

Sonnet Selection
with eight Rilke lyrics translated
Akros, 2007

INCH-SPACE OF THE HEART
A Sonnet-Sequence

*We lock infinity into a square-foot of silk:
pour a deluge from the inch-space of the heart.*
Basho

PROLOGUE: EXTRAVAGANZA

While others may outskill us far in prose
in lives of duty, virtue, common-sense,
we each day labour, ready at the close
to scrap all for some lack of excellence.

A life, a year, or manuscript rejected,
offered to others, critics and the rest
of time; which self will prove the one selected?
How many sacrificed to keep the best?

Your volte-face revolts me: can I reverse
the poem once made? Recite it upside down?
Compose the very pieces you disperse?
Recant, or sing it to another tune?

You are the words I write, extravaganza,
my couplet, testament, my every stanza.

MIND'S DESIRE

You cannot penetrate my secret space
with so-called love in search of an orgasm,
esprit and corps kept in a separate place,
head and penis marked by dualism.
I want your seeds of thoughtful protoplasm
to reach my burning ophalos within,
your recklessness and skill to dare the chasm
leading to my holiest domain.
There I shall feast you more on food and wine
which lull the very potency I need
to open up most precious gifts of mine
sealed, imprisoned, waiting to be freed.

I give your thoughts my bodily conception
desire you with consummate intellection.

DISPELLS

We try to make a poem of our lives,
choose form and metre, lovely some refrain;
with vision, brave ideas, new perspectives
we write a word or two, begin again.

It may not be a pornographic novel
or dissertation based on careful study
which brings rewards, respect; no interval
shut-in-the-dark, lonely, broken, broody.

Together we composed a tragedy,
no full-scale operatic melodrama
but straight-forward, simple, saddest beauty –
The Magic-Apple-Tree of Samuel Palmer:

That poem we made I break in brutal fragments
and scatter them, dispells and disenchantments.

LOVE GAINSAID

What we write is easily deleted
crossed, blotted out; for now we see
it makes no sense: this tragedy
misunderstood by fools, was not completed.
Heretic to Plato's real ideas
you swallowed your own words, destroying them
as thoroughly as you concocted them –
those vows, bestowals, poems, letters, tears.

How can I, unaided, keep our treasure
heavy behind locked lips in strongroom heart,
if you decide it was but dross and lead?
There is no thought nor whisper than can measure –
no song, no symphony, nor any art
the destitution of a love gainsaid.

THE CANVAS

With a penknife you are hacking me out
of your heart . . . deliberately doing it.
The canvas is vandalised scratch by scrape.

It hangs there and cannot protest or shout.
I was the design for all you painted
upon your confused, interior landscape.

Through Kafka-grey obdurate fortresses
of colour, Pavesi trailed dejection
with yellow-ochre streaks. Subtle texture
of Virgil or Sappho's polished verses
Dotted into fugue or variation.
I was shaped like spaces in the picture.

Is it bleak now, blanched of memory?
Have you masked the gashes there – of me?

LOVE'S BAPTISM

Let me be baptised into more pain
or left in depths of Jordan without air
until, immersed in ceaseless streams of care,
this body of my death be sloughed and slain.

If love be Love it cannot drown in woe
nor burn in fire, nor cease through suffering:
this silence faintly I am entering
Is torture loathingly I undergo.

Lest I betray my own heart's certain love,
lest I speak or scream or merely weep,
let there be no lessening of pain.
The generosity for which we strove,
the pure ideals we longed to know and keep,
these now alone I safe-guard and maintain.

ALCHEMICAL SONNET

As that fanatical bird-singing morn
to elixir of enchantment responded,
amazed in half-light of uncertain dawn
we lay in crazy alchemy enbonded.

The nugget of our hard-won self had melted,
a softening-unto-death and yet sublime,
but a more precious metal still unsmelted
demanded mettle unimpaired by time.

Our hey-day soon descended into night,
buried the fond treasure of our promise,

unpractised our impracticable rite
leaving ashen memories for solace.

Such ores refined in pain may lastly prove
gold – in the alembic of our love.

GRACED WITH LIGHT

My sleep had been like sunlight filtered through
a canopy of leaves, Yet I was blind
and groped in darkness for the one I drew
beside me: dreading to awake and find
myself within my ownmost self confined:
no light, no tree, no lover, even sleep
itself perhaps the making of a mind
wandered and too overwrought to weep.

‘He slumbers not who doth me ever keep’
but comes to touch and wake me with the note
of blackbird offering faintly out of deep
night – quavers of another dawn afloat.

I turn to trace dear features in outline
graced with light and bending over mine.

THE COST

If distances were not so far
between my love and my desire,
if he were ever by my side
and nothing we need fear or hide,
if I were free, and he unbound
from his own nature’s holy ground,
how should we know the speed or strength
or height or depth or life or length
of love between us? Love so rare
that when I think on it I dare
not speak it, lest by utterance
I put to flight its innocence,
but catch my breath and silently
afford more love incessantly.

BATTLEFIELD

My poem was an epic concerning
a crusade, campaign:
reverses, panic, slow returning

to the battlefield again.

Forced into cunning like Odysseus,
foes behind the lines,
friendly metaphors turning treacherous,
foxes in the vines.

Truce was called; battle-standards lowered,
lip-service paid to peace;
but my heroic poem was dishonoured
in its high-seriousness.

The Troy we fought for vanished in the plain:
what can we write, who won our war in vain?

SHELL-SHOCKED

I was shell-shocked and invalided out . . .
'but you can write!' they say,
'yes, everything's just fine – or just about.
why can't you smile today?'

Can I rejoice to see the land laid waste,
cottage and castle blackened-out with fire,
hillside and valley cruelly defaced
with trenches and barbed-wire?

Can I smile except for this one moment
in greeting to a friend
when there is no future, and no present,
nothing without end?

Could I divine a poem in my shock
it would be water wrenched from desert rock.

PUNCTUATION

It is not my eyes you think you're seeing
rather full stops, black dots to mark a space,
a barrenness through moisture lost in crying,
a dark-night-of-the soul, a desert place.

It is not my hands you think you're touching,
rather two commas bent to give a pause,
two beggars on the dusty pavement crouching
past caring further now to plead their cause.

It is not my smile, expression lifting,
but exclamation-mark to end the line;
new emphasis, prejudiced and shifting
the customary meaning of the sign.

Nor is it my voice you think you're hearing –
A question-mark, unanswered, interfering.

LOST POEM

What happened to the poem that we made?
shown in the index but not on the page,
as if it had its moment on the stage
and now remains a scene no longer played.

Can't find it in the poetry-book at all.
torn out, the frayed edge leaves a mark.
perhaps it's hidden under other work
or in anthology more suitable?

Don't show it, if you find it, to your friends:
they would not understand its garbled tongue,
the words are rather difficult and long,
and you know how pathetically it ends.

I'll make a perfect haiku on my own
that former poem never need be known.

CREDITS

The love I loved, without once raking back
a part in part when direly torn apart;
the days I dazed with dismal, stricken heart,
imagining you dead; bleak night's attack
of dreams denoting death with no escape;
hour's blood waiting; chronic prayers
for angels to have charge of your despairs
winging every shadow into shape
of Nature: my generating spirit
spiralled in your life: grant so much credit!

What you devalue has intrinsic worth
and shall be stored by me, restored to me
through other eyes and lives, another birth
harvesting mercy out of misery.

DEBITS

For debit I acknowledge keen delight
of eye, of ear, inspired intelligence;
belief in beauty's truth and permanence,
images of magic, fancy's flight;
extraordinary joy in being loved
for nothing but my own rhapsodic soul:
and loving in return I made you whole –
self-deprecation handsomely disproved.

We rolled together down a steep incline,
one mind, one body toppled down the hill
in sudden playfulness, spontaneous passion.
Now separate we make a strange design,
abused and ridiculed for matching ill,
our poem out-of-date and out-of-fashion.

BIRTHDAY WISH

For all the wishes, flowers, I cannot send,
for all the kisses, hours, we cannot spend
together: may this card alone attend
you on your birthday, greet and not offend
you. May Apollo and the Muses lend
you favours that the very gods intend
shall evermore be yours; bend, condescend,
touch, heal, misericordia mildly mend;
orchestral angels solemnly ascend
by day and night, from sorrow to defend
you: with my every word that I have penned
you, I can nevermore attempt, pretend
my love is less than love that will transcend
all lesser loves: my love world without end.

CLASSICAL FORM

Express your life in Latin or in Greek,
wear borrowed thought fashioned in ancient time,
let apt quotations sprinkle all you speak
to give your pettiness an air sublime;
be careful to reveal great scholarship,
in experience find these layers of learning;
they lend authority, but fail to keep
you constant; add lustre to the yearning
for your reflection in the shining pool
of my unfathomed love, but nothing more.

You tell me now yourself I was a fool –
worshipped the beauty you were haggling for:

The Greeks, who lived the poems that they wrought
cannot live ours; and ours has come to nought.

DO NOT APOLOGISE

You feel you must apologise for love?
To clear your conscience of unwanted load,
regret the trouble caused, bad form you showed
in loving one you knew you could not have?

You did not notice the reserved label?
Bathsheba took hers off to wash, and lost
her husband, not her heart, in the fable;
her feelings were not counted in the cost.

Diana, not the huntress hard and chaste,
but of Poitiers the gracious lady,
the young king's life-long love, was not outfaced
by any scheming Catherine of Medici.

Do not apologise for love, but hate
that self-regard which is Love's apostate.

HARD AND FAST

There is no hard and fastness in my love
hard rules to keep
hard man to reap
whoever sows in hollow or in grove.

No fastnesses enclosing mine and thine
snatching want
pruned plant
withering in a word or look malign.

My love is void yet ever overflows
invisible yet coiling into form
untouchable, ascending as it goes
into the paradise it floated from.

So loosely, lovely, broken, integral
lavished, spilt, used up, a cruse of oil.

POETIC SENSE

I did not lack in love and all I gave
increases my capacity for love;
by losing my contentedness I save
a rapture that no pedant dare reprove.

My happiness discarded, laid aside,
I take the garment of eternal woe;
you now put on a coat of borrowed pride;
it may not warm you in the winter snow.

The Muse will not despise my lowliness,
will feed and clothe me with unfailing ardour;
for you I fear and for your callowness
which swaggers in an artificial grandeur:

If you repudiate poetic sense
your wisdom will construe as ignorance.

CRUCIFIED

When you fastened your cross around my neck
you made me accept it. 'This must be yours,'
you said, 'because I love you for ever.'

From the first I was reluctant to take
something so precious. But when Love implores
we accept the gift as the giver.

'Again and again I clasp you,' you said.
I wore the pendant, its shaft a sword.
It burdened my breast like the albatross
with weight of love I could never shed.

Or was I hanging while nails were hammered?
Did I suffocate on your cross?

Forgive him. He knows not what he has done:
agape crucified, *eros* lives on.

REFLECTIONS ON WAKING: EASTER DAY

I have no god: as prophet call me false;
the god of Love triumphs not, but fails.
I shall not utter now the tones so dear,

darkness and death I'm hoping for.

Break my limbs lest I again awake
to slow strangulation of the snake,
the crucifixion of another day
and desperation at my death's delay.

If Easter means arising, let me lie.
The god of Hate and Fear jealously
devours with flames his altars saturated,
for Love has not been loved or vindicated.

The God I worship died as other men,
his suffering broke out and rose again.

LAST ATTEMPT

These poems are my last attempt to tell
you that I love you and will never cease.
Through them my misery has sought release;
cathartic? Purgatory? To hell with Hell!

I would bombard you with them like bullets
exploded from my loaded pent-up grief,
except I know it would not bring relief;
you would shrug them off as paper pellets.

'What more do you expect?' I hear you say;
'friendship? Occasionally a social call?'
More or less from nothing's grand total
leaves no remainder in respects to pay.

Whatever life may bring or chance may hold
think of me lovingly when you are old.

LOVE'S REASONING

My ink is dry and my invention spoiled;
I wish to die: no poem can I make.
Like Petrarch without Laura in the world
my loss awakes within me when I wake
each day; the plague took Laura from him,
an act of God? You took yourself from me
and scoffed at my complaint in Reason's name.
But Reason turns against such blasphemy,
unites with Love to draw us into God.
There is a Reason of the heart which tells

how Love is forced to carry its own load,
the very instrument by which it falls.

According then to Reason Love must die,
and since I truly love you, so must I.

CODA: MISUNDERSTANDING

You have mythologised my mind
and think thereby you understand,
believing your own myth about me
until you can no longer doubt me:
all my lies are plain to see –
my deceit, hypocrisy.

All that I can say, explain
to contradict you, is in vain.
I know myself – till you confuse me.
I am not what you will suppose me.
Keep your myth, I cannot live it,
if sometime I may forgive it.

Myths describe the mind that makes them;
the real other always breaks them.
You keep your god, describe the world
in terms that leave your myth unspoiled.
I must escape to find my soul,
the destiny that makes me whole.

EPILOGUE

THE GARDENER

To the Gardener, who, making paradise,
radiates sweet, seasonal advice,
who loves me when I laugh,
whose rod and staff
have saved me in the valley, brought me near
the fountain flowing into water clear,
who sailed me out of harbouring my grief
into summer – the tall ash in leaf.

Waves, oceans, shores, philosophy and song,
the round world's endless roundelay of wrong,
storm, winter, mud, acrimony, censure –
yet riding through them all the dear adventure

of poem-life, written in the living:
this sonnet is my gesture of thanksgiving.

TRANSVERBERATION

Sequence of seven linked sonnets

i

I know you do not speak of what you fear
for fear I would protect you from doing
what you want: to go on enjoying
our curiously happy adventure.
We work and we know we must not tire,
ceaselessly making what is beautiful
without reward, unhurriedly, until
the poetry itself is our desire.

I know your sadness is well-disciplined,
but would not have you put it from your mind;
you are completed by its presence –
nor do you turn aside when I am weeping.
Let's walk on through the woods. Your hand is keeping
mine warm in your pocket, talking nonsense.

ii

My hand in your pocket talking nonsense
or perhaps in touch with all that's wisest
in the world of energies, and closest
to reality, without pretence.
Nerves and skin, distributors of essence,
inform and form us. My hands take their shape
from ancestors, their life-work, like landscape
in fields that yield their ploughed-in resonance:

The captain who sailed to Australia
with wife and children in a paddle steamer,
surgeon, teacher or administrator,
artist and engineer combine in me.
I know the strains of each one's destiny
and your voice acts now as their arbiter.

iii

Your voice acts now as my arbiter
not by words you utter but the generous
tone and grain, precise yet sensuous,
that denotes the rashness of your nature.

What conducts our voices? The heart or
the tremors of the earth? Before we speak
we hear. In some language our minds awake:
Gaelic, Hindi, English, father, mother.

Our voice forms through language, lends it colour,
the most personal and peculiar
of our attributes, need never grow old.
Unique, and yet in voices we relate,
share ourselves, sympathise, intimate.
Love through our voices will not be concealed.

iv

Love through our voices will not be concealed
nor is it absent in our silences.
I understand your subtle defences
and what you did not mean when you smiled.
Scenes from the past may suddenly unfold
in the midst of some normal daily task.
We do not have to mention them, or ask
what is too complicated to be told.

I hear you on the telephone and wonder
how our voices fly to one another
o for the wings, for the wings of a dove:
our disembodied words will columbine,
reach home where the codings intertwine –
then we say ‘I love You’ and have to laugh.

v

We say ‘I love you’ and have to laugh:
It’s absurd, we know, and equally
we know it is essential. Tenderly
to live for one another is enough.
I watch you as a birch tree, silvery,
straight, elegant, reliable and tough
in all weathers, yet you are desirous of
my ministrations, almost gallantly.

Love is a protection that exposes
us to greater loneliness. In a world
too small and yet too large for the human
we crave the landscape of beloved faces.
Familiar paths and features guide and lead
us bravely onward with our eyes open.

vi

We are led onward with our eyes open
and yet we notice what we imagine
only, or learn to see. We determine
our world as we would have it happen.
We choose, it seems, perhaps we intervene,
in search of law and beauty, a garden
of our making, a down-to-earth Eden
to grow, evolve, as it has always done.

We have come together now and changed
our key to harmonise with one another
bringing into play a latent person
who had no voice or who was a stranger
to us, as if an angel visitor
unrecognised until we pay attention.

vii

Unrecognised until we pay attention
to the unutterable voice we hear
all our lives: the music of our mother
from the womb, when we were in gestation.
In our every word we try to answer
with counterpoint, a conversation
of sound and meaning, a tradition
which holds, breaks and redefines the measure.

Love through our voices will not be concealed,
although you do not speak of what you fear –
to live for one another is enough.
We listen and the pattern is revealed
of poetry itself our one desire,
the task and the adventure of our love.

THE GREAT OAK

Sonnet for a chieftain tree

The Great Oak stands stalwart at Eardisley
first recorded in the Domesday Book
a royal forest and a royal oak
a tree for kings, itself a chieftain tree.

Within the trunk's capacious hollow core
King Charles' men could hide, or locals flee,
who knew the secret of the ancient tree –

and children picnic on its mossy floor.

Beetles make their home and butterflies,
fern and lichen, fungi, weasel, stoat,
the woodpecker, the flycatcher, the bat,
a thousand and another thousand years.

With earthen roots as deep as heavenly height
balance *above below*, darkness and light.

THE MAGIC APPLE TREE

'comfort me with apples'

*Cherry blossom pink and apple blossom
white* or apple blossom's deeper pink
as in Samuel Palmer's *magic apple tree*
created for immortal Avalon
or for a taste of wisdom from the muse
from Venus, Friday's child, with Strongbow cider
fermented for a feast at harvest home.

Now hidden on a misty Scottish coast
old apple trees survive and are restored
each one to give its quintessential taste
in gardens of Lindores, its ancient abbey:
a gift to every sense and to more life
for birds, flowers, insects, thriving where
the apple reigns, cherished, venerated.

MAN AND NATURE

Our ancestors made temples out of trees
wherever grove or mountain spoke to them;
then changed the trees to stone and giant column
hacked from the hillside, unmoved by the breeze
immortal because dead, no unction drawn
from earth's long *agape*, no strength received
from light and air, no blessed fruit conceived
to shed and share, no passive wisdom grown.

Those gods live on, whose temples lie in dust
with remnant rocks, like hard tears suppressed,
now sanctified by foliage and flower –

What need had they of monuments to power?

Earth sets her face lest we should turning see
her damaged flesh, her wounded deity.

Eight Rilke lyrics translated

SINCE DELIGHT HAS WINGED YOU

Since delight has winged you
over countless previous precipices,
engineer bold bridges now
whose arching defies geometries.

Not merely through endurance,
freak survival of great danger,
but in pure direct performance
is the wonderment of wonder.

It is no presumption to play a part
in the complex ceaseless weaving of
life's patterning, ever more intricate –
to be carried along is not enough.

Let your practised skills outreach
until they join wide contraries,
for within the limits of human touch
the god discovers his mysteries.

MAGIC

From transformation such amazing shapes
appear. Oh do but feel and trust!
To ashes often turn our flaming hopes
yet art can set on fire our very dust.

Magic is here. In the enchanted world
the ordinary word appears translated
but sounds as real as if the ringdove called
to seek its mate, invisible, awaited.

I LOVE THE DARK HOURS OF MY BEING

I love the dark hours of my being
wherein my senses drown;
for there my daily life's already done
as in old letters found again
or, like a far-off legend, overcome.

Within the darkness I discover scope
for a wide eternal second life.
I'm like a ripe and rustling tree that leans
above the grave of my own inner child
and warms him with my roots, enfolding him,
unfolding for him that unspoken dream
the one he lost in elegiac song.

I LIVE MY LIFE IN WIDENING RINGS

I live my life in widening rings
that work their way through this world of things.
The final one I may not complete
but not because I accept defeat.

I encircle god and the ancient tower
a thousand years in outspreading gyre;
am I falcon or am I storm
or some unending song?

GRANT ME, OH EARTH

Grant me, oh Earth, a pure
clay for my pitcher of tears;
let my whole being outpour
all its imprisoned fears.

To fill this earthen vessel
let what I'm containing be freed.
Nothingness is what's evil

for all that has Being is good.

NOT TO BE CUT OFF

Let me not be separated,
not by so thin a partition
cut off from the realm of stars.
Inwardness, what is it
if not the unfathomable sky
tossed through with birds and blown
through with deep home-coming.

Undaunted I will complete the course,
terrified lest something mortal prevents me.
Once I was held in the womb
and to be wrenched out seemed death.
I won my way into Life. Are her arms now so deep,
so nourishing that I cannot break loose,
as in my original need, to seek new birth?

WERE IT NOW TIME

Were it now time for the gods
to emerge out of the everyday . . .
so as to rifle my house, page upon page.
A new page. Only the wind,
tossing some leaf in a spiral, reaches in here,
turns air over air like shovelling turf:
a new breathing field. Ye gods, ye gods,
you, oh who visit again and again,
you who sleep within things,
who rise up in joy, whom we imagine
rinsing your wings at fountains
and who lightly bestow your tranquillity
on what seems full, our busy lives.
Let it be morning for you once more, ye gods.
We are copies. You alone are archetypes.
The world rises with you and that power
of renewal gleams
through our every fracture and failure.

NIGHT SKY AND FALLING STARS

The sky is vast and full of hidden wonders,
a great storehouse of overflowing planet;
its beginning just too distant from our borders
its end too near for us to contemplate.

A falling star – we glimpse and make our wish,
a sudden shocking glorious connection.
What has begun and how much do we miss?
What is our guilt and what can be forgiven?

