 silica gardens in our heads.
Political animals lock horns,
 with irascibility for ideology.
Artists as circus dogs make their own hoops.

But the geckos are only intent on taking the heavy moths
 that whirl aimlessly around the light.

Suntai, 11/4/84

Too often I receive your messages
in the empty corners of the earth.
reassuring me that I still have access to a high crag in your mind.
But when the time comes to alight
the eyrie's only a bundle of empty sticks.
Well, I can't expect you to comb out your hair for me alone,
I haven't tangled it.
The love I've given you is broad as a highway
as relaxed as the weave of a soft cloth.

You made me promises
clasping your hands together in emphasis
There must be something we do with sincerity between birth and death.

Completed, 24/7/81

With no more than a cursory glance I set out,
trampling across Zen gardens with unsuitable boots.
My voice, thin like the treble of a missionary harmonium,
My morals, those of the ant.

Well, you'd say, 'People teach by example,
-their lives ensue,
as the tang of the arrow is shaped, so the pig runs in the bush.'
You'd say, 'People are patient
-when the chameleon stumbles, God is put to shame.'
'They talk and yet don't talk -say and don't sing.
Their books are open and yet they don't read.'
and when the fever of understanding overtakes you,
your joints ache with the effort, your gums bleed and there are no steps but up,
you can have done with consensus.
Yet to other people you present only lame intangibles.

Epping, 26/5/82.

Loving

You can forget to love someone
-not writing their name in your diary.
They come to you like frost on a winter's day
and vanish as quietly.
There's no regret in a carefully adjusted life
though sometimes people break down the walls of their own city.

Completed, 1980.

There are no mysteries, only expectations.
I see your brown legs in the market, follow the movement of your breasts,
 your eyebrows rising in surprise or dismay
and then, discussing over coffee,
 proffering love cautiously, because
because I.. travelling, I'm always travelling,

and you're here, active like a grain-mill,
 asking and answering.
Each meeting holds small misconceptions
 desire is not a true mirror.
None of us willingly passes their life in a vacant space
 or rows their emotions out into the open sea.
 We're wary for our errors.

* *

There's no logic of course, no-one setting off small romances
 like a chain of fireworks.
Sometimes you fall on one another, biting necks,
 or else you pinion the end of your tongue in a grim humour.
But we confess our past quickly,
 no time can be lost in these things,
 intensity supersedes subtlety.
And though you know this type of intimacy can be toxic
 you continue
for the promise in the curled tongue and the brown nipples.

In the mornings, you wake up, not cold, but aching from an unkind bed,
 and forget all this.
but as the day goes on it comes back
 and as you re-interpret it you
exchange current uncertainties for those of yesterday.

Sometimes, when you're at the top of a mountain or in a stony desert
 you want to end this senseless trafficking
 let the soul, like the lark, ascend unto the heavens.
But it's a poor philosophy that collapses under the next half-smile,
 an untidy paradigm that is disordered by a laugh.
Your body remains, wheezing and shapeless, unresponsive to anything
 but another body.

Love is humour and dismay, eclectic and confined.
Though it is hard to explain this to the inhabitants of the temperate zone,
 for whom emotions are both monumental and tiresome.

Kaduna,
9/6/84

I.

Tie up your long hair, we're going out
to find a street in this tired city
where your body is unknown.

My parables haven't reached you,
despair floats from your lips like pollen
as easily given as received.

The dervishes push swords through their lips for you,
cut out their tongues to avoid speaking heresy
and you're impressed.

Standing beside me at some bitter circus,
in a small Afghan town,
you'd reach out to catch someone falling.

But you're closed, knotted,
beneath your embroidered dresses
a colonial fear of incision.

Even when someone lies beside you you're alone,
convincing yourself that desire is trivial,
you clutter your mind to be rid of it.

Down in the catacombs, among the trite icons,
you lost your virginity,
you're still aching with that dissatisfaction.

Your nerves are so keen for insufficiency,
-for the slight foolishness of the everyday,
you're lost with strangers.

You won't set foot in Atlantis,
suspecting it's a marsh
and you're right -but the reeds shine.

You've never been asleep,
too many strange things around you,
clicking their wings or rattling their scales.

If the cherry-tree bends down to offer you its fruit,
You accept it.
Dogs catch their feet in traps and no-one comes to release them.

Your bedroom is floored with rushes and sunlight
making mosaics of light and dark.
Will you never stain it with alien feet?

You sit, waiting for the storm to end,
and I'm hoping, uselessly,
that you'll come to my bed once again.

I'll praise the eighteenth century in my hoarse voice,
grow vegetables, anything -if you need them,
beyond the music of a careful life.

But your breasts are narrow, or they seem so,
your eyes brown and serious,
as if their sensuality had somehow escaped to your fingertips.

There's blood on your sleeve
a tinge of sacrifice about your shabby furniture.
Do all your heroines have consumption?

When I see you dancing,
to a saw-toothed music,
what penance are you imagining?

Do you never want to escape this overstuffed planet
with its cycles of pretentious agony?
To climb out the skylight into another earth?

The ocean comes up to your feet,
but the hieroglyphics in the sand there
are washed away before they can be read.

The deep sequences of the millennia have their own hypnosis.
Cosseted by their tranquillity,
you ignore the alarm ringing in your dreams.

What do you seem to see?
You strain your eyes, following a crooked thread,
snarled with love and death.

There's some beauty I've misunderstood
stumbling about in this subterranean world,
the roof of the sky's cracked, and a light shines through.

If so, I'll forgive you everything,
and if not, you're still forgiven.
Your words stay with me like the egg of a great bird.

I can't be sour, there's too much humour
in even the small stones,
though there's no embracing.

But if, this time, I leave you without sadness,
without ruffling your hair,
I expect you'll bear a fragment of that light when we meet again.

Between the islands, small boats ply,
a message you send will not be lost.
May the fish-eagles bring you everything you desire.

And if at last the small coracle of your dreams runs aground,
don't despair,
Love is always skewed by the turning of the world.

Cambridge,
14/2/82.

II.

Then and Now

Well, later on I found that you had no more sought happiness than I,
that for every poem of mine you'd placed
another tile in the mosaic.

We both mistook love's texture for its substance
and when its fine silica fell through our fingers
laughed, cried and threw it away.

In the cafés at night, we constructed disturbing curves,
their colours about us like the mysteries of drugs,
or the delicate music of intention.

We're soldiers and cryptographers, creatures of streets and basements
where others lie down in darkness, we've captured the light,
invisible armies follow us.

Laughter in the desert, silence in the cities of the steppe,
we lay out there on grass mats only to discover
the past is like the present.

The sun comes with you, your throat's dry with discovery,
your palms lined with the decade
dust streaks your hair.

You're still silent, you force me to write you a biography
a wild dictionary of unprepared affairs
vines rooting in crevices.

Do you still have contact with subtle spirits? Have serpents licked out your ears?
Does the sea rush up to greet you each morning
and the small birds bring you messages?

for you, I'm a piece of unclaimed memory,
a piano playing indecipherable tunes in the next room.
a sentence with no conclusion.

The untidy inhabitants of the atom circle one another.
If I touch you there's a shower of sparks.
Squares encircle squares in some dimension.

Perhaps it is a mistake, love should be bought and sold.
Whatever we think and say becomes the dust of chaos
fractals converging on infinity.

Over a decade, the dunes shift, forgotten watchtowers are exposed,
our beliefs have worn down like mill-wheels,
hope escapes like a fish.

The summer heat diffracts love, curls manuscripts,
sand piles up against the house,

church bells go out of tune.

Eccentric deities splayed sunbeams from their fingers,
clocks ran backwards, and crumbling buildings reformed
the earth was unaccustomed to injury.

I became tired of the galleries, the illustrated bird books,
concrete and polished wood, tastes multiplied a thousandfold
tidied streets in old cities.

Where love was an adventure, it became a task, like counting
potsherds, or relating unexceptional history
the burden of a thousand papyri.

And there's one terrible truth, that we're content with dismal lies,
winter is summer, or discoloured paper beauty,
dreams are given us like presents.

So for every beauty there's only a simulacrum, hiding the grotesque,
the last few turtles climb up on the beach,
the Khans call for fire and blood.

The roc's egg has opened, and now we accept some things with an easy humour,
the phoenix reborn in our age,
and dog-headed men take over the world.

All this I'd have told you, but intemperate news is wearying
and I only have fragments of you, a few lines of cuneiform
so I leave the tablet intact.

the last and worst is -your beauty's fallen away -where I saw your
long thighs and fine hands
your body can't disturb me.

Only that, despite those lost years, I know you
know your once-bright voice and dark eyes
their indistinct signatures.

so I'll say I want you, nothing more. No further
entries in the ledger or dependent clauses
just come with me.

I'll kiss you now, and you give me your hand,
the tombs of kings stretch up to the sky,
but here below, we fall to earth.

Assisi,
25/7/88

III.

Love, you've given me no more hope,
no more warm days or nights drugged
only sorry insubstantial simulacra.

Where will I ask of you?
are you there in Brazil, hiding in the *favelas*?
beaten to the floor, punished for disobedience?

Love, you've seized my imagination, stolen it,
left only an insipid slurry of memory,
my dreams left standing at traffic lights.

We've talked, oh, so long, given it a name,
set our dogs on it, rolled it in the dust,
but nothing comes of nothing, like rain on the ocean.

I'd listen to your promises, and thought
the Maya must have known this, the great cycles of their calendar
would bring you, in and out of season.

I trailed round, from one old stone to another,
seeking out museums xxx.

But you came, kissing me, head half turned,
and, for once, the dismal science was forgotten,
earthquake predictions unravelled.

No shoes on your feet, dress aswirl,
tables and chairs scattered, notices torn down,
some undistinguished deity tipped over in the corner.

Some dark liquid other than blood must run in our arteries,
our hearts pump sentences, stanzas, books,
we cough away in the darkness, taping back together our
cracked spines.

You come upon me, no longer confident of the world's ways,

beauty fell from you like celadon cracking.

The demons that chased us were sackcloth and firecrackers,
the dragons papier-mâché with painted flames,
hell just red wallpaper.

Wars raging, the kingdom over-run
barbarians, despairing as ever of passion in the empire of order,
greedy for meat, hungry for jewels.

Like the blind going among the deaf,
sensory modulations lost
clumsy with our hands and voices.

So lead us on, like any good story,
I'll see how this resolves,
any small predatory mammal would do the same.

Love me, and I'll love you in return,
not sweet and spiced like gingerbread,
but like a stream flowing down from the hills.

Cambridge,
23/7/98

IV.

This time, there are no invitations, no printed cards to give you directions,
the river's taken us, up, about, and on every side,
the sightless forest throws down fruits for the waiting fish.
Each time I ask, you say it's still too early,
we're waiting for the séance to begin, the sharp clamour of gongs,
not that there's anything to be revealed.
Winds blow through the market, gold and feathers scatter,
quails run on the ground, grain-dust flies up,
if there were anything left to tell, it would be here.
There so many silver wires joining heaven and earth,
cutting through them, we'd just set off,
intertwined like tree and temple.
Caution, well at least you shared that with me. You said, we can spring to life,
at any time, like dormant magnolias,
rescue ourselves in a dry season.
If that's true, I'll stay with lies,
keep your breasts covered, I've no longer a use for them,
bind up your hair.
If I'm lost, I'll stay lost
wherever creepers climb, I can
if a tree falls in the forest, I'll hear it.
and those songs you'd thought to give me, the cable binding our cities,
the great underground river supposed to keep us sane,
they're not music, only politics, a church fallen in ruin.
You've nothing for me now, I see the blotches on the back of your hand,
eyes tired with years of watching the sky
but I won't wait.
At least let me climb towards the light,
if we're unsteady on our feet, no matter,
the rocky ground and sandy sky tells us something.
Like a flicker on the horizon, an island appears,
blue-grey below the streaky gold of dawn,
its unvisited kings, already preparing their wives.
Wherever else I must follow,
let the sprites of the upper air seize me,
blow me where they will.
Time, there's no time for anything, no plans for anyone,
love's untidy message is scrawled on our walls,
let it stay there until the bureaucrats scrape it off.

Seoul
27/9/02

V.

No need to get up!
 We're all of us for the hard armchairs now.
 Like nitrate film rotting, we can only recover a few frames of our
 lives at a time.
The carpet's indeterminate, the furniture, cheap but usable
 too many coffees, too much sugar
 once our teeth rot, our brains soon follow.
The singing in the upper air
 has been replaced
 by the screeching of electronic macaques.
and now, somehow, we're walking, striding along edgeless footpaths
 sunlight, dust and thorns surround us
 lizards on the rocks.
Where have you been? I can guess.
 Stepping gingerly along a cracked river-bed collecting oyster-shells?
 No more intentions?
We're to do this, not because of what might have been
 but rather a Newtonian sense
 of equal and opposite reactions.
So many people in our lives seem half-finished, sketched
 glue coming unstuck at the joints
 searching for small cubes so they can stand up again.
We were for marrying, I think, and yet we didn't
 it seemed like no substitute for love, not intricate enough
 a tool too limiting to confront the world.
But our friends went mad, babbling of other universes
 our doctors couldn't heal themselves, they were left behind.
 Sick, now alone we had to follow where the strongest marched.
We exhausted all our metaphors,
 sold out, like so many cucumbers,
 or fractured like the handle of hoe.
For every temple Egypt gives, poking out surprised from the sand,
 a suburban house is pulverised to brick-dust
 the terrorist is the revenge of the crocodile.
Time is folded, complex, in physics as in love
 so many things we wish to be connected aren't
 so many roads that turn back on themselves.

*02 October 2003
San, Mali*

Aut tunc, aut nunquam

Between hope and denying lie two choices,
given to us in a murky alehouse between the wars.
If truth lies in a high castle
and despair is a rimless ocean
down which furtive alleyway shall we creep?

We protest our bleeding hands -the matter's not easily grasped
no talking book to help our confusion.
Our manuscripts are fat with sophistry
their meaning as elusive as the root of a vine.
Like a flickering lamp or a cracked flute
our indecision traces patterns on the walls around us.
Buffoons with placards dance
their folly has at least certainty.
We might envy the slow trajectory of the snail.

6/2/81

Unwisdom

As we get older, we either become cruel or complacent,
power comes as naturally as the lines on the back of our hands,
and anarchy is exiled to an attic.

There's neither revolution nor dancing,
and our honesty deliquesces,
staining the expensive fabrics of middle age.

Tired or evil, our ideologies crumble like fossils in shale,
first bread and justice,
then bread or justice,
now neither are on offer.

Our lips bleed and our wrists shake.

* * *

and, and,

if we could once,

uncurl,

obey unwisdom,

love and protest are the commandments.

*Rewritten, 20/4/85
Cambridge*

Leviathan

Some time ago the word went out the world's a soft and sensual place,
and for years you thought you'd caught its rhythms in your measured pace.
But then someone comes along and asks you how you've spent your time,
You never can remember, there's always something on your mind.
Or you stay up late one night to talk about the things you've done,
and either you've forgotten, you imagined them, or you were somehow drunk.
always
And then you're in an open place surrounded by a crowd of strangers,
You can't hear what they're saying, they're like a crowd of moths around your face, and you cry out
in anger.
All the unconsidered places in your past
are woven into nets and spread across your path.
They've trapped you in a mesh so fine, you can't make out the knots,
Your voice is hoarse with shouting, but no-one comes to help you out.
When you finally struggle free, the light has almost gone
and looking once behind, you know you must continue on.
Before you, all along the street, the doors are opening at last
and standing by you window in the night you ask,
if it's the stomach of Leviathan you're lying in, and where you might have failed.
For it seems that, despite all your stratagems, you're inside the whale.

Late night. 4/5/78.

You pass you journey imagining
the comedy of your return.
the cycles of friendship collapse, without a sound, or brightly, like star-shells.
leaving more corruption than sadness.
there's continuity only in the most tiresome things,
familial hypocrisy and empty scholarship.
Conversations grow up everywhere like clumps of bamboo.

Completed 15/2/80.

Words

Words are like an endless intestine
kill a goat every other week and you'll have enough for a lifetime.
-or the tapeworms in a pig
no gainsaying their cancerous qualities.
Arguments can be like screwing on the kitchen table
there's nothing erotic about logical entailment.
Your stories are deformed, stumps pounding the earth,
blind and thirsty for listeners.
They're sent out like hogs to root around for rubbish in
other's gardens.
Gossip beating on the walls of our houses
like a drunk in an alleyway.
Your angry paragraphs are so colourless,
as well hit someone with the flat of the hand.
People are scraped with them
as a coconut is grated.
and your letters
we might make a pile of them in the cellars to grow mushrooms.

Ibadan, 27/3/81

Magicians

I found them standing on stone towers
and confronted them.
They explained that their magic could be stored in iron-bound chests and carried away
that Golgotha was closed for repairs and Delphi sold to developers,
that John the Baptist sold his head for loose change, but that with sufficient courage,
you could pick gold coins from the empty air.

They produced coloured lights from their sleeves, making the sand in the hourglass
vanish.
The paradox of eternity was resolved and the skein of empty space untangled.
but afterwards of course,
I found my questions
lying forgotten at the bottom of a well.

Draft 12/11/78
Additions 27/12/78
Final version 10/9/81

The river you step in is different every time you wet your feet
but Heraclitus' words are always the same.
Every day the Universe ends in Chaos.
oh, if you want proof that the philosophers existed.....

Completed 1/11/80.

'I ever came out the door I first went in'

Fitzgerald's Omar Kayyam

At first you're set to follow Jack o' Lantern
to learn not to apologise for his drifting touch.
In and out, above, below, anywhere there's learning he may go,
in alleyways and mud-walled towns,
wherever up and down.
Whenever he bleeds, we follow his tracks
at least he's not trying to wring out the past like a faded cloth
the grain of the years can only be attacked with a cross-cut saw.

Pici, 11/10/81.

The City

Oh, parks and gardens, put like that,
rows of empty street-lights on concrete,
Trams and trains, serviced by synthesised voices,
hissing like cats in bare spaces.
And under the streets, as always,
the slave-economy.

Dark men and women, misguided in money as in love
attending the chattering pot-lids.
Who's at home in the dirty city?
-the very rich and the very poor.

There's security in its facelessness
no place for the leisured sceptic.
And if it vanishes -swallowed in poison fields
or overplanted with green
it will be no more regretted
than a moth freed by an open window.

Frankfurt, 10/9/82

If you don't grow old too quickly
you can attain a sort of menstrual mysticism
whether through pain, coffee or honesty doesn't matter.
At least it stops you stumbling around here on earth.

* * *

If you can write
anguish is as commercial as herb tea.
If you can speak or even stammer
there is a place for hourly sagacity.
The centres of our cities feed on blood.

12/7/80

Most of your life is spent underground
even the smallest adventures are a chink of light.
You're as unconscious as the hours of the thistle,
only the open logic of the everyday keeps you awake at all.
The suffusion of the erotic in women's magazines,
the kitchen-clatter of the television
the unspoken trudge between events.
If you're lost in a corridor its doorways may be as large as the gates of a city.
No-one comes now to visit your gallery of worn china,
or approve your devotions.
Your letters aren't posted
and your visitors never arrive.
Waiting to be convinced of mortality
your existence has turned sepia.
Your sisters and daughters have gone out now and won't return.

4/12/79.

Waiting for you in the rainy season

In the hot, dry time, love is given diffidently,
But with the rain, there's a vortex of possibility,
a startling dawn, the sky cracked open like an egg,
cool afternoons, an evening loose like a prostitute's robe.
So, if we can pick our way between the pools of water,
out to where they're building some monument,
I can take your love and drink it freely like rain-water.
away from the acrid streets you can unbind your breasts.
We all keep travelling yet our imaginations lead us nowhere,
poured into one indifferent city after another,
like ants seeking sugar.
But it's outside that things germinate
by the rivers, reeds and grasses give their spores into the upper air.
Everything prepares to give birth
and if we give way to this indifferent fecundity
our children will all be daughters.
the storm ends,
Love flourishes with water.

Kaduna, 25/8/85

...your castles on the high, warm islands of Melanesia
sitting day on day under the draped roots of the banyan,
Calling attention day on day to the domains of the forest,
aleatory trigrams, formally rush and viridian.
Smoking ambergris, poured slowly over a dying beetle,
a flickering macaw recaptured
herbs gathered and crushed for another day.
The rain renews itself like a goddess and the rivers speak like flutes

All these people, harmless
grown cheerful with seaweed
like sunken Spanish galleons.

1969

You don't need a weatherman..'

I.

Down through the villages a dry wind's blowing
-the faithful are being called to prayer.
The drunkard's walk becomes the theologian's apologetic.
The earth's secrets are blown about and the wanton spirits of the air evaporate
Pot-herbs and wild fruits are left for the goats
and all the world's luminous uncertainties
vanish in the electric glare.
The bees have left their hive.

II.

Our empires are subtle, swimming things, tar on a new road, poison in the blood-stream,
We're grit in your nails, witchweed on your sorghum
the iron city on the horizon and the gutter at your feet.
We build houses where no-one would go before with a candle,
our feet echo in the empty corridors.
If we come with bronze trumpets and kettle drums that's no reason to disbelieve us,
If the fish in the great rivers swim into our nets, that's not our fault
Our railways don't break down the palace doors
or our roads demolish the city gates.
We do have sanctity measured in candles and there's no despair
even the weakest of us marches towards the future.

Perhaps you find our prose elliptical
but half the known world follows out commandments.
We have no patience with mountebanks
there's no reason to prove that truth is beauty.
One man's laughter decays the teeth
another's causes the grass to grow.

We have a yoke on eroticism -the well of sensuality is poisoned.
the ticking of computerised music follows us everywhere
we trade in decayed air.
If you don't see why we need you
ask God.

He has been known to provide the answers to such questions.
Do termites know why the rain falls?

Undated.

Sometimes you think the rains must wash away
the miasma over the earth and leave it clean
but the trees only shine for a season.

October, 1976

The floors and walls of these old houses
are charged with frustration,
Their kitchens hazy with a toxic animation.
An indefinite skein of tired music enropes them all.
They cluster round a postcard from Mexico
'If you climb to the top of one of those pyramids, you'll see
something new.....won't you?

15/12/79

Shamans

Shamans have knives to open your head,
and give voice to your tongue.
Can you answer, your spirit flew out by the roof,
or drowned in a river of blood?
There's no appeasing them.

The sibilances of the animals enter them,
they have purposes with fireflies.
They dance among the small herbs
and whisper with salamanders.
There's no talking to them.

In the womb of the earth, iron's alive,
above, caterpillars feed on the leaves of the world-tree
The fault-lines cross and re-cross the world
even the night is broken open.
There's no mistaking it.

But to you, with your classical imagination,
their blades are still not long enough.
No ditch is so small you can't remain trapped in it
and who wouldn't want to believe they've fallen in the canal that leads to reality?
There's no belying it.

If you enter the past -its a cracked vessel
the bedroom of a courtesan, the stony course of a river
A kingdom of locked doors -rickety ladders into the sky,
the untouchable morality of catastrophe.
There's no revoking it.

If you flicker out into the clean air of the future
its chiming tones are a fugue without dissonances.
No messages can be brought back from an empty field
your prophecies will be as lucid as glass.
There's no obscuring them.
In the garden, forking paths lead in every direction,
but the cities they approach are everywhere the same.
you can't excise the sombre hum of reality
or the pitiless succession of sun and moon.
There's no disturbing them.

So, summon in your spirit to the tune of hanging stones
-with a drum and gourd-rattle you can remake the world.
Seed the tireless ocean with the crystals of madness,
unanswer the serious and begin new masquerades.
There'll be no ending to it.

Final version, 8/2/81.

'I tell you, you cannot compare this life you live today with ours in the past'

With a creaking of old forms I sat,
descrying pencilled scholia,
But a wind, rushing through the rooms,
came with a voice from the high sky, whistling and convolute.

'You'll not know - with those papers of yours swirling back and forth like swallows, how
we lived.'

'Your answers are like blocks of stone,
once you set them in place, they cannot be lifted.'
and, of course, I wanted to make amends,
but could only offer coffee and a genius for scribbling.

'Your reparation - shall I wear it over my head, like a torn sack in cold weather?
Your guilt - great gobbets of it - before I'd have used it to seal cracks in my wall.
Your religion and its atheism -knotted fingers of blood and fantasy.

'But', I said, 'you can't turn the world inside out or rewrite the page,

-nor repair the broken'

1/7/82

You can take a book off the shelf
and with it comes a whiff of Armageddon
sketches by Leonardo,
quatrains by Nostradamus.
All the air's aswirl with cinnamon and sulphur.

* *

We'll go down to hell accompanied by good books
or a string quartet playing God Bless America.
The demons that populate our television screens
were serious when we were joking.
After we're dead we can watch videos
of silly people trying to save the world.

28/8/85

I think I've walked across the world and spread my hands to catch the people drifting in its	open-eyed tide
But most of them speak languages that I don't They smile a bit or whisper and then let go	understand my hand
and some of them tell stories that I can't quite though I never know the truth of them for after that	believe they leave
For hours I've followed people who vanish into sand-dunes -and you can't see where they've	playing tambourines been
Some of them wear crazy masks as they dance around I've always been afraid to tell them that	the temple now its empty
And sometimes I come upon a shrine that's left I burn a cup of oil for the Saint who's been	unguarded discarded
Some I meet are beggars hopping round on They curse God for their condition, how can I say	twisted limbs it wasn't him?
And if one day I should decide to stop and take would these other people disappear as if they'd been	a rest dismissed?
If I chose to migrate South beyond this rank would it be their quiet entreaties has at last become	confessional inaudible?
If you think years afterward of everyone would you recognise them if they stopped you	you met in the street
Would you always know them by the bells that jingle or would it always be	at their feet, too late?

January, 1978

Wormwood

A pain in the spine and you're down on your knees praying.
Your mouth won't open and shut any more,
your lip's split to the nose
and blood spills out from your eye.
You have to pull away the coping-stone to tell you what's been
happening under the earth.
In your dreams, headhunters are chasing your skull,

only you don't have a gold sovereign to buy them off
because you bent down to look at an orchid.

May, 1978.

Fantasies

I. Breughel's Tower of Babel was only a few stories high

I though I saw elves at work,
laying dynamite beneath the television transmitters,
and carrying off the foundations of office-blocks.
I found them running spice-bazaars in alleyways
and heard the tinkling of their bells on the corner of the street
They printed out broadsheets making fun of the United Nations
blew squeakers during Party Political Broadcasts
and loved everybody just a little.
They were blamed for the sex and violence on television,
and a judge muttered they should go back to Afghanistan
whence, he supposed, they had migrated.
But they came upon a world slumped in its armchair,
so I think they must have quietly tiptoed out the door again.
Someone asked me later if I wasn't mistaken -wouldn't they have left
at least some traces?

August 23/29 1978

II.

Some mornings you have to hope the house will stay where it is,
Paracelsus has borrowed the kitchen for his experiments,
and Quasimodo's moved into the attic.
The girl next door with the straggly blond hair is
teaching her sea-lions to catch fish, and they're digging up the
road outside to look for a Roman temple. The back garden's piled up
with broken furniture and the door that doesn't shut still doesn't shut.
The floor's half an inch deep in instant coffee and you watch your
annotated copy of George Herbert float by. The cat's strangled itself in the Japanese
wind-chimes.
No-one seems to know whose trombone that is on the mantelpiece,
or which drawer the left-handed scissors are in,
and the only thing you can remember is
a documentary about Beethoven's progressive deafness,
and that you live in a global village.

Someone's rings you up, but it's no good
your soul's on holiday

Sunday, 15th September, 1978

III.

There's so much understanding about, salted and packed in barrels,
waiting for export
some of it might be distributed to the malnourished.
So much money -perhaps it might be dried and smoked,
then they'd take it in exchange for beads.
So much love -wrapped in old clothes and packed in tea-chests
it could be safely trucked up-country.
If we spill any in the wrong place
the wound can be rubbed with alcohol.

11/4/80

IV. Did Calvin store gunpowder at Geneva?

Commonplace demons, being of low caste,
were accustomed to tormenting sinners with pitchforks
But with Reformation,
the greater influx of the damned required
more efficiency.
So they took to dragging humanity through lakes of fire
since this meant less
individual attention.
The lakes of fire silted up rapidly.

Lucifer, in despair at fools,
who came to Hell,
without even taking advantage of evil on Earth,
secretly affixed a ladder between
New Amsterdam and Heaven.
A few escaped up there
before it was noticed.

Impressed by the power of the printed word
and the way in which telegraphic communication spread and
maintained the Empires of capitalism in all parts of the world,
he invented psychoanalysis.

1973

A song is like the sea
washing at our feet, waiting to be heard.
It moans beneath our houses -its head lies crumpled on the pillow,
hair unbound. You can't recover it with entreaties,
or unpick its layers like some cunning pastry.
In its laziness, you find it slung on the donkey with a wineskin
in its moment -inscribed on stone columns.
Our names are not among its cadences,
it is confused as raw silk.
Yet when its open mouth closes at last,
there is no silence but its silence,
no despair but its despair.

London, 21/6/79

Rondeau

some star-trodden wood streets
 beyond Damascus. Odd leaning roofs
permuting with the minarets
or not, as is the dream.
You could perturb the glassy textures of our cities
 with a footstep,
or not, as is your power.
stone patterns in the cold mountains of Peru -unreconstructed palaces
 a mezzanine reality
demanding gold and apotheosis
 or not, as is the way.
These castle walls allow to watch people,
 shifting, dissolving like grains of salt,
and you cannot go down to help them
or will not.

Summer, 1973

Thrushes

You wake up one morning, startled by the sun,
for the other people in the house, the day seems to have begun.
You tell your lover to leave you and sweep her china animals off the shelf
and wandering in the other rooms, you find you're by yourself.
You suddenly have a language that no-one understands,
you've lost all your store of rhetoric and can only use your hands.
Just beyond the doorstep, the poppies grow in clusters,
and you must walk out among them, though you can sense disaster.
Everyone you meet outside just shakes your hand and leaves,
but that's alright, because you know it isn't them you have to meet.
You sit down on a gate to wait and someone takes your arm,
you hear a voice speak softly, merely asking if you'll come.
You want to turn and challenge them, but the words go all astray,
you find that you can't face them so you twist your head away.
You no longer have your stories, your songs have found no singer,

the voice you hear behind you is warm and full of anger.
No-one comes to ask you now to come and entertain them,
you remember all the preachers and their silent congregations.
All at once you have the courage, you're ready to confess,
but she turns and walks away -and of course there was no test.
Your soul's laid out as neatly as the stones that mark the path,
but no-one's come to look at it, so you pick it up and laugh.
Some people crack you open like a snail-shell on a stone,
break you into pieces and then leave you on your own.

February/June 1978

Homage to Herodotos

ride down to the oasis at Ghat with a desert truck,
sand gathers before your eyes, kohl, as it were.
Beyond the road's sinuses the angular web of the desert.
Silica crystals edge the fortresses,
warming your hands with their roughness.

Ksar Mara

Herodotos sailed down to Thebes and listened to the priests with clasped hands
-how the land of Libya flowed with oryxes and jackals
of the Gyzantians 'who paint themselves red and eat monkeys,
whereof there is an inexhaustible store in the hills'.

Tanezrouft

Now and then, the road turns in a circle;
someone died there and other travellers
have scraped arcana in the sand.

and of the Nasamones who grind up locusts and sprinkle them on milk
and the Gindanes whose women put leather bands around their ankles to count the number of
their lovers
or the Atarantes, who have no names but curse the sun that turns their land to dust.

Ouarzazate

The desert's only empty today
but it can be tapestried with Lotophagi
you can see again the Garamantes, 'who hunt the Ethiopian troglodytes with four-horse chariots',
who build houses of salt, white and purple, forming cities.

Terhazza

Rub your eyes at sunset, greet the Touareg,
watch the splintered rocks carefully,
persuade Herodotos to rid with you on the truck,
pointing out new countries.

Clouds are all colours.

August, 1974

People

I. Writing to you in red ink

Cauterize your voice,
curse the blood flowing in the veins of your hands.
Pilgrims you can afford to be disgusted by,
the moon, foundering in a black wash,
need not be salvaged.
The hills, cinnamon with war, pass under your slender fingers,
like underdrawn Chinese scrolls.
Greengrey lizards watch you from the broken stones,
the wind scatters the strands of your dark hair,
and you whisper imprecations to all the hidden mirrors.

Certainly I would not exchange you for a street of Bombay prostitutes.

1973

II.

My paths were always somewhat skew
and then I was considering the river,
when I heard you, tired, but singing
and you brought me bread and tomatoes.
As you laughed, I saw your feet had sandals,
heard your breath like a panpipe, hurrying to higher pitches,
and saw, quite dimly, the constellation of your dreams.

but, as it happened, I was going somewhere else
-though on the hot roads of the South I sometimes did wonder if

Final version,
September, 1976

III.

..shadows two columns, a semitone apart,
a toccata of sunlight on the flat rocks

The Greece of Pausanias
laid out like squares of biscuit,
terracotta diagrams of palaces.
Honeycomb tiles, golden, white and blue,
geometrical theorems in the space of a bright rag.
Dolphins and monkeys swimming through the stone-green light,
sea-grass decaying.

and a caryatid
having walked beside her all summer
among the olives and the locusts
he laid his hand on her forehead
but even that was too much,
she fell apart like badly fired porcelain.

He cut out her thigh-bone to make himself a flute,

painted the bark of the tree carmine with her blood
and left the fragments,
 for the small lizards that live under the walls
 and her golden hair crumbled
 into the sand-strewn earth.

1974

IV.

All around there were uninterpretable grotesques -the air
crumbled with cinders -or we were under a lake, tilapia and weeds in
the upper air -wind formed vortices at the intersection of the streets
and you could hear the singing from underground chapels -I had begun
to see even my hand as mutated.

and you dropped like an egg from the womb of a dream
-laughing at the silence -singing to the tree stumps -building
your house of loose stones -planting for the next rains.

and I thought that, like Newton, I had spent too long peering
into the workings of things
picked back through the analects of Confucius to see if I had
missed something,

Turn over a stone in the forest and you will find wood-lice.
Hagfish swarm in the ocean's mud. Wandering through the
corridors of a monastery I thought I heard an echo of the trumpets at
the corners of the world.

But you suppose we're all a little crabbed,

enough sunshine and

all these imaginings will evaporate.

August, 1976.

V.

I suppose the world you're passing through
is all wind-chimes and paper-flowers.
You hardly even disturb the dust that has been so carefully raked
been raked into position.
Your observances are made to the fat god in the corner
and some others in the house.
I came in, shaking the snow from my sandals,
and offered you a branch of apricot blossom.
You smiled, took it, and left it between the pages of a book
where I found it three days later.

and now you're gazing into the mountains
and you never once look round.
I almost said, 'No-one can live up there'.

But you know that.

30/1/78

VI.

You're all aslant
at least I
could sometimes see where the edge of the road had fallen away
and noticed there weren't any caryatids to hold up
the temple

But you're close mouthed,
perhaps you've had to crawl under too many barbed-wire fences.
There might be a drought suddenly,
and now you're afraid to suffer.
You've always had to hope you're right
because no-one would refuse you.
But don't tempt me
you might break like a clay pot.

26/10/78

Among us, you find some that are disconsolate,
regretting the new Jerusalem or a lost cat
some that are weary,
climbing the Mount of Olives; a nostrum for despair
some that are unloved
and search their body every day before the mirror
some corroded
by the cruel sentences of biology.

They seek the New Jerusalem, the fifth Rome,
hunch over maps for hints of Eldorado, and when they conclude, with us,
that the mystics were lying, or at least, bewitched,
some try and make this our earth in their image.

Crime can be fought with blunt instruments, matchlocks and computers
But terror,
is belief, hope and faith
attack them and you unravel the world.

Lagos-Abidjan 12/5/86

The long hand of the pigeon

All your memories are calumnies..
Your people have fallen though the hole in the centre of the French coin,
their houses are scattered in the forest and their goats gone to the leopards,
they have been crushed on the path like insects.

Lies were drawn out from a stone as men draw copper for a woman's bangle
Your traditions were sold for a bolt of cloth
your kingdoms exchanged for a child's slate.
Songs were coiled in the slow turning of your pots,
now the pots are broken, the songs seep into the earth.
Your right and left hands each had their own history,
but your wrists are bound together.
How would you fight when peace and war cannot be distinguished?

January 1979/March 1980

The City

during the course of the last century
certain travellers, army officers and affluent citizens
journeyed to the royal city of Esfahan.
and thence with mules and camels to the ruins
of Persepolis.
They climbed among the fallen columns,
brushed sand from the reliefs
and regarded with interest the potsherds and
tiny statues the local people represented to them as having been found
on the site.

Deciding the occasion of their visit,
required some memorial, a stone-cutter from the
near-by village was employed to incise their names and the date of
their visit on the great gateway -which generally took a day and a
half.

Last year I went to Persepolis
and saw the broken pillars
the shallow stairways
the bronze trumpet in the museum,
and read these graffiti with a mixture of amusement and irritation.

Spring, 1974.

The Emperor of the Last Days

Alexander built a wall to keep out
the tribes of Gog and Magog
and with a shout
they threw down the wall marched across the Hindu Kush
burnt the temples of the plain raped the women in the villages of Ethiopia,
people asked- will the Emperor come again?

The Emperor lay sleeping in the mountain
clouds surrounding his tomb,
but one night the lightning set the rocks on fire
and the Emperor came down.

The Emperor's marching on Rome
take you hay-forks, gather your women,
beat your hoe-blades into swords
and we'll follow him -the Judgment is beginning

and the Popes hid in their citadels -no-one had told them
the end of the world had come
they thought it was a few noisy citizens wanting to knock down
some of the streets of Rome.

All the people on earth have gathered
to march on Jerusalem
and the armies of the demons are preparing
for the final exorcism.

The sky is torn open like parchment
a horseman in white appears
the kings of the earth are led captive
before the the throne of Antichrist.

The Emperor's come to Golgotha,
his captains by his side
his crown is laid upon the cross
a sunbeam struck him and he died.

The Heavenly Host defeats the Antichrist
with a great deal of smoke and fire,
till the earth itself looked like pictures of Hell
and the people are in despair.

Then the demons were driven back into the pit,
and Christ came before the people and said,
'You must all go back to your villages,
Judgement won't be just yet'.

They looked around at their burning cities,
the charred fields and the ruins of their homes,
they buried their dead and tramped off again
still waiting for Kingdom come.

*17/2/77.
Revised 1/3/79*

**Poem dedicated to Miss Catalina Laserna on the attainment of her quarter-century,
January 1st 1978.**

The Dewlings was a nice house way down in Doklominskaya
only three *versts* from the railway station
and if it hadn't been so cold
Dostoyevsky might have written
'Crime and Punishment'
there.

My father was a tractor-driver on a collective farm
until he lost his teeth
the night the Cossacks came to our village.
Semyon Afansyevich would only drink tea
when the glass was half-full with sugar.
He retired to a monastery,
after a demon spoke to him from a sack of flour.
and when he died
the body stayed uncorrupted for three days.
Our village policeman couldn't say whether his passport was valid
for those three days.

My aunt used to read the pamphlets put out by
the Socialist Truth Society,
and if she had been a bit less deaf,
she might have thrown bombs for the anarchists.

How hard our lives were!
Some weeks there would be nothing to eat but bread and sausage,
and the cabbages would lie rotting on the ground.
Every evening the peasants would be drunk on vodka,
-sometimes the manager of our collective would come by
and see them lying in the muddy straw.
'Can't you see, something must be done to help these people?'
Our village was a sad one.

Paris, 1/1/78

and someone taught them to read
all the long ages of dreaming Sanskrit epics
the aboriginal poems of the pornographers
the songs of the Great Mantis.
How else could you furnish the Hall of Grotesques?

The brightly polished mythologies, the ritual knives,
caught like cobras unawares.

I had thought my friends -oh, *trouvères*, griots
might help me burn the museums
that their lutes might break the silence
But perhaps I wasn't very serious.

Afraid of my own prophecies the Red Man
the Hanged King
the destruction of the New Jerusalem
the morning of the magicians,
the crumbling of the Wall at the World's End.

I shrouded them in satire, and lied to the cheerful music of the nickelodeon
unimagining.

9/5/76

The Silence¹

The old people at the end of the world
securing the walls of their driftwood Eden,
hold up their fragile mysteries like a candle
engraving them on the skin of the sea-wolf,
to conjure the sour wind.

In our darkness there is no darkness.

Our dogmas are written on the ceilings of your schoolrooms,
your children's hands are stained with their ink.
Our policemen are trained in the use of dialectic
they use their rifles sparingly.

We have given birth to a world full of promises, our generosity with the future
shackles the dead and the living.
Our revolutions have the insubstantial beauty of firecrackers
our tranquility the infinite vacuity of empty space.

-if there are only phantoms to appreciate our genius
the storerooms of our museums will be full.

October, 1979

Puff-ball

Drunken syntax and an armoury villages disappear at death's festival
and the phosphorus in their bones fertilises the earth.
Marx and Engels (you might imagine) sitting, listening to a palm-court
orchestra, knotting their fingers in surprise,
-meant none of this.

and Burton Barth Nachtigal
were innocent.

The missionaries, distributing salvation like fresh corn-bread,
the printers of postage stamps the designers of uniforms
the drivers of outdated steam-engines had nothing to do with it.

Even the mercenaries caught up in their comic strip glory
were uninvolved.

In fact, those who had really washed in the river of madness were the people in the villages

-the people who couldn't afford Hondas and powdered milk,
who had no strength other than the wet earth around their houses,
whose harps hung unmended in the rafters and whose moon was eaten monthly.

Presently it was announced that they were to be preserved
-broadcasts were transmitted by satellite,
anthropologists twinkled like stars in the night sky.
Officially everyone would be issued with a banjo and three cans of beer a day.
Further evidence of atrocities under colonial rule would be uncovered and import licenses for
hymnbooks severely restricted.

The nation would be put under a dust-cover
-people exchanged for ivory carvings made somewhere else.
Instant coffee and tea-chests of the Chairman's wisdom.
A paltry exequy for the old earth.
Innocence is only to hand for torpid imaginations,
any larger abstractions will just rattle around like a coin in a beggar's cup.

Markets are burnt down to prevent disease
People shot to prevent thought.

July, 1976.

Hill-Tribes

1. with Columbus, we lost our innocence,
one afternoon among the Caribs,
and the world soured, like milk.

The sea was poisoned and now we're at its edges
casting with fine-meshed nets.

2. We came to the foothills and hailed them with iron megaphones.
'Peace is declared -come down from your castles and farm the plains'
And, carrying their magical spears, and some heads they'd stolen
from the less witting, they came.
We clasped their hands and said that wisdom, at least, was
available to everyone, once they decide to pay its price
-we pointed to our own neatly preserved sensibilities.
What songs the mothers sang went unrecorded
and now their children's houses have no walls.

3. There's nothing to say the fine crystal chains that join the spheres
can't be broken.
The sky can be stained indigo, and the earth painted red or black.

History can be drawn off like blood and poetry dissolved in half a
glass of water.
There are no marshes that can't be drained and no forests that can't
be cut down.
There's nothing to be said for silence or forgetfulness
and no answers to our questions either.

January, 1979

Lost Originals

I. Mirabiliae urbis Romae -a song for Hildebert

who followed the paths across the armed mountains
by the fallen towers of Milan
to the gates of Rome.

and, as he proceeded from one marvel to another, became convinced that the Roman
Empire was truly the divinely appointed predecessor of Christendom.

saw how the temples of the old gods were thrown into the marshes and the treasures of a
hundred kingdoms despoiled,
that this ruin had itself been fashioned.

and wrote, certain that Joachim du Bellay had been wrong
-a second Rome had risen.
that would be his act of faith.

of course, the city is eternal,
-Juvenal complained of the crowded streets.

II. Venice

I hitchhiked down the autostrada to Venice,
remembering Monteverdi,
and saw only blinded peasants tapping along the walls of concrete alleys.
I slept out by the railway station, walking from place to place to see if the Doges had left
any graffiti.

Somewhere along the Canal was the Basilica, golden and smudged blue, the
turbulent mythologies on its walls growing more obscure each day.
Beneath the great palaces I saw mosses crumbling the piles.

The guardians of the Serene Republic are men selling die-cast Eiffel towers and
prostitutes with bright green scarves.

and someone explained about the
fund they'd set up to stop the city falling into the lagoon.

III. Florence

Imagine,
wandering with Petrarch on the low hills
throwing pebbles into silver streams
and tangling the skeins of silver grass.

I sat around in the cafes reading paperback art books.
wondering when it would stop raining.
One afternoon I walked up to Fiesole
inappropriately humming Beethoven,

only to find they'd closed the ruins for the afternoon.

As Petrarch walked from one courtyard to another,
thrushes in their gardens and bright anemones underfoot,
each with fountains splashing in the centre, where gracious ladies
sat to discuss their lovers,
he wondered if poetry were not a temptation of the Devil,
like water dropping on a stone, it ate away his soul.

The students were all complaining about the Americans,
who, it seemed, were inflicting the petrol station and so on on the rest of us,
and were somehow responsible for the corruption of the local judiciary.

the world of weeping virgins and spring mornings,
was at least an elegant fantasy.

Sequence completed 31st May, 1974

Anger

Take an axe to your television,
there's only some copper wire and coloured plastic inside.
Hack up the stereo with your electric carving knife,
put your automated kitchen on a lorry and drive it off a cliff.
After that you could take apart your neighbours,
there's nothing much inside them either.
and when you've finished, you could use the axe on your head.

Summer, 1977

Cannibals

But you can't stop us eating people, we print them out like photostats, and when we've finished, screw them up into a ball and throw them in a corner, or chew them up for pulp to make Sunday newspapers.

The people who walk about in our paperback cities have no real existence. Set light to them and they vanish, take away their radios and they fill up cardboard hospitals.

Ideologies collect flies, governments scuttle by like cockroaches.

Marx got his scrapbooks mixed up somehow, and now his disciples are just grinding new teeth for the gears in some endless machine.

We've eaten all the people who sat around in armchairs until their death, waiting for the revolution to happen.

All those who fell asleep half-way through their lives,
Those who are happily or unhappily married,
Those who find joy in Turkish poppy-fields
or wisdom by the lakes of Kashmir,
those who are professional anything.

Their shares in the universe have been burnt.

Summer, 1977

I.

The summer's like spun sugar,
everyone drawing our delicate patterns.
A single sheet of paper can be folded to make a flower,
grass seeds blow everywhere.
But in winter, they're all buying tape to keep out the cold.
indexing their newspaper cuttings
or listening to the radio,
and you must meet everyone all over again.

21/11/78

II.

I've stood here tapping my nails against
the glass of your door for weeks,
until everyone else has forgotten where I am,
and finally you answer,
letting me into the hall with an unhappy smile, saying,

'But there's nothing in the house.'
and that, seems to be true.
How can I believe it now?

21/11/78

III.

So many adventures have not made me less of a foolish spirit.
Fantasies mature, yet remain fantastical.
Imagine flying -the pteranodon made it

so why not you?

Guiseley, 10/8/86

IV.

Great Conversations

sometimes I'm talking to you,
and its as if all the great philosophers
were passing by in the street outside.
I occasionally wonder where they're going.

There seem to be poets somewhere away upstairs
physicists are making toast in the kitchen,
theologians are arguing out on the landing,
and mostly I get an urge to push them all into a stagnant pond.

31/1/78

J'ai étudié les Qu'rans et
tous les livres saints des civilisations Gothiques,
pour savoir si le rossignol chante la-dedans,
ou si on n'entend que le cri d'un aigle fusillé.

Meister Eckhart a écrit aussi,
pour nous donner des renseignements,
au sujet des chemins de fer,
mais il s'est servi d'un vieil horaire.

1973

Bliss

Our love bleeds like honey-cake,
and though the tumbled hexagons hold together society
Each dark dry structure, justice, curiosity,
can crumble away.
Whenever I look for you,
you're out tending the trees.

Some of us stay awake for so long
that when we sleep - the world's attendant changes
all occur at once.
Spices gain new savours
and words new meanings.
Eloquence becomes insignificant as tigers retake the forest.

Guiseley, 10/8/86

Where the birds fly, there are no traces,
 no untidy smears on the pathways of the air,
And in the desert, where some oryx remain,
 the winds easily covers the marks of their hooves.
The bourdons of whales traverse the oceans from north to south
 hardly even displacing the water.
Yet we have disfigured the earth, so that millennia
 will be needed to make it clean.

*Gatié Loumo
13/6/87*

There are some islands, where the laughter has been squeezed out
 -like water from a rag
where goats and rats have displaced more magical creatures,
 and concrete regenerates like coral.
The ocean has its highways; -civilization stopped here,
 wearing its askew disguise: video-games, sugar, ideology,
 were disgorged upon the beach.
People were thrown away like a plastic cup,
 plants without names uprooted, in favour of their weary
 relatives from the temperate zones.
Hillsides fell into the sea like collapsing piers.

Of course there are apologies -the earth resounds with them,
 they blow through the empty houses, and shake the poles
 that hold up the canopy of the sky.
Regret -a specialized occupation of the middle classes
 expressed in the madness of museums
 gives birth to nothing more than stones.

*Ngouma/Bambara Maounde
19/6/87*

The cracking seed and the star Sirius

To speculate is to suppose
that there's water at the end of a long dry tunnel,
that the earth has been visited by fire.

From where we sit under
the granary at mid-day, collapsing the history of the world
into a few choice aphorisms,
there's nothing conclusive.
Nothing you'd want to make a book out of
and rule the world.

for all the
hot disorder of the day, barking dogs and stray conversation,
there are no random sequences.

Every wild imagining,
plucked from the air like floss and packed into a chest
would hardly fill the space of half an hour.

Catfish free themselves from the mud,
and God sends us cryptic messages
something we should reflect on.

Some indeed,
deny everything,
if the earth appears to be flat, then it is.

Well, let them lie on their cast-iron beds. Here up on the roof,
among the stars and kinder planets chiming in their orbits,
things can be seen as they really might be.

Sirius brought us luck, anthropologists
bearded men to share our enthusiasms
climb with us to where the pygmies once lived.

and the problem's only that
whatever we believe now
is what they told us we believed.

Mopti, 28/5/87, Severe, 13/3/05

Overthrow

When all the world's in squares
every hill and valley sharp-edged
the tongues arguing for disorder silenced
and even the insects in retreat
then it will be time.

When the silly cry of village orators
and the oblique tunes of empty stairwells
have become mixed with the wind
the pan-pipes of the knife-grinders
may sound the alarm.

Plaintive discussions in the banks and cafes
dismay at the writers' union
stale cakes and ersatz coffee
the afterglow of terminals
extinguishing.

Like fish surfacing to die on a lake
or cattle staggering in a drought
the grey and white men
at last confront the aching world
they have created.

Snakes unwind and strike
the clocks stop
the landscape reforms
and they see the forest
cover the whole earth.

The machinery of their dreams
and the machinery of dreams
the great tangle of obsequious photons
disperse.

You can't begin anew
each generation stands
if not on the shoulders
at least on the bones of those
who passed before them.

Robe, 18/11/86

California

White walls, white ceilings, Spanish patio,
disgorged on the city, we're without orientation,
cross-streets a-flicker,
Behind every wall, another wall, and beyond that, a painting of a wall
boles of cactus, sword-edges of palm leaves,
and the blue, indeterminate sea,
at the centre of every imagination.

The carillon of the missions, the three-chord ukulele player,
the cocaine tremor of the radio,
a clatter of unedited images,
conjurations to prevent the mountains falling into the sea.
Space is locally distorted, around every corner another corner,
the tremor of a sunbeam bent by gravity,
a Medusa's head of roads,
connecting the temples.

The search is on, following the promontories and crags,
detectives on every foreshore,
whoever she was, she ran out into the ocean,
trailing phosphorescence from her fingers.
The lamp in our cell is out, beyond our darkness, another darkness,
the whistle of birds and telephones ceases,
silence, once insubstantial, becomes pervasive,
the long-awaited chaos is to hand.

Saratoga, 26/11/87

Your beauty's there for everyone -but your love's high on the shelf
in a biscuit tin.

Reach it down for me.

Hand me your digital clock -I'll send it crazy
your diary -I'll burn it.
We'll live out on the street for a while,
outside the dismal schedules of the highways,
roast fishes, gather the seeds of the wild wheat,
follow the fractals of the shore...

Oh, I read too many fantastical books, and you
hit the piano too often.
The rhythm of our love has fled.

To London, 11/12/87

Each of us looks for love in our own way,
some wandering, some still,
some gorged, some incomplete,
but all hoping to glimpse mysteries.

For if not there, where else can they be found
-now the universe is charted?

Port Sudan
7/3/88

The shape-changer

In the still-untidy jungles of South America,
it waits for us.
In high apartments over the breathless cities,
it asks for our belief.
Lodged in our spine like the tip of an arrow,
or curled like a grub in a ripe cashew.
Everywhere you look -in the niches of cathedrals
winking from the goblets of conjurers
dripping from sides of beef in the slaughterhouse
clashes in the overtones of the piano.

You raise your hand to strike and your heel bleeds
your curse is lost among the radio jingles.
No more intangibles; no moral dilemmas.
you're to be roasted as if you were a Christian.

Cambridge 20/1/88

Poison

Like smoke and cobalt,
they dissolve in the fluids of the brain
gathering like gum arabic on the trees
immaculate in their subtlety.

The executioners are meeting, swords in hand,
if the planet is dying, who'll care to
announce the victims?

Khartoum-London
18/3/88

Look down with me
small fiery creatures, with salamander tongues
gaze up at us from the abyss.
Follow me down, briefly, into hell,
so you can tell them afterwards,
something of where I led you.
But don't imagine,
that you can see with my eyes,
or catch the fire-sprites' words.
Long afterwards, surviving,
you'll remember the three children,
who escaped the furnace.

As for me, I'll be off
in some disused part of the world,
singing old love songs.

Cairo-Khartoum
15/2/88

Repentance

The lions in Trafalgar Square may yet
yap acceptance.
Newsmen mouthing, goldfish-like.

The sick lie on imaginary beds
unsure whether to live or die.

Xylophone-players and baked potato-sellers
still clog the street corners.
But the cities will soon be demolished
and the winds stir over the empty land.

Cairo-Khartoum
15/2/88

And those snowy days, when you stayed in to tell me
of the journeys we would make
of the scarabs that hide under rocks, of horses sacrificed for vulgar emperors,
and the ocean beyond the reefs.
I loved you then, though I think you didn't know it,
and now, I can't tell you.
Between one part of the world and another all the ways are crooked.

Cambridge
5/10/88

Love's like coffee, it keeps you awake at night,
but its other virtues are obscure,
unless filling up poets' notebooks is somehow useful.

Cambridge
3/10/88

"and now it seems, everybody's been havin' them dreams..."

We all hear soft voices calling for miracles,
the smooth transition,
the State withered on the branch.
Pythagoras listened to the chiming spheres
but we're bounded in one of his triangles.
It's not immodest to ask
for easy travel to other planets,
to surpass the dull dimensions of space
and the fruitless politics of everyday life.
Not unnatural to suppose
that outside our cone of vision,
salamanders, prophets, iridescent beings,
are there, pushing the electrons on their way.

Only, while you watch the skies,
the fences are down and the hyenas out.
They'll destroy the whole world as we sit here.

Virginia Beach
24/4/88

The Greeks took their wines to the
dry green coasts of the Mediterranean
trading intoxication for amber and gold.
Their imagination unravelled
as they tracked the turtles and dolphins
beauty found them at each landfall.

Now these shores are coasted by pirates,
dynamiting the coral
and cementing over the cracks in the earth.
The singers of epics stare at videos in the bars
and the stonemasons drive dump-trucks.
The merchants' cargoes bring no hope
just as striplights bring no illumination.

Whitwell/Boston
11/4/88

That day, when we watched the swallows over the city of the dead,
you were going to tell me,
what you'd left out from the night confessions,
and I thought, this time, I'll learn

The children were watching us, noisy but respectful,
and you said, 'if you do understand,
follow me out of the city, leave its oblique pleasures'.
Where your hand crossed mine it left a shadow.
And that's all there was for a remembrance,
walking in the alleys where the goldsmiths work, I lost you,
and though I heard your voice again, calling,
I could never see you.

And as I crossed back through the gate, I felt some regret,
for the stories you'd begun and not ended,
for the walks we might still have made.
But for our unfinished love -nothing.

*Cambridge
20/10/88*

Capitalism

If you could disassemble the philosophical machines
accelerators that transmute air into ideas
declare the sun and moon of equal size
we would be safe from rational men.
Philosophers give birth to them and then
rational men write scripts for soap operas.

*Italy
July, 1988*

You call me now to say we'll go out at midnight
when only the frogs are around
and walk there till dawn.

*Makurdi
9/6/90*

Once poets stood on every street corner
practising the clandestine administration of the law
but their dismal proclamations were lost in the noise of traffic

Date?

The Author Renounces Love

Ah Love! You and I did conspire
in the winters, when the house hung, cold and indefinite,
through summers, flavoured with indigestible longing,
to bring about some lapse into folly.

Come to think of it, the sorry scheme of things enveloped me
and off I went -forays to intemperate lands.

And so you wrote to me on pictorial aerograms,
quoting children's' rhymes,
saying 'out there' is only a place for the imagination
to reset the clock or renew the blood.

Come back! and I will
cover you with the erotic
lead you in a maze with no exit
forgive your foolish jokes
read to you from the mystics

and so at once I wrote back
excited by these promises, I asked to be forgiven.

You replied:
by staying in one place you can have the whole earth pass you by
[this you'd salvaged from general relativity]

So, leaving sensuality aside, I returned and

but you'll know what I found:
these things proceed like an often-read novel
that the cold rooms I'd left behind were still cold
that the sick were dead and the well grown sick
that the piles of books had grown into towers
that the state had become a strangling fig

and those incandescent glories I had set such store by?
-deferred till next week
poetry that was to be as edible as meringues?
-off the menu
carnivals almost luminescent with joy?
-under police protection

Well, I could see you weren't responsible -it was the climate
a new Ice Age, rising lake levels.
And I heard you'd been detained -a threat to public order?

In the past, spirits rose up to threaten us -but now we are surrounded
by the ghostly forms of economics textbooks.

But then I thought -you must know all this
that a warm hand clasping a cold one becomes cold also
that colour, lights, turbulence have no grainy texture
that people dance because they daren't stand still
that there are mirrors inside mirrors,
reflections within reflections
and finally no images.

So why then write to me? Pull down my dream.

Love, subject of so many television documentaries
and useful anthologies
surely you'd be more prudent by now?

and I

wouldn't be here but there
where surprise shakes you daily like fever
where the trees drop useless fruits onto your palm
where fish come swimming to you with small aphorisms

But I'd learnt what you had to teach
recited the new litanies of the state
shaken hands with the comfortable and the irritated
waited fruitlessly to be kissed
stayed calm, since staying calm was fashionable.

At least I suppose that was the lesson
that water-colour swirls look well on paper
but they have no place in the schemes of rational people.

Which is where it ends
a night sky obscured by misaligned floodlights
extraterrestrials maintaining radio silence
the spice-jar left too long uncapped.

In some ways I regret the ending of our long partnership
when we sat up late at night trying to imagine
what lever could move the earth
what new mathematics might ensure
each of us to find some fragment of their desire.

and I regret the selfish hope you encouraged
that somewhere above desire, exhausted animals reel in the heat
above an amniotic fluid of shared assumptions
I would find someone for the long ritual dance

But not so much, for now I see your offerings for what they are
over-sweet cakes with coffee
aimless music and shapeless images
politics melting and softening
plaintive silences of parents and children
money running in the flooded gutters.

Say nothing more, I'm bound to find
some untenanted eyrie, a stray pathway
to sense the earth's trepidation
to watch the mountains uncloud
and spring gather its forces in the uplands

Your letters? I'll burn them -send me a message in a forked stick
I'll send you back a drawing of a song
the ripe berries of coincidence
a tangle of coloured thread
I've nothing more serious to say, only laboured jokes.

and I'm away
down the river, into the hills, along the shore
gone to look into the sources of things
to dig for the roots of sunrise
to trace out philosophies running underground like streams.

and if your pigeon finds me, carrying a note in an italic script
those years will remain with me
aching in the summer, passing the winter in hopeless gatherings,
waiting on empty railway stations,
seeming to bleed without wounds.

Forget them?

Hardly.

*N'Djamena
11/6/89*

'I went out into the street and to everyone who passed,
I asked of you'

Flamenco song

You left, and I was still staring at those cuneiform texts
hoping for a chronicle of the imagination but guessing
some tedious merchant had come in to sit opposite me.
Before, I'd crossed paths with the masters of the millennia
but lately, it's come down to waiting for columns of figures
And you, you brought me glass fragments, small animals, postcards from Corfu
and either these things were love or were only fragments.
You left, and I was listening to that zither music
hoping for intoxication but now knowing
the river merchant's daughter had gone away.
You'd asked whether those mirrors showed the future
and the faces and names in the past would be just the same
clocks ticking backwards.
For lack of an answer I gave you words;
and those you can buy anywhere -though I didn't see it.

*Cambridge
April, 1991*

Drunk or sober, we can't exhume our innocence
steel ships replace wood and roads climb over other roads
When we put the bottle to our lips the wine pours away
computers whisper the arcana of oracles or repeat the questions of children
Where the forest went, no-one can say -they were only temporary enthusiasms
The sea washes up the scum of dead centuries
Television has inverted our world
we are all professors lecturing and only machines to listen.

Ibadan
27/4/91

Another Love Song

Your stories are all quite simple
telexes from another world
philosophies chopped into convenient squares.

I think you'd have me believe
truth's that way too
just tell me and I'll understand.

Of course we can all do wise things
interpret the world or change it
keep order among lies.

You withdrew your hand
kept me waiting for your kisses
knots in the chain that binds us.

and meanwhile, trains leave the station
birds migrate, the sky discolours
the year doubles back on itself.

So forgive me if I don't believe you
we can't all go to bed at night alone
or accept literature in place of love.

5/9/89

Love in a Side-Street

Ours is a sober civilization
 intemperate behaviour is imprisoned in a television studio
 violence managed thoughtfully for our entertainment
They say the poets were great drunkards
 praising mellow evenings soused in wine
 singing for us all.
Tertullian thought you couldn't believe poets even where they were awake.

Ours is a fantastical civilization
 where everyone dreams of being someone else
 and spacemen rule the planet.
Out there in the desert we drew great geometric theorems
 where better to demonstrate to God
 the logic of his universe?
Who'll speak for the silent and make paintings for the blind?

Ours is a murdering civilization
 the dead are intertwined with the living
 like a spreading vine.
We asked soldiers to design our society
 to tell us which trees fruits should grow on
 and which should be chopped down.
Someone else will have to get used to the smouldering earth.

Cambridge
14/11/91

I lost you in that garden
where the trees are set in order
xx
I thought I'd come upon,
a summerhouse, a square of lawn,
where all the paths would somehow come together.

and sometimes, shawms would sound,
processions pass and march around,
leaving trampled earth where people danced.
I thought perhaps you'd gone away,
with them to celebrate the May,
or whatever other season chanced.

People pass like meteors,
burning traces in the ether
and you can't always forget them though they've fallen far away.
You go tramping in the briars,
sight the ashes of their fires,
or go searching for their footsteps in the clay.

You left when it was winter
But with the other seasons missing
did you lock them in a chest and lose the key?

Are they shining in the rafters
or like bells along a halter
that ring

Are you somewhere in these corridors
describing patterns in the burnished floors
or trying summer dresses in an attic?
Are you tracing ragged pentagrams
in the frost upon the grass
with your fingernail to conjure the exotic?

You said before you left
that I should look for someone else
dressed in rags and tatters like the dancers on the green.
But the clothes you wore were black,
and like the chain around my neck
I'm bound to all the things I once have been.

Somewhere in my past
there is a scrap of coloured glass
the fragment that I need to watch the sun.
You must believe I couldn't know
You didn't warn me that you'd go
or give me time to end what I'd begun.

Rewritten, Cambridge, 17/1/85

Night birds calling

Though the owl seems to sleep, it has its own poetry;
 straight, precise verse, calling the praises of unwary mice.
So when the road roars and the greasy air shakes
 you should discern the jagged contours of a melody.

If we can't listen to the world without subtitles, or see it except through a screen
 its winding strophes may be abandoned
 for the simple text of our dark desires.

Rome 29/9/92

Nightfall

Better that history be swept out with every generation
 before the wall, no books, before the books, creation
No-one knows which side are the barbarians.
Facts lie about waiting to be blown away
 logs waiting to be sawn.
When we remember our mistakes, we cry
 on every stairway, miss a step.
Rats, mice, voles, scurry beyond our eyesight
 carrying sometimes plague, sometimes pollen for new flowers
and if the soul can fling aside its doubts and dreams

break the crumbling clay and scramble out
perhaps all Rome should burn, its books and walls,
for once each millennium, night falls.

Rome,
29/9/92

If you've come to touch me as you touch a keyboard
eliciting Bach or ghostly green script
know that I'm grateful in my absence
Remote arms will stroke your spine
electronic eyes emit sympathy at your indecisions
but where I'm walking,
rough stones and sparse trees
is over a river you cannot cross

San Francisco
2/1/94

Havaiki

If you've bound your life into a book
empty, dismayed or trivially full
illuminated capitals for each section
leave it for the analphabete rats.
Cast off, there's no guide to these islands
no frigate birds or seaweed trails
if you need epic stories, compose them
oceans preserve no tracks
Leave love behind, throw it out
like a dead crab or a coconut husk
no need for exigent emotions when you travel
they slow you like a contrary wind

* * *

and the terraces, the stone- towers, the birds graved on rocks?
the discarded bottles and the plastic spar?
no island is ever really deserted
no wind that has not blown that way before.

Sigatoka
31/1/94

trace lines in the desert
 knock out landing spaces in the wheat
build fiery towers in geometric patterns
 send out coded poetry to the cold corners of the galaxy
God, formerly of songs and the bloody spear,
 has been seduced into engineering
and now has cameras to record out infractions
We need watching,
 irascible and fractious, we burn down each other's buildings, turn forests
 into grass and grass to stones
We confound love and consolation
 real and imaginary apocalypses
swallow burning stones to cure out troubled hearts

and so, as our messages find no replies
 the earth burns and the last insects scatter
darkness is made visible

December, 1993

Dog Soldiers

Well you have us marching, blank rhythms across the scrub, spears of burnt grass
crackling
gravel making sand,
We carry lights, though honest men are few,
and compasses, though we hardly need direction
Our hands, usually idle, are ugly, indistinct,
our legs, straight, muscled, argue for running
When the night's run out and dawn's come too far to be pushed back
let us leave, take the desert roads, the path through the marshes
Scattering and chivvying, like water-birds, drinking from roadside pools,
gathering figs from unco-operative trees.

[Unfinished..]

? early 1994.

You remember, that old America,
the one that lived, almost, in black and white
of shapeless, unnecessary cars and dark felt hats
of cheerful television and quiet streets.

There was another England, too
of shambling, amiable policemen more than two yards high
criminals who gave themselves up, like fruit falling from trees,
and rounded cars moving decorously along empty highways.

Of course, those days when you look up from work,
stare through the streaked window,
or trudge the filthy pavements,
past half-people in suits and whole human beings in cardboard boxes,
you're sure, sure it *was* all like that.

But finally, the strange
thing is
That even if you lived through such a time
you can no longer tell if it was real.

Amman
19/2/95

The Plain of Stones

Only snakes, scorpions and footsteps,
scratching between the stones,
seeds waiting for the rain.

The plain was hard when we walked here,
its uncovered beauty difficult to absorb
only dust and strained joints,
no reason for singing.

Someone said the Nabateans..
'Oh, people long ago, like the Arabs but not'
..cherished these deserts,
arranged the stones in lines and cut the twisting paths.
It was said they knew where the water went
kept across the years in underground cisterns
channelled along the contour lines
so that their farms grew where nothing should.

and afterwards left the land for the gazelles, oryx, sand-foxes
left the camomile and white broom to push back up.
The stones of their walls fell back onto the plain
and nothing remained but their name in a song.

We come here centuries too late, vehicle creaking down another track
when there's nothing to see.
The wine's dried up, the ground corn's now dust
the girls who bathed in the hot pool and later, danced
a last image.

It's not that we have nothing to say,
our concerns are very proper for so late in the millennium.
It's not that we are unhappy or unfortunate,
we have the usual pleasures of our age and state.
We are pleased to look for lost sheep
to report them to the authorities
summarise them in columns of figures.

There are so many lost civilisations, you say with asperity
"You can't be there saving them all. Better go on, not back"
So much that has fallen can't be regained.

Still..

Rwaished
6th April, 1995

Down by the Dead Sea

I would have given you up, but
we were there, between Sodom and Gomorrah
the powdering white rock straining our eyes,
radio blaring Israeli quiz shows.

and you looked at me, laughing, like a bird
and said 'there's no long way round to love'
as if eternity were to bubble up like a spring
and carry us away as the rocks cracked.

I have some faith, but still, believing you is difficult
like poems written on a fallen wall
or staid fragments of Byzantine wisdom.

We residents of the Old World have no deep imagination,
nothing to conjure with when science runs out
no promises inscribed on the air.

You were telling me some story about an old church
saints, miracles, frescoes painted over,
then you put your hand over mine and said
'Where you go, I can follow'.

and I was grateful, but

Lot's wife became
a pillar of salt
and salt dissolves.

*Amman
20th June, 1995*

Marmot and Sable

You might think of the early Soviets as Cubists
piling up the future in towers of blocks
swaying, uncertain perhaps, but with edges so
sharp your fingers might bleed.

Trotsky, you remember, thought we would all grow taller
our voices deepen, not with smoke but gladness.

Well, they believed in machines like no-one since
that the music of the future would rise from
the dark hum of electrical generators.

They went out, further east and south,
met strange people and talked to them in gestures,
drank *arak* with them in skin tents, hunted marmot and sable,
all the time, talking, persuading, melting snow with their warm breath,
turning monasteries into factories and earth into fire.

After them came other men, both wise and deadly
seeing so far into the future, they dispensed with the present altogether.
The towers of blocks fell, to be reconstructed in other images
the fingers of simple men bled.

and now, the future seems to have arrived.
People *have* grown taller, music *does* come from machines.
Lenin, it turns out, was exactly correct: the Revolution *is* electricity plus justice
and the hunters are long gone, fled with the marmot and the sable.

Ulaan Baatar
19/9/95

The prophetess

Compassion doesn't run dry
disasters aren't just absorbed
our tears flow in rivulets on the dry earth.

On a screen, people wait for death openhandedly,
love their relatives, dread another day,
and yet our hearts are syringed out.

Like music that won't stop
Everything you say is true
but none of it is to be believed.

*Malawi?
June 1996*

Quantum logic

Armageddon must repeated and repeated

Alien spacecraft can carry away
corruption in their holds
rebuild our bodies and brains to take advantage of the new earth.

When we flatten out the surface of the world
there's no room for irony,
no sighing for an older, funnier place.

Before, you'd wander out into the rainy street and know things were as they were
But now, the screen never goes blank.

*Heidelberg
4/10/96*

Kings of infinite space

I saw the world divided into squares,
no larger than a speck of dust,
ochre, crimson, harsh pink and swimming green.
Forests, deserts, mountains dotted out in a fluorescent tide
speckled like a child's cake.

In this geometry, a misplaced thumb could change the world,
fields where farmers dig become the sea,
waves of sand cover the whole earth.

Do we have this power? If you believe you can
take thought and add a cubit to your height,
then you can.

The dreaming screens add unwanted colour to our lives,
the forests are cut down and floated away,
the mountains dismantled to build artificial hills,
and oceans turn white and red.

A great wind came, draining the dust of colour,
reforming it into the rigid polygons of the city,
numbering them in many dimensions.
So we might set out, scattering among the stars,
and account ourselves kings of infinite space.

*Harare
10/11/96*

I've lost –well, these things don't matter so much
like a cinder flying up at night or a chord among static,
the imaginary sunbeams of cathedral builders,
the last gleam before dark.

and you –calling like an owl,
searching on moonless nights,
wanting so much to believe in eloquence,
the blockish rhetoric of things.

Together we'll walk in the Domus Aureus,
where so many paintings were lifted away like transfers,
but where windows remain still open.
Join with the birds, the twining roses and fly out into a fantastical land.

*Cambridge
24/6/00*

The fox and the pangolin

Every question we ask has some answer
each lie its counterweight of truth
Who knows these things? The fox.

A fox came visiting by night, sharp teeth, silver fur, love unconstrained
–for silver coins I must love her and her kind.
For seven years I lived with her, till, caught by the drumming of her own kind, she left
again.

Who feels for us? Paints arrows under our feet to guide us in these times?

On the plains, hot as a cigarette, I was following some path and met
a pangolin, both of us surprised. Despite that, he
agreed to guide me. For some the world's an old straight road.

Each line of poetry has its rhythm, each building we raise leaves a hollow in the earth.
Who lights lamps for us?

The pangolin died at last, exhausted by my efforts to understand. If we know our way
across the world,
why stay here?

Leeuwenhorst
1996

Sour salad

Believe us? O, you'll want to believe us,
everything we've ever said is true, true like dreams,
dreams given us by our grandfathers
visions released from spirits, fruit lying open on the path,
cries of birds in the forest.
We've come, beating our gong, clamouring for attention,
chattering in your quiet houses, demanding, crying and replying
singing with the metallic chime of crickets
multiplying the sorcerers' secret words.
Giant catfish rise from the river's mud to hear and are caught,
sunbirds take time from the flowers to listen and their feet are limed.
Gaur, sunbears, elephants –their bones ground in the pharmacist's mortar,
trees that stood for five hundred years now furnish karaoke bars.
Wooden houses rise from the forest floor, fences grow from vines,
uncertainty is born, unravelling our families and texturing our lies,
our children run to the towns and the towns come to the country.
If once the future unrolled at the pace of an ox, the roads in and out have been stolen
all we now eat is sour.

Kok Lum
19/12/01

World untangled

Some of us know where the trains go,
know they don't stop for love or death,
that ethics are like fig trees, twisted as the soil they're grown in.
Mountains slide into the sea and no-one notices
so engaged are we.

Some said, 'Oh it must end in blood and fire',
the worst thing we could think of.
Prophecy's no profession for optimists.

When the waters rise up to cover the world
drowning casinos and hospitals, returning silicon to sand,
we'll be there at the edge, trying to grow gills.

Manila
1/7/99

Rumours of War

Under our feet, grumbling pebbles,
 in our hands, the rough green spines of the palm,
on the air, the unconsolated breath of the storm
 and the frigate-bird, hurrying along magnetic lines,
 marking small eruptions of chaos with its fluid wing.
The coconut, wandering the seas unattended,
 and the sea-bean, finding new attachments on unknown shores.

On the high green mountains, squeaking below our hearing like a trapped mouse,
 machines on machines, arrayed,
 clicking in bedrooms and offices,
 following dark ingenious pathways
transcribing the circuits of Babel.

For all we know, these intricate messages are no more than inter-galactic noise,
 an accidental polyphony, silence into sound,
 composing the textless rhetoric of armies, the vituperation of
 missiles,
into the scrambled aphorisms of war.

Who wants our blood? Calling to us like stage vampires,
 singing back to us our uncertain songs,
 having us on our knees in the desert like a weekend game.
Sawing us in pieces like stage conjurors,
 hoping desperately to reassemble the pieces.

But now we're emptied, rolling back and forth like *bêche-le-mer* in the shallows.
 They're out dynamiting the reef and no-one cares.
No exceptions: the cyclone passes, the coral crumbles, the outriggers lie wrecked
on the sand,
 the crabs are out hunting coconuts again,
and all the sharp-angled oddities of our times,
 slip back into the sea.

Seoul
27/9/02

Three-card trick

Hieronymus Bosch saw that,
 in a village they would be fooled.
But we're not our fathers, digging truth out of the ground,
 growing justice like so many vegetables.
We buy our understanding like anything else,
 pain's not to be considered.
So when a showman does come along,
 all fingers and rodomontade,
 and a tricky way with a microphone,
 we are inclined to laugh, not take issue, dismiss him.
Which is how the trick works. Inconsequential glitter takes our eyes
 and the butchers cut out our hearts.

*San José, Costa Rica
25/03/03*

Barnacles

Darwin studied barnacles and hoped no-one would guess
 it meant human beings, were apes.
If God also cared for these minutest of his creatures
 then perhaps he'd take a bow, politely absent himself.
But criminals and saints don't make their exits without a flourish;
 the earth's already full of those that have no memorial.
So the barnacles were forgotten
 and we're to killing all the apes
 to get rid of the evidence.

*San, Mali
02/10/03*

Is it true, we first met among the dry trees?
 Your fingers so close to mine, that love could pass between them,
 crackling across the empty air.
and now, when the world is full of water,
 great winds giving voice, deep oceans murmuring
 you tell me love isn't enough.
I've heard these stories before, seen the way you tell them
 isn't it rather that your desires have withered?

xx

Now we learn there's not one universe but several, all contingent
 with every wrong decision I take a new path
 stay there, and everything will fall apart around you.

*Marrakech
8/12/05*

Each long street's hung with the banners of temptation,
each lighted shop, creased with noise, shot through with colours.
Our hope can be packed in boxes, wrapped in imagining,
whatever we believe is good, is better
whatever we believe is sharp, cuts open our arms.
Small bridges keep us apart, stone paths help us walk together.
There are no songs not worth the singing, no poems better left unsaid.

Kunming
11/4/06

The high castle

We stand at the edge of war, trumpets, blood, teeth rattling,
paper strips of prophecy lie torn up at our feet.
Afraid for our intricate possessions, given to love at odd times,
we wear our innocence like an armband.
Perhaps the new generals won't notice we sold our children
gave away the earth's surface for a short ride in a fast machine.
There's no hope for us. Children when we need to be adults,
hazed in sensuality, while sand-storms cover our houses.
They'll pull down our temples, scatter our unbelief,
snap the bones of our ancestors for dice.
History's not some woven carpet, unrolling
but crazy, like tracks in the sand.
All the rites of the dukes of Qufu will not prevent
the fabric of the heavens becoming unstitched.

Beijing-Frankfurt
15/4/06

Parents tell their children to resist the clamour of the dead,
not to listen to their murmurings, seize the day,
run it through your hands, like water in the sun.
The past is a wound that won't heal,
burn it away.

Kordofan
13th May, 2006

and some there are who have no memorial..

whatever we say, we'd all like to believe
we leave some trace, a plangent tone ringing out in the universal hiss,
a stroke of the bell some morning on a Greek island,
inspired gestures in a long-running drama.

Some of us whisper to God, tell him that, despite appearances...
others are content with some minutes on daytime television
or a drunken sprawl in an anonymous high street.

each of us seeks out the mirror that suits our reflection.

Marrakesh
8/12/05

Did we first meet among the dry trees?
Your fingers on mine, as if love could pass between us,
crackling across the empty air.

and now, when the world is full of water, dust-storms,
winds that give voice to the murmurs of deep oceans
you want to tell me love isn't enough.
I've heard your stories before, seen the way you tell them
your desires have so far withered
you've no more stories to tell.

Well, there's not one universe but several, all contingent
at every wrong decision I can take a new path,
so stay there, and watch everything fall apart.

Marrakesh
8/12/05

Two sonnets

I.

The reef's broken, sharks swim in and out,
there are pots on the ocean floor, spilling out oil, sardines,
a bronze gong or two waits for someone to claim it.
Planes fly through a rift in the mountains,
spinning around in storms, gathering red dust,
full with cheap promises, sugar and cocaine.
The road splits the horizon, blue-grey in the heat,
grumbling with trucks, elephants telling stories with their feet,
disturbing the graveyards of whoever came before us.
So light crosses the universe, undeterred by distance,
scattering photons, small presents to new civilisations,
neutral messengers from the past to the future.
Travel carefully through the world, without hope or fear,
there's time to be wrong when you're dead.

II.

Whatever church we reach, let's stop and pray,
remember our dead, give breath to the living,
if there's a crossroads, sorrow for those who could not stay on earth with
us.
and if there's a temple over the next ridge, alive with bells,
burn some incense, in hope for our further lives,
confront our casual cruelties.
Light fires on the plain, small insurrections against the night,
imagine dismay no longer rules,
that the fiery tongue of truth will lick us clean.
Come the end of the world, we must offer ourselves up, naked.
surrender our diaries and our swords,
go with nothing but love on our tongues.
For every one of us, whose eyes are opened at last,
thousands will walk in hell.

*Kordofan
13th May, 2006*