

# *Raw Skies*

**Also by Nigel Wheale**

*Answerable Love* (Great Works Editions, 1977)

*Simples* (The Many Press, 1979)

*Strong Lines Recessional Numbers* (infernial methods, 1980)

*The Plains of Sight* (The Many Press, 1989)

*Remote Sensing* (Poetical Histories, 1989)

*Phrasing the Light* (The Many Press, 1994)

with Walid Abdul-Hamid

*He Said to His Prince and Patron Sayf Al-Dawla* (Poetical Histories, 2002)

*The Postmodern Arts: An Introductory Reader* (Routledge, 1995)

*Writing and Society: Literacy, Print and Politics in Britain 1590–1660*

(Routledge, 1999)

**As editor**

*Shakespeare in the Changing Curriculum* (with Lesley Aers) (Routledge, 1991)

*Remaking Shakespeare: Performance Across Media, Genres and Cultures* (with  
Pascale Aebischer and Edward J. Esche) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)

# Raw Skies

New & Selected Poems

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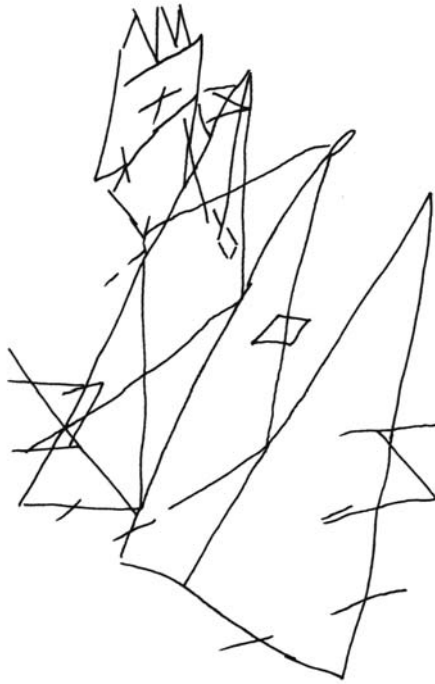
J : tibi seruiat ultima Thule

I sent a tightly folded poem, expecting no reply.  
Your answer came, woven in the tide's race,  
The wordless speech of branches.



# Flows and Traces

2003





## Curlew Glide

Rises stuttering, a seeded trail of cries  
flung between the green and the grey,  
he marks his ground in song spraint.

At full curve from tail to beak tip,  
wing blades flexed,  
the arc of song  
tense with an urgency we seem to know  
thrills to a joyful alarm.

In the clearing of night  
they are homeless star cries  
stitched upon soft felt.

## Riddle

Rapid breaths across the wan dome.  
Sheddings of light from an ice-pleated sky.  
Wave upon pulse, a shiver among stars.  
White satin sheet, furrowed and stained.  
Breathing of sand across dark dunes.  
Fumes of light, snagging on Algal.  
A weaving drape of light-fall  
thrown down to this earthline.

## Goose Field

A gentle inbreath as two hundred wings  
unfold to beat them upwards. Once there,  
they fade to strandlines, crying creatures  
strung out against the northern light.

Gull-motes surf above the latten-grey Flow,  
buoyantly underlit. Fierce masses of water  
trade gradients below. Soon Draco  
will fracture their sky with his bright graph line.

O sleep, thou fleshly birth, may you  
never be free of your heart, here  
in a world that the world might make.

*A night endless like the sea's waves . . .*

A night endless like the sea's waves, a dark curtain flooding,

bringing the sky-host of anxieties.

I said, as it arched its huge back above me,

its chest unmoving, the hips so far beyond,

'Monstrous night, make way for dawn,

though morning will bring no relief.

Such a night you are, as if your stars

were tied to the Ward Mountain by thick chords,

the Pleiades bound with simmans to rock.'

From the *Mu'allaqa* of Imru'al-Quays (lived 497–545 AD; a pre-Islamic poet from Najd, Yemen. Translated with Walid Abdul-Hamid.

## Flow Stone

Trending layers swept south  
    across the intermontane basin,  
'a sea gradually shallowing'  
    gently deposited blank pages of rock  
Over millennia, pressing rare life.  
Now stone-frozen fish swim the strata  
    within lamina of grey mudshale.

Glazed by light in a moment's breath,  
    a wave's feathering  
Is caught across warm silt skin.  
    Now it is rock-woven,  
Eve's falling tresses at Autun  
    drift on the palaeocurrent.

Then flexures, folding and faulting  
    contort the passive sediment.  
Firths and straits are overdeepened  
    under glacial stress,  
Mountains levelled and gouged  
    and all is overlain  
By thin tills of glacial drift.

At Outertown the basal complex  
    is laid bare, granite flesh  
Shot with white banding,  
    dykes become shattered rubble.  
Thermal aureoles burn within the granite  
    to survive this savage downthrow,  
Cold rock under the sparagma of stars.

## Wind Huis

There are breeze ghosts in the wind slabs  
when near-gales burnish stone and flesh alike.  
Window songs and chimney voices  
pluck at the soul of the small hours,  
peedie ones dancing maniacally beyond the wall's depth  
under the glancing loom of the lighthouse.

This house begins to sing once more,  
tuning for long winter,  
but by morning light-quiet has been won  
between the passage of storms,  
a front losing its identity beyond the Fair Isle,  
morning a solvent of warming light,  
and silence wide as the bay curves to the hills.

Small birds make nests  
in branches high against the sky.  
Their song hangs open to the light  
as all of time begins to brim  
towards the corners of our day.



## *Such a scale of light*

Such a scale of light  
soothed the islands last evening  
under a bird-calling stardome.

Morning's glarestrip is laid upon the waters,  
turquoise of inshore plunging to dark  
over the hundred fathom deeps.

Quick flecks move on the bay below  
as a whitemaa cloud rises from the back rig,  
sown by spring's harrow.

Swiftless these skies, light spaces aching  
for wing notes, heart cries of young May,  
gracing the bitter sharp savours of hoar thorn.

Yet two buds upon each sprig  
have made the mountain blush  
across the bay.

## Sea Notes

There are no tricks in sea painting,  
no short cuts to success as a sea painter.  
I intend to analyse waveform through my responsive medium,  
sweeping in the main lines with a flowing brush of thin Ivory Black.  
Too much detail would suggest the sea stood still to be portrayed.

First lay in the semi-dark waveforms.  
In this way the immensity of the sea  
rolls through the carrying power of the colour.  
The rocks will show their resistance to the sea.  
The water, though enormous in mass, is pliant.

You must work at top speed, placing  
everything on canvas in its proper value,  
leaving accidentals in the mixed tone.  
These will reflect a greater sense of light.  
The canvas begins to have colour all over  
and your highlights should flash like amber drops,  
more brilliant than foam.

Rose Madder purples shadow colour,  
detracting from the sunlit detail.  
It is not lack that blooms in the shadow,  
only reflected light.  
In this case, a pink note runs throughout.

You could not paint a landscape sky  
into a seascape work. There is more halation  
by the sea. The clouds are more radiant  
in tone and colour. The peep of the sea below  
provides a platform of complementary colour.

A certain amount of wildness  
is apparent in this rough note.

Formulas lightly adapted from Borlaise Smart, *The Technique of Sea Painting* (1946).

## Five Remarks about Waves

Waves leave no mark upon each other  
but have certainly impressed these redstone cliffs.

The luminous inner palm of which wave was it  
has left these Spanish detergent bottles  
ecstatically high at the driftline?

All of those frail waves have carried all of those great ships.

The wave passes through its medium  
like a persuasive idea, vertically agitating  
all the stationary monads, itself unmoved.

Nature's way of bringing the sea to an end,  
waves are not symbols of permanence or change,  
nor of passion or equanimity.  
The Department of Wave Mechanics knows this,  
but will never be able to convince the oceans,  
forever fretting at the land.

## Surface Tension

A meniscus skins water  
with transparent rigour.  
Creatures walk upon it  
or fail to pierce it  
from beneath,  
condemned to water.

This inter face curves  
from shore to shore,  
a sac dividing anti worlds.

Waters meeting across a temperature gradient  
struggle to level their surface differences,  
the meniscus line a complex polymer  
ferociously dancing as it arbitrates.

At middle dusk the water face  
petulantly throws off light of the sky  
and its depths withdraw  
under implacable grey.  
Small insects touching on this silvered flesh  
fall through, but do not sink.  
The face of the water eats them via its creatures.

## Fight or Flight

Racing tidal headwaters  
etch an eroding shore.  
Each stone and wrack stands clear  
in a raking daedal dawn.

Light's seven-braided blade  
hangs above the brae,  
fierce covenant of times to come.

How you walk the wastes of this heart,  
the sharp tang of our flowering  
still upon me.