Sonnets of various sizes
SAMPLER
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Shearsman Books
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Whole-day-long journeys, hours of fields and towns
Sun
(The wind)
The clouds are copying the trees and cows
Six foot of intricate machinery
Here is my hand, a future map they say
(Westminster Bridge)
One day a song will burst into my brain
Often I’ve tried to settle in this place
Ladywell has gone up into the sky
David stood firm against a storm of days
Waiting for the renewal of my passport
Elderly summer in her Ascot hat
(Sleep)
(Spring)
Now summer in her loveliness is here
Rain falling out of heaven happily
Now listen in to the periphery
The wind that shakes the ilex tree shakes me
Dawn is a kingdom just beyond the world
(gimme some truth)
England. I think some clear and simple thing
Take away their mountain – see them scraping
This year, as last year, stitchwort, I fear
(Hedges)
(Scalpay)
God bless the consonants that call up trees
(After Dante)
(After Dante)
My love is in the world and I am free
In a letter, Hopkins wrote that the English sonnet is too short, because Italian vowels are longer than English vowels, and the Italian is the original and perfect sonnet. So in this collection you will find one extended sonnet – Les Murray wrote that an example of ‘sprawl’ (which is something he approves of) is a sonnet in its twenty-first line. You will also find some sonnets from the Italian of Dante, crammed into tight English vowels. Some sonnets that don’t rhyme. Some in the rhyming-couplet form of John Clare. And some poems of fourteen lines which are probably not sonnets at all.

(These poems were written over a period of thirty-two years. They are not arranged in chronological order.)
Love all at once – heart bursting into head,
Every not yet and now and finished instant:
Would crack the brain, like as if all the dead,
Future and past, and those dying this moment,
Sucked, great star-cloud, into a garden shed,
Or every rose-seed crammed into one case,
Growing one rose, with the whole world, its bed,
Squeezed in the talon roots. The human race,
Its final number, has to be outspread,
Like refugees on a long road, flung dots
Of difference, fields not murdered into bread;
And roses have to grow in separate spots;
And I have got to love you bit by bit:
Flashes of scraps, like windows headlight-lit.
As I went looking for my love,
On a wet bank I slipped – a stripe
Of damp on my left cheek, a swipe
From a low branch sagged in the wet
Of its dead freight, not dropped yet
Into the litterings that spread
Orange-brown circles, pools of shed
Prototype souls, or skins of thought
Not wrong but just used up. Hooks caught
Then, in the flapping of my jacket,
Sharp rose-memories, and my right boot
Sank, and I, reeling, dragged at it,
And sinking flailed and flailing sink
As through the wet wood weave my loose footprints.
My lover is like Berkshire in the night.
She stretches out like Slough beneath the stars.
Her veins are lamplit sidestreets where warm cars
Pass on a wave of light from light to light.
Between her towns dark woods bow to the moon,
But total darkness you will never find,
Always some vestige of the afternoon
Keeps shining like the daydreams of the blind.
She has some heaths where people never go,
Or if they do, at certain moonless times,
Think themselves ghosts revisiting their crimes,
And feel eternity’s dead heart beat slow.
But just when she’s convinced them that they’re dead,
Morning gets up again in Maidenhead.
Love is a medical emergency,
Cell-overload of electricity,
Heavy intensifying mist of light
Mixing the mind’s eye up with the eyesight.
A sudden swishing secrecy of screens,
A drunken disappearing of betweens,
And you are opened in a necessary
Ancient suspension of all modesty.
But you are two and this is a magician
Mending them in the mask of a clinician,
No, a witchdoctor with a smiling knife
Cutting towards the noose around your life,
As it hangs in the balance. First in crisis
Joins us, and then in crisis separates us.
(Wedding present)

That was the day the sun just went on rising
Into the light; the thrush, in its dawn singing,
Out-topped its highest note until unheard ones
Shattered the windows of the chapel and
Of the skyscrapers flashing tangerine,
And the glass flew straight up into the stars;
Mercury burst from the barometers
In bullet streaks; tall-stretching sycamores
Were pumas sharpening their branchy claws
On the sky’s ice; hawks shrank into the stratosphere,
Mountains grew mountains as if bodybuilding –
And the most near pressed close to the most far.
Then the whole thing snapped shut with a string’s twang
Into this silver locket – here you are.
Closest, I recognise her least. She breaks,
Glass of a river when it melts through rocks,
Shatters into a crowd of characters,
Dark glitterers and silent chatterers,
All of her selves, all her past lives, her strata,
Orange leaving dashing to a brink of water,
All claiming this one moment, shades who crowd
To the trench filled with honey and hot blood,
Slowed by Odysseus with his blade, lost man
Hardened to make them answer one by one.
Who are you when you are a swarm of bees,
Split from the hive, between localities,
Who, when the next is found, sink back unseen
Into the sleeping person of the Queen?
(Vows)

This is no shapeless patch of territory. We travelled here by random roads for certain, but it’s a place, it is a certain country, and we have earned a certain recognition, since it was us who chanted out the borders, marking the flowing map of what we move in. So the dark field I climb is you, the village beyond, in rising light, all have love’s features. Which are a cage of light to free the eyes, or water to the seal released, who touches at every stroke, no edge, no see-through limit with faces pressed against. So he abandons triangulating fear with death and failure, and hate’s co ordinates all prove inaccurate.
Carrying one another carefully
Over the stones, each brimful of the other,
And careful not to spill, exchanging spoonfuls,
Like children feeding one another medicine—
Be careful how this concentration
On the midpoint, leaves free the fringe of vision
For half-seen things to enter, bright invasion
Not border-checked by thoughts, but flooding
As through the eyes of leafless Eve and Adam,
Accumulating insect-jewels, feather-crowns
That will be hard to carry later on.
Beware you bearing one another’s bones,
Like flowers, the later limping over stones,
Laden with treasures and without a helper.