

MICHAEL AYRES



Recent Poems

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## *Orpheus*

---

*to Si, Jo and Louise*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

inevitably away from me.

I imagine soul destruction can be quick or slow:  
or perhaps the soul destroyed takes time  
to realise it is destroyed  
turning on itself in habitual apathy  
it takes for rain or moments of desire,  
or the possibility of a new love,  
a better or a different love,  
when it is impossible  
although the rain is still beautiful  
and it falls.

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

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

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

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

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

easy with our beauty —  
too easy with our beauty...

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

Two moments and a jolt of years,  
train carriages, like soul commuters,  
the hodgepodge and the bother of it,  
the fudge and the erosion,  
the eroded honey of it, and the numbing,  
ice transfusion in a snowscape May,  
the yaw and yelp of it,  
the backtracking and the long disgrace,  
the eke of sidling and lies,  
the fulminating spark of it,

the passionate stubborn bloody dismay:  
I dream of such lucidity  
the world is zenned and floating loose  
the snowdrop and the ant  
bear up the sun  
and they are both exactly  
one universe long...  
Fall in loss and fall again,  
a Coil remix, James Stewart's eyes,  
that blue of dizziness and July  
panting lovers locking  
butterfly elevations  
and drags  
slipped into muzzy cocooning, you know  
I used to care for you, but now  
I just don't care anymore —  
Christ on a wafer to a quick cough lozenge,  
yes, Christ on a wafer to a quick cough lozenge —  
darling, I guess I just don't care...

Maybe I could say  
hold on to a word, hold on  
to a word once spoken: hold on!  
But even then it's the pale, aphid green  
of cold snap frost and then ephemera  
imperative like a heart, and like a heart  
imperative and ephemeral:  
ant, snowdrop, universe,  
they take their time and they take my time  
as the clouds drift over King St  
still with unmoving showers;  
and I say your name —  
it's just a word but it's enough  
to start a dream; well,  
and maybe I could say, hold on...

When the clouds drift down on King Street,  
hours roughened me to this,  
ziggurats and cluster bombs,  
rains and overseas,  
grammars of flesh dispelled  
to a spray of ghostly atoms,  
pistachio shells and oyster showers,  
and their lucidity dreams of me,  
of one, of us, of one of us:  
I use a match to light a cigarette,  
it's just a flame, but it's enough  
to start a fire —  
love, it's just enough...

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

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

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

Snow falls over Middlesbrough,

city where it will never be December,  
December of a metallic fire:  
snow falls over Middlesbrough,  
the petals of a desolate flower.

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

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

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

Middlesbrough made us, but now we are leaving.  
Steel grows on beneath the rising smoke,

metals cool beneath the falling snows,  
strong, strong, strong.  
Middlesbrough made us, Middlesbrough bore us,  
and now Middlesbrough leaves us  
as easily as a gardener throws  
to the wind the wet ashes of a burned rose.

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

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

When the cars drift down King Street  
they're enough to star a lust,  
the graceful keg of a pregnant girl  
gazelle and grief and labour  
to make a radiance between two graves  
carries the flower of life  
like a teenage daydream suitor  
Ziggy on the radio  
and urban cherry blossom in the air  
a high street glam stomp of fairy godzillas  
she is his thought and he her will,  
he her pain and he her hope,  
necklaced on a naked bed  
Pinocchio and the donkey boys

in idle goldmine darkness  
potencies and latencies,  
all whirled up in telegram kisses,  
soft cables of ourselves  
sent twisting sexually in flight  
and the city drifts in pollen light  
and skyscrapers are fireflies

Dustless and wracked by stars  
I climb into my corpse and go  
snap my fingers at those kiss-red lips  
start a car like a mafia scene  
the dead in garbage to the gorgeous lines  
of *Layla* liquid and visceral  
the gunshot wounds like roses:  
the hero is a bitter one  
the axis of a decaying wheel  
turning on itself like lies and flies  
while all the time  
as cars drift down King St  
people with small thoughts  
are busy making smaller worlds  
smaller and smaller still  
ground the spiritual to  
material horses' hooves  
pounding in a funfair ride  
are merry dizzy making machines go round  
grinding coffee beans to a caffeine jag  
round and round a universe  
of asteroids and nebulae inside your head,  
galaxies and planets  
of gold and lemon in the dark  
where I have ox-eyed daisies like a sheath  
of dragonsblood and orange supernovas  
and I'm peeling paint, faded off a wooden post

on the ramshackle fence  
of a deserted coastal garden  
positionless and supercool  
beside my friend, who is the beautiful  
one who suffers and is kind,  
the flaking coat, washed-out azures  
of what was made to protect  
but was not protected, and hence  
did not protect  
against a breeze made of salt and time  
against the futility of the people, my heart...

The battlements of symbols, Dharma, wheat  
of theories, needs and stone  
as the clouds drift down King St  
I guess I just don't care.  
There's no one at the wheel now, love,  
there's no chauffeur, no driver,  
some people think of the public good,  
some chafing of their own desire,  
but me, I just don't care.  
The cars are greedy on a phantom power,  
a metal father, half Oz woodcutter,  
half cybermotive child,  
I have time and I take my time,  
light a cigarette and dream:  
the core is to endure but no one dares and no one does  
flower to the ghost of a tyrannical summer  
it is too hurtful not to be  
better fold dying petals back into the bud  
shelter me from abrading light  
and summon thorns like dumb crusaders  
thorns for dawns, then more, more thorns,  
growing dragon miser, to ring in fear  
a great city of our wish

to be with towers and walls of rampart power  
stout and mute to be real but  
how do you defend yourself against the nothingness inside  
guarding the void with all your might  
in case it moves,  
it's not enough to make me care,  
abuttred and redoubted, visored, kept and crenellated,  
against the rat gnaws of people  
grain which rots to a rich starvation  
I watch them as they feed and squeal  
skating aloof on frozen pharmaceuticals  
across the darkness where a soul might be  
seeking a beauty which I may be  
but find instead  
a boredom with virtue and society  
a disgust for things so coarse and greedy  
our pain deserved who swilled in luxury  
and wept for more while a world went crying  
who used up their world, then wanted another,  
one was not enough,  
but there is no other world,  
and it's not enough  
to make me care, until

one day stupefied I drift into your life like rain  
where clouds tumble slowly over King St  
and the sound of my voice closing on your name  
or of cloudbursts glimpsed from a moving train —  
it's enough  
to startle us: it's enough  
to start a love —  
sweetheart, it's just enough...

I imagine soul destruction can be quick or slow.  
Maybe the soul destroying takes time

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

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

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

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

## *The Disappeared*

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

Your mouth rests on plum blossom:  
you move your lips, and there's darkness  
which opens, like petals, my lips.  
For a moment, I'm balanced on my eyelashes.  
We're poised — we're not slaves —  
we don't need to ape midnight, which only  
occurs when it's told.  
We're not angels, either — not midnight,  
not angels — though in tradition we may comprehend  
the faculties of angels. We're partners —  
which is to say  
light, blown, dust.

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

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

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

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

Of the sixth and seventh, they remained unaware.  
But our mouths and our lips, warm and integral,  
spoke of them.  
Who are they? Themselves: themselves. We should fear them.  
They're seeking a kind of stillness, beyond repose.  
They put a wave in a museum.  
I was speaking of the power of power,  
and of something which consents to power occurring.  
And the month was May — sweet and permissive.

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

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

Who were they? They were the masters of nothing.  
But they killed, and the killing belonged to them.

The lost was certainly lost.  
The vanished were certainly vanished — if uncertainly.  
'Hello,' she was saying, tiredly: 'It's me. I'm on the train'.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I'll call you tomorrow.

## *Total Eclipse*

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They still don't understand.  
They can have my eyes, and my dead, psychopathic gaze  
on which the driftwood rises and the driftwood falls.  
They can pull up a chair, make themselves at home,  
though I never invited them in,

and they can listen to the sea.  
I don't want to be with them when the darkness comes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## *Partial Eclipse*

---

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

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

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

There's a moment which is quite still.  
When you kiss deeply, and the breath in your lungs  
belongs to your lover,  
that stranger you have fought your way through to,  
fought off, fought for,  
and whose intimacy is like a god's,  
invisible and embracing, humdrum, made of words,  
authorial, made of days, made of scents and tracks,

made of the first glance in the morning,  
made, above all, of a gigantic, regal absence —  
there's a moment which is quite still,  
in which the fighting is over and the god is dead,  
and you love more deeply than you have ever loved before  
because you are not loved and yet you love,  
and there is no world left for anyone to conquer,  
but you must still watch them, fighting their way  
ever deeper into the defenceless night,  
which hurts them, unbearably, with the sunlight  
of what has passed, and what can never pass.

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

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

When the gravity cuts and laws are suspended,  
the rumbling, juggernaut routine trembles to a halt,  
in a moment between trains in a provincial station,  
on the end of the platform where a lark is singing  
and michaelmas daisies grow between the sleepers,

there's a moment when one world ends  
and you could know me by a different name,  
a stronger and a sweeter name,  
know me by the trail of the burned and the wounded,  
by the ones we could dispense with,  
those we could forget, those we never even knew:  
then my indifference is almost divine, almost universal,  
and my love a tiny absence,  
like a lost glove, a hair on a pillow,  
or a call reverse charges.

I can still feel you on my lips.  
When you kiss, I feel you.  
When I laugh suddenly, surprising even myself.  
When my mouth is a crescent, I feel you.  
When there is a new moon.  
When you say the words, 'rise up'.

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

When the skyscrapers split and the metals failed,  
the pressure was an abyssal blow,  
like punching thumbs through an eggshell,  
the hull too thin, the skin too frail,  
the fall too far, the gravity too real,  
when the clamshells, suckers, opened in the heat,  
when love was made,  
then we understood anew  
how Nature abhors a vacuum,

and how the luscious void  
lies inside us,  
a child with only one glove,  
a delve in a pillow where a dream was felt,  
a call reverse charges.

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

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

I will not leave you my war.

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

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

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

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

You will know.

You will forget.

Rise up.

## *Human*

---

I gave you my eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

And I kissed you — it was  
the peak of my life — but, still,  
this wasn't enough:  
you didn't have everything,  
and we weren't complete.  
I gave you the rain — the cold, new rain  
of my days, autumn when the sky  
is milk and cataract, or a summer shower  
like a birth at noon  
on the dirty streets,  
among the monoxide, aphids and butterflies  
of my boyhood town,  
laying the dust.

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

I gave you my distance,  
and you moved through it,  
all that numb  
azure where people drift away and no one

feels them going;  
you slipped through those crowds,  
Asia and sampans, roosters in cages,  
and I saw you,  
I asked you to wait —  
but you knew that was childish  
and you laughed, and kissed me, brushingly, on my temple,  
and then didn't look back.

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

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

I gave you everything, and sometimes willingly,  
sometimes against myself, in a tearing way,  
I gave you the finest things I could be —  
yes, and the worst.  
I gave you my proud dirt,  
my time lying on the ground,  
the shining animal worn loose from its mother —  
my death, always raised like Abraham's knife —  
even the real night by the shore when I was alone,  
when the wind swirled the sand and moved through the Martin's  
pines  
which first seemed as if they would shout,  
then cry, then break,  
but which just shimmered, shimmered, shimmered —  
still, this wasn't enough,  
you were still somehow alone  
by the Tasman Sea.

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

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

like a fire burning in water,  
and it was always a night approaching,  
and it was always a child.

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

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

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

You took everything I had,  
and then you kept on taking.  
You took my emptiness, and my turquoise truck,  
my castle, my terminal fatigue.  
You took my last words —  
the final ones, the ones I didn't write when I was young  
but which had all my youth in them,  
words I would tie myself to,  
words with you in them and which, like a Russian,  
I could address to the whole crowd of time,

the night, history, the stars.  
You took my death, and the silence I'd beaten out  
like a tough metal for so long.  
You took my dreams, and all my waking thoughts;  
I gave you my love, and you took it,  
sometimes like a thief,  
and sometimes when it really belonged to you.

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

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

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

Open them. Close them.

Open them.

## *The 20 Sleepless Years*

---

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

But I want to sleep.

And if I sleep...

And if you wake...

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

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

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

And if you sleep...

And if I wake...

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

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

Do you know who I am anymore?

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

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

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

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

You were a promise made to the world,  
and I tried to honour you.  
You could attain your own eyes like an altitude,  
but never keep it.  
And your own heart threw you out in the streets,  
and sometimes you had to lie to get back in,  
and sometimes you had to tell such a truth that  
even when you stepped back in  
it was strange, and you remembered the quality of the starlight at dawn  
when you were 15 years old  
and how you looked up, and made  
some kind of promise.

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

What have you done?

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

Oh, sweetheart, what have you done?

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

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

It was one of those evenings when two lives meet,  
and you're proud of love,  
something out of Atlantis for you.  
The air in the streets was supercharged by the spring storm,  
when the hail had popped and blipped against the cars  
and a stillness seemed to enter me  
like the stillness that forms before the word,  
a stillness that is homage to the word  
and which the word beats against  
with every human thing there has ever been  
both the torment and the peace,  
both the bestial rage and the bestial tenderness,  
but above all hope, both the realised and the futile:  
and I was proud of being in love  
because it humbled and defied me,  
and she swept through my life like that spring storm  
had swept its way through the city  
drowning it in moments — but not like Atlantis.

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

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

And if I had to write your name,  
to wall it round with letters,

I would spend 20 sleepless years  
to encircle you with your own heart.

But you want me to sleep...

And if I sleep...

And if you wake...

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

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

And you left us so long ago,  
you left us to ourselves,  
to our raw violence and our magnanimity,  
to our smooth violence,  
to our disturbed sleep, our broken and restless sleep —  
you left us  
to our beauty and our sea  
and to a spring morning — it must have been spring  
because I remember, it was warm enough  
to wheel an amplifier through the streets of New York —  
you left us to rotting to ourselves,  
garbage and light,  
and perhaps we deserved this.

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

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

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

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

I put on the Afghan Whigs, *1965*, man that was the coolest sound  
I ever heard.  
And I know, I am one of those charred and turbulent things  
whiplashing and frightened, electrical, eel supple and writhing  
with eyes that know pain and have given pain.  
I am one of those dying and scintillating things,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We were the music and the fire.  
We were the drive-by slaying, gun to a temple,  
priest aflame, doused in gasoline,  
we were the moment and the opportunity,  
we were Buddha's footsteps, the smile and the flower,  
the fumbled division of everything,  
we were the pornography and the sutra,  
we were the chance taken and the chance missed,  
we were signs of unknowing, guerillas, ambassadors,  
we were dangerous and ludicrous pioneers,  
a drunk, lost boy, puking up in an alley:  
we were Prospero's goodbye.

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

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

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

I loved you  
beyond reason or rhyme,  
20 sleepless reasons, 20 sleepless rhymes —  
but you left us:  
at 5 letters per second  
you walked away from us,

and they were blows, those letters, each one  
against the universe.

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

I will sing her a lullaby  
the willow more lovely than the rose  
and the storm a child too,  
rocking in my baby's arms.  
I will sing her a lullaby,  
the wind that shakes the trees and blows  
all night by the river and the willows  
in the morning will be a memory:  
I will sing her a lullaby  
until the eyelids of the rain,  
one by one, close.

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

But will she hear it?

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

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

Rain, close your eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I pity Lot's wife, I'm angry for her sake.  
Upon our shoulders, all that is burning begins.  
The desert is the place for prophets and dreams,

and for us, the shining flood is the Law now.  
Descartes' Arab is haunted, crossing the bright, wide sands,  
looking for an earth in which to bury,  
safe from harm, the shell and the stone he carries,  
Euclid and Poetry. Deep in the dream,  
he's searching for a grave of the human heart:  
but should he find it,  
who will find it?

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

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

## *The Ambassadors*

---

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

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

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

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

To write something beautiful.  
To extend, into the darkness, my hand:  
to touch your face,  
and feel my loneliness

against your skin, to feel your lips  
moving softly, your lips and no other,  
specific and gentle and unrepeatable, to caress  
that opening mouth which holds  
all the secrets of the world  
in the fuzzy, unadorned labour  
of a struggling mother.  
Is it 2001? — I'm looking at stormclouds.  
You come close to me, brush against me,  
I feel the distance between us  
glow, and move, prickly like pine needles, deepen, and then  
open as you stand before me so clearly  
as if there is not one  
iota of me in my seeing  
and a path has been made lucid  
for you to move upon,  
being someone beautiful.

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

And who will receive us in that place

but other lovers, speaking caresses  
in another tongue?  
This is the embassy  
of late buses and trains, the formality  
pauses and delays between awe-struck young lips  
make of a ferrous and a bone-laden world,  
turning it to scriptures  
beginning will always adore  
and let fall, suddenly, blindly, kiss-struck and a shooting star  
melting over the night sky  
above Sanur,  
the universe up on tip-toes,  
and its mouth open  
about to say... 'Oh!'...  
To write something beautiful.  
To look into your eyes, to hold, between my hands  
all the gentleness I can bear  
of your face;  
to tilt your chin, to turn your mouth to where  
deep in the eye of the calm  
of the whorling storm's black  
core of my eyes  
a boy in a lambswool hat  
chases his spooky breath  
in Dorset, as my handsome father —  
far more handsome than Lawrence of Arabia! —  
works with a spade of steel  
to shift off the drifts  
and the compiled crystal layers  
which are blocking the way.

It is not that the snow is ugly,  
it is just that my father must clear it  
to open the path  
for my mother,

so she may call out  
that it is time to come in now  
from the troll-haunted shadows Jack  
Frost glimmers between, leaving only  
the glistening echoes of his movements  
frozen through ferns, in forests of white quiet:  
he writes something beautiful.

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

I come to you because  
I cannot sleep, Marlboro and the fingers  
of hands which have held psalms, and held  
those poor hands, palm to palm, where on the back  
the veins went brittle,  
now the air mélanges spring and green difficult passages  
and the dumb surges and rollers of the 11.15  
taking me late at night from the city, glancing up for a moment,  
someone with a book in a hazy, travelling mirror  
as in two minds I Shakespeare and you  
rising above the shouting waves  
where Sebastian and Viola went drowning,  
you always drifting into my thoughts, my thoughts  
always returning to you, my finer thoughts  
still open like my eyes and as my words  
still reach into the sands

of a salt, realising Illyria  
reborn from the storm as from an angry, turbulent chrysalis  
as a kind of survivor,  
as a kind of ambassador.

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

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

I still believe  
in both the lion and the lamb.  
I did not let go. And if we,  
if we could remain awake  
for one more hour,  
if I could wrest  
from my fatigue  
one more moment of you,  
we could stay up, late, into the dawn  
and catch a glimpse  
of Jack Frost alighting

from the steps of his carriage, rig  
confected from icicles, points of dazzle, shimmering  
in the fir-blue shadows  
under the pines  
before morning  
turns all to substantial fire  
erasing something beautiful.

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

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

## *The 43rd Spring*

---

My time will come.

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

Of course, the time to come cannot belong to me —  
how could it?

That would be like saying  
'this powder-blue sky is mine'.  
Owners are so foolish, aren't they, Love?

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

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

No: the book's closed:  
what moves out there, beyond the dusty window sill,  
something more waiting than moving, perhaps,

has not been written, yet —  
and it never will be:  
how could you horizon round  
even the tiniest moment  
of all there is,  
a life indefinite, the sweet, elusive  
nature of the possible itself?

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

Destiny. Vocation.

What became of him?

Perhaps he never wrote the poem which would  
align the universe within his dream —  
maybe he thought too much about himself,  
or about the alphabet,  
phonemes or rhyme schemes,  
semantics or the vernacular,  
performance or the supercool, sugary cliques whom he mistook  
for readers, when they  
were the braid on a uniform  
the officer himself hated, in the end, to wear,

and yearned for the evenings  
when he could bathe  
and be naked with his wife.

Or perhaps he wrote the poem,  
and did not see it, put it aside.

Or wrote the poem,  
but did not feel it.

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

## *Constructed*

---

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

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

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

My sorrow at this time — November, 2002 —  
is dimensionless, and I cannot bear  
the news of suffering, the way we grow

cannibal with necessity.  
So much beauty will go down, it is like the Greeks  
or Nagasaki, like Stalingrad in winter.  
One must be formal with such wasting,  
find a ceremonial container,  
and to the ceremony and the form adhere —  
cling, really, when the new dying begins.

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

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

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

Then let me be explicit.  
If our foundations are in power, control,

exploitation, possession, material mastery,  
this poem will not be constructed,  
and silence will roam here  
among swaying weeds.

False power is greedy and despises  
moments. And it dwells here in *Constructed*,  
evicting the truth. It is unjust:  
it is like Kafka's mole, endlessly  
at risk, imprisoned  
in the very place devised for its security.

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

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

I ask, for the first time:  
where is the ground of our glance, our eyes

restless on a restless word?  
Show me. Where is the foundation of this love?  
Recall: this poem is called *Constructed*.  
May beauty rise with it.  
And may it be a beauty of yours.

Show me.

## *Do You Believe in the Spirits of the Mirror?*

---

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

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

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

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

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

Fox Ultra Captain King Eros Romeo Starfish —  
why did you let them take your soul away?  
It's gruesome, Hammer.

All that long, soul-snatching summer,  
when your body was living,  
and they were zombies in the shopping mall,  
out-takes of George A. Romero.

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

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

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

Do you believe in the Spirits of the Mirror?  
What a strange life they have, subtle and eerie,  
floating in their glass dimension — mutely.

Do you believe in the poem of the mirror?  
What an obvious death you'll have.  
I'm not looking back at you.

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

So, let's talk.  
There's no need for a trench of sacrificial blood  
or anything mythical:  
I'm living, you're dead —  
call me up, I'm here.  
I'm here.  
Speak — say one, precious word.  
A word that belongs to you,  
a word for which you'd give your life:  
please, don't remain silent,  
don't let them fill you with silence:  
raise yourself up, say a word.

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

Why were you never shocked by words?  
Why didn't they call you?  
Why couldn't you feel how rough they were,  
how irreducibly strange, how magical?  
You thought words were easy, smooth, charming —

didn't you realise they were killers?  
Killers, and Christ, and hammers:  
all that 2-trains summer,  
when I kissed you,  
and you died?

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

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

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

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

What is? Did you hear a voice?  
Did you see a sign?

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

I'm alive.

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

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

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

Who will close the eyelids of this poem?  
I am half darkness, a hemisphere, afraid.  
I'm afraid that my words are not worthy of you,  
and I'm afraid that my patience is mutable.  
All the time that we kissed,  
Judas was wordless, and Lucifer a falling star,

and the sea was dangerous, and pliable:  
against this, you asked me to be beautiful,  
and, for the length of a poem, I was.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and carries me away from myself  
across a hundred miles of silence.

A hundred miles, a hundred silences — and a word.  
There are certain things between us.  
I say so many stupid things,  
but this, at least, is true:  
you made the distance in my life  
that poetry calls me.

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

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

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

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

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

Now, you're cast up to where  
you always wanted to be —  
but the sea is still moving.  
And you know, perhaps more than anyone, the colour of my eyes;  
and how if I'm to be truthful,  
I'll recall that any gaze is a metaphor.

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

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

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

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

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

'Espinazo' I assume shares a root with our English 'spine'.  
In the same *Independent*, I saw an article on the launch  
of a new game, speaking of unprecedented depths of immersion.  
The piece detailed pinnacles in the rise of games,

a desire to move beyond shoot-'em-ups and brain candy,  
and these things floated in my mind in Guillermo del Toro's film  
with the ghost who the children called "the one who sighs";  
I noticed, too, how a certain game was described  
as the killer app for the Nintendo Gameboy.

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

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

but constructs it.

And this is where beauty comes in,  
and the freedom, not to change things, but  
to set them free.

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

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

I mean, I suppose, this —  
we know nothing, or rather what we know constantly  
eludes us. Once, I wrote about love, and a summer,

and how at that time  
I thought like a river. Now I am dry,  
my thoughts are dust. But I cannot  
grieve over that because grief itself  
is also dust, and as dust  
is blown by the unowned wind  
free and without destination.

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

It is my ambition  
to set the world free. And this poem, *Maborosi*,  
is both my attempt to engineer that liberty and  
the mark of my failure. Only for this moment  
can it be numbered among  
the undestroyed. Memory  
is an outpost, a buttress, a child  
watching *Thunderbirds* or *Stingray*. Zysoshin’s dream  
cannot contain Zysoshin, the boy himself  
is inside the dream inside him, there is no  
end to that, one falls  
ravaged and cruelly salient through all the fragments  
of plum blossoms and chattering trains.

It is less fantastic, in a way, to believe  
in ourselves than to believe in ghosts.  
Thoughts haunt us, and one speaks  
of a haunting beauty. Those irradant ones who despite

our laws  
persist — we might say, unnaturally —  
who are they? Destructionless,  
the river destroys,  
and leaves no footprints,  
but is dotted  
and speckled  
with moving blossoms.

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

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

In such reflections, one may perceive  
a kind of symmetry, but the film  
is very deep. And of course,  
it is only a story. We know the woman upon the screen  
is not the widow of the suicide,  
but the actress, Makikio Esumi, who  
has taken on the role.  
She will not be a widow when the director cuts.

And she was never, anyway, the widow  
of *Maborosi* — was she?

Yet it is serene, precise and  
without affectation.

There is another scene which is simply  
a light bulb, placed there by an unseen hand,  
rocking beside a clock upon a drawer  
towards stillness.

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

## *Siberia*

---

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

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

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

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

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

The night is never alone now.  
Someone is always looking up, watching fading stars.  
You are a dawn that aches not to have broken,

you are only a dawn, and that's why I love you —  
you cannot but break, and the wave of you  
is always travelling through fresh space, making it new.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Everything will be lost, nothing will be replaced —  
this is why I love you now,  
under these great, open skies of time.  
The storm will be a storm,  
the wave will fall as a wave,  
and you will be beautiful.

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

## *Goodnight*

---

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

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

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

In a world all touch,  
who is left untouched;  
in a world all loneliness

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

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

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

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

of something worth hearing  
but is yet  
to speak.

The dead are formed, but the living  
rush by them.

Perhaps it was a moment  
like Pierre, or Prince Bolkonsky —  
(was that his name? —  
Prince Andrei's name?) —  
I forget, or am unclear) —  
but a moment  
so fresh,  
the dew still on it,  
when the soldier lay down,  
on his back, in the grass,  
and the shipwrecked woman, on her belly,  
rose up  
out of the seaming foam.

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

On every other day of the year, I guess,  
she is unseen  
but stands upon the sands  
like a heart.  
Well: so he had lights in his veins.  
And at dusk, one spring,

he thought he was walking home  
through a white-haunted  
indigo darkness.

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

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

## *Notes on recent work*

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

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

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

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

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

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

I am planning a more realisable collection, to be called *Metropolitan*. In very broad terms, I view *Metropolitan* as a return to the theme of cultural malaise explored in the unpublished *Dash* poems. I'm thinking of

dividing *Metropolitan* into two sections (and possibly even two separate volumes) – *The Politics of the Sublime* and *The Politics of the Mundane*.

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

The germinal event of *The 20 Sleepless Years* was an article I read on the publication of work on the human genome. The title refers to the notion that if a person were to speak all the letters which make up the genetic code describing the human genome, it would take 20 years without sleep.

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

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

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

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

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

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

bareness of that poem, its wryness, tenderness, the way it arrests itself at the end with those lines I've quoted)...

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

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

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

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

I suppose I see the violence as something one must pass through. If you don't encounter violence, serenity is diminished; if you experience violence, or experience violently, then serenity (if it comes) is amplified.

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

Poems like *Barents* and *Siberia* move towards a different end, or move at least in a different way. While I hope all my poetry is a form of

contribution of one kind or another, my own belief is that a poem like *Siberia* forms an inherently greater contribution than a poem like *The 20 Sleepless Years*.

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

To whom, after all, do poems belong?

Michael Ayres  
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