

*Natural Selection: poems*  
Akros, 2001

### LIFE'S SUMMERTIME

It is not yesterday that I would have  
return, to pioneer again that path  
I cut. Nor care I for the aftermath  
which hedges round the present life I live,  
narrowing down the choices I must take  
toward the future, and to my decline.  
And yet without each effort now of mine  
the world may be a future none can make.

I choose the sense of having loved to be  
alive, and draw in fragrance from the past;  
I balance amiably on present flowers  
as each new moment sets another free;  
and while the buzz of my intention lasts  
I build my honeycomb of future powers.

### RIVER

Light flows with the river:  
broadly calmly the force  
of all those deeps is contained  
although each winter turf by turf  
the banks give way and fall.

Birds fly with the river:  
loudly lowly the speed  
of all those wings is directed  
and each Spring in reed and sand  
they build anew their nests.

Trees grow with the river:  
blown and bent the persistence  
of all those leaves bears fruit  
and branch and flower festoon their own  
reflection in the pools.

Feelings flow, ideas fly and  
peace grows with the river:  
we nest our hearts  
and trail our leaves  
in that deep reflection

as the river takes it.

## UNITY

It concerns the vowels and their numbering,  
the sounds they make, the tuning  
    of each oracle with its sister sites  
    where earth-energy emanates,  
and concentrated will-power  
evokes a hero for the hour  
whose voice rings and resonates –

its frequency captured by Earth  
whose daily death and rebirth  
    is patterned in stars and their ordering,  
    the light-years they are spiralling  
through counterfoils of time to join  
in the chanting of the OM,  
and human music answering.

## DUNVEGAN, ISLE OF SKYE

*the castle seen from across the loch at sunset*

dying sunlight on Dunvegan  
captured from the pale horizon

craven rocks around and moorlands  
callous waters of the islands

bright the wing of boat and bird  
golden seaweed, fling of cloud

between the hidden Hebrides  
and the Cuillins, *Eumenides*

nothing sudden here nor violent  
non-committal here and silent

deep the rift of land and heart  
sealed with mist all love and hurt

accomplished now the heron's flight  
posed and poised for the twilight

croaking takes up his position

we who come will ask no question

Dunvegan now with folded wing  
watches its own voyaging

## BARRA

*The wind the tide the cockle strand*  
larks and plovers wheeling  
a belt of flowers between the sand

the 'twin otter' keeling  
round the headland over rocks  
as if a seabird landing

a seabird messenger of gods  
an angel taken for granted  
while men with mail and luggage bags

unload load-up unhurried  
*the wind the tide the cockle strand*  
together and concerted

allow the little plane to land  
where duck and seal play dive and seek  
and swim and fly and seem to speak  
*of wind and tide and cockle strand*

## DRUID (possibly Gaelic for Skylark)

You play among flowers on the dunes  
little druid;  
I spy your nest tunneled in grass  
with buttercups at the door;  
in you go and again hurry out  
to forage for your family.

I hear you before I see you  
little druid  
on your vertical songline;  
it was a far journey to find you here  
on sea-lanes patched with islands;  
purple gold turquoise the mantle  
you draw around you from sea and sky  
to adorn your brown tunic;

you inscribe your incantation in air –  
it fades at once as you fall.

### KINGFISHER

Kingfisher blue  
bluer than sky  
skyer than air  
more air than water  
more water than leaf  
leafer than light  
lighter than stream  
more stream than ray  
more ray than russet  
more russet than daybreak

blue sky air  
water leaf light  
stream ray russet  
daybreak blue

I saw you not once  
not twice but three times

What is your message  
bluebird, tell me?

I wait I tremble  
it will come it will come  
out of the blue

### ICY SWIMMERS

A heron has stalked here over the snow  
unerringly to the river and lonely  
as ever positions himself by a stump  
humped as he waits.

I follow his tracks  
and watch as he stretches his neck  
higher, holds it, until my presence  
is a tree or bush, while water  
laps the melting bank with fish:  
icy swimmers.

Working indoors  
I know the heron wades there, alone

day and night, crumpled by wind  
or stiffened by frost, stands  
awaiting his chance. His life  
depends on it – even as mine  
has come to depend on the chance  
of steadfastness such as his.

#### QUIET NATURE

Fish do not scream although they struggle  
we take the tension on the line  
and slender rod bent almost double

While casting long the peaceful hours  
we tie a gaudy wanton fly  
and sink it deep beneath the waters

Or modest 'brown' on windy pools  
to dance the surface playfully  
in little spurts and sudden whorls

The peaceful hours fish do not scream  
we take the tension on the line  
enjoy a glinting and a gleam

Reward for patience practice, skill  
with slender rod bent almost double  
the quiet nature of the kill

#### TRANSPLANTED

'April 16th' from the poem-book *Shadows from the Greater Hill*

Trees do not grow for three or four years  
after being transplanted;  
they settle their roots.

These trees in the park  
are large to have been uprooted.  
The younger the tree  
the quicker it settles and grows;  
so I am told.

My experience is different:  
roots were dragging me under.  
I could not grow for the heavy clinging.

Transplanted now  
I am lifted, winging  
weightless almost.

My growing is to shed  
all that holds me down.

I grow stems of thought  
to flower as poems.

WINDY DAWN OVER ARTHUR'S SEAT, AUGUST  
'August 3rd' from the poem-book *Shadows from the Greater Hill*

The hill is tossing high frail wisps of  
rosy cloud to glide in steady gale  
along a turquoise sky around above the  
perpendicular and slightly askew columns  
above the triangular gap  
between crown and crag.

The moon full at midnight  
is now high and faded  
almost a lazy eyelid  
day's eye opening  
or night's eye closing.

Birds chase and ride the wind  
reeling wheeling  
aware that in a moment  
ordinary flight of day will have to be resumed.

The hawk alone is steady  
keeps position despite the gale  
to pinpoint a victim

and far below  
grasses tinge in flower:  
harebell, yarrow, lady's yellow bedstraw  
among the rangy thistles and fatted doves.

HOLYROOD PARK, OCTOBER, SEEN FROM ABROAD  
'October 14th' from the poem-book *Shadows from the Greater Hill*

To define a particular mountain from this distance  
across the Atlantic  
is not difficult, since

no close-up obstacles can intervene.

Details must be omitted:  
whether it rests in accustomed cloud  
unperturbed, or rises  
in clear, elegant outline of sun and shade.  
The time of day, too, is slightly uncertain.

I know the time of year and how trees  
are experiencing those first loving  
touches of newly-awakened frost  
which quietens autumnal trembling.  
Beside the loch they are yellow  
except for the willow,  
but young trees in their roundels  
are wispy and frail.  
It takes a mass of withered leaves  
for abundant colour.

The mower perhaps is working one last time  
to leave the grass evenly smoothed  
before the churning of winter.  
Swifts have gone, but geese  
flock and fly and land and walk and swim.  
They own the place in their noisy way.  
Birds are scarcely singing now  
but berries are brilliant;  
even beside the bus-stop on the roadside  
haws are darkly bloody.  
Rowans are dotted with crimson  
as if welcoming winter:  
its clear, piercing, crying, enduring love.

## TIME AND THE HOUR

We took our rest beneath the Milky Way  
clear far yet near and cool,  
told tales of earthy Irish things  
and old-folk we had known.

In mossy woods the tracks were lined  
with butter-coloured chanterelles  
fluted like Mahler's singing earth  
and ready for our gathering.

We climbed to where the mountain waters flowed

spreading a thin veil on sculpted rock  
yet islanded midstream a tiny fir stood firm  
with tormentil and melancholy thistle.

Swallows settled on the pylon wires  
or swooped, escaped above us.  
A robin sat to pass the damp of evening  
as fallen branches were cut up for fuel.

Then we lit the fire and talked a while  
and fended off our sad presentiments.  
We wanted to be warm and quiet and glad  
to stay amid the waterfalling round us.

## SEARCH

Dawn wings over with seagulls  
seagulls scatter light  
light is caught in the eye  
the eye opens the mind

the mind tags a word  
words that say 'it is day'  
day and light returning  
returning yet quite new

quite new, yet also another  
another chance to take  
take by making a gift  
gift of what I am

I am my own creator  
creator of what I do  
what I do without fail  
not fail to reach the mark

mark my words as seagulls  
gulls prise open shells  
shells secrete the pearl  
pearl of wisdom dawning.

## REGENERATION

Regeneration is what counts.  
Like a flower newly crushed



I'll lay aside superfluous wants  
and turn the way of all plants  
that look for light, however pushed  
away, thrown out, displaced, torn,  
I shall be centred on the sun.

Perfume is not diminished when  
petals are crushed or desiccated.  
Colours are as clear and clean  
although leaf and stem are broken  
and the plant is mutilated.  
Earth accepts such limitations,  
protects, restores, her creations.

Insects creep from captivity  
to use the plant for their needs.  
It is broken, lacks beauty,  
why weep with slow pity  
over withered, tangled weeds?  
The huge scuttling cockroach  
squats with his entourage.

The butterfly is absent now  
and bees have accomplished  
their work before dark. Below  
ground begins renewal  
of the livelihood that perished.  
It is not visible. I die.  
Another life begins, not I.

#### ELEGY

I saw a roe-deer stepping over grass.  
She bent to crop or stood to poise and raise  
her head, her seeming gaze  
towards me where I watched within the room;  
about me, chrysostom,  
a visitation from the world of gold  
beyond our low threshold.

What fences has she leapt to reach the lawn,  
what wire, what barriers has she overcome  
to dance into this freedom?  
Does she bring me an essential message  
of my dead mother's passage  
free into joy, delight, *our lady greensleeves*,  
while her old daughter grieves?

The deer has disappeared and night has fallen.  
Up on the moor each tiny plant is hidden:  
woundwort and valerian.  
Good mother, all you gave has now been taken –  
for our sake life forsaken.  
Up in the woodland trees are harbouring  
small creatures on the wing.

## SECOND SIGHT

Dragonfly  
Heaven's spy  
    beckoner  
    eye-catcher  
follower☒  
agitator  
    devil's needle☒  
    angel's spindle  
slender legged  
upper lipped  
    double wings☒  
    up in a whirr  
shimmerings  
now where  
  
    threadbare☒  
    pine and fir  
the waterfall  
dare or die  
    tells it all☒  
    dragonfly

## UNITY / Search

The story of Snow White and Rose Red:  
the children listened, chose colours, painted  
the happiness and sadness of the girls.

Really or imaginatively? Feelings  
become colour mixed with water on paper:  
from story through heart into art.

But who wrote the archetypal story?  
Anonymous: the child in all of us who mourns

the losses that accompany our growing.

Who killed cock robin? The child weeps  
with all the birds of the air  
and death is born, a living pain in her.

On the way to school one day she finds  
a dead bird, perfect, fallen from its nest. She stoops,  
examines it without the least distress.

This fact of death is not the pain of death  
which lurks in her and practises its part whenever  
her own mortality is touched by art.