

Poems appearing only in *Not Just Moonshine*

STOIC

to Callum Macdonald for St. Valentine's day
14th February 1999
when he was in hospital prior to his death on 24th February 1999

My dearest love's a stoic
who will endure his pain
his deepest grief, believing
nothing is in vain.

Stricken, he will ask no help;
in silence he keeps his fears;
he will suffer, nor seek relief
in anger, talk or tears.

To others he'll give counsel
wise and closely thought;
the individual, universal
entirely interwrought.

His feelings do not interfere
with judgement and good measure
for generosity runs clear
in humour, love and pleasure.

In all that's beautiful and true
of good report and pure
a stoic gives to worth its due
and love that will endure.

After Callimachus' HERACLITUS
for Callum, March 1999

They speak of your death, Callum, only to sing your praises
for you worked without sparing yourself to publish the poets.
You were generous, kind, wise, utterly loyal
and only perfection could satisfy your aesthetic zeal.

But for me it is not the books, nor even *Lines Review*
that for ten years I worked on hour after hour beside you,
it's the memory of how you would come and embrace me,
the doorlamp burning, music around you
and pour me a whisky on Friday evenings.

Poems were special and hawthorn blossom and ducks on the Tweed
and white doves and martins skimming around our heads
and difficult clues solved or new words discovered

and your telling me in Gaelic 'Come now quickly to bed.'*

**greas ort anns an leabaidh*

IMPRINT

Your handwriting keeps appearing on everything I touch
my dear Tessa...

mo ghaol...

from one who loves you true

and so I believe you do even now
you have gone to shade and light.

Your old hands, large and gnarled,
would delicately hold a fine-nibbed pen
or the special editing pencil you kept
in your breast-pocket as if
a little correction might be required
unexpectedly on the pages of life
as each day's poem unfurled.

In your frailty at last you could hardly manage
your signature
and were in silent tears at the failure
but you need not have wept:
your handwriting keeps appearing and
I say your name with my brain and breath
or I hear your voice recorded within me
safely in Gaelic and English.

This is perhaps an attempt of mine at replying.
I'm writing again and again.
Your absent presence is heavy to bear
although so light.
It is almost as if I am myself
the very last book you published.

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.

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.

ROMAN PAVANE

In Mendelssohn's Italian symphony
a minor key slowly presages
the broken lyre engraved on Keats' stone,
whose house of death below the Spanish steps
abides an altar to unresting rapture:

not only that he was, as Wilde wrote,
'a priest of beauty', but that he inspired
Severn's guardian friendship in despite
their deep disconsolation as destroys
its very pain and paralyses life.

I picked a violet's leaf from Keats' grave
to keep in green perennial appetite
for beauty's pact with truth; and yet in Rome
I everywhere was startled by perfection
made more so by its counter-transience.

Rome will remain even if what we see
of it should pass, as long as human minds
imagine such a city, such a setting
of ideals and technicality
assembled in an alchemy of power:

designs that built the pantheon and left
it winking to the sky; that made flesh
from marble and magnificence from dust;
the detailed working out of husbandry
in art, in thought, inhabiting the earth.

Still an altar to unresting rapture
despite the pain of deep disconsolation;
I everywhere was startled by perfection
of ideals and technicality
in art, in thought, inhabiting the earth.

SACRED CITY

The old makes beautiful what we sense as new
as skyline over High Street and Canongate
in floodlit outlined shining message
graces the vision of New Town windows

The Outlook Tower is white as a candle-stem
for Patrick Geddes gave us his sign of hope
a look-out post, a lasting beacon
humanly making connections earthwise

This city keeps her principles castle clear
and will not waive them casually with a nod
to tourist, banker, student, planner,
visitor, conference speaker, trader

We live our days in shadow and sidelong sun;
what we attempt is battered by wind and cold.
The Old Town Geddes touched will slowly
yield with reserve her warmer closes

We make our sacred sites by our daily work
and money cannot turn them upsides for profit.
Neglect may leave their spirit intact
flowing anew when discovered quietly

No need to shout and label and publicise;
no need to claim top prizes or new awards,
compete and count and measure matter:
rather continue in thought and wonder

THE LAST ARMISTICE DAY OF THE CENTURY

*for William Geoffrey Walford, killed 4th November 1918 aged 22,
after four years in the war (1914–18)*

Who shall be your rememberer now my mother is dead,
she who adored you so briefly and yet for so long?
In ninety-six years she never forgot you and kept
your photograph beside her and within her head.

You were someone we knew and yet we never knew,
the almost-haloed one, the hero who died,
whose beauty emerges here and there in us
and yet the one we sensed we lacked and missed somehow.

I feel my mother's pain as I did when as a child
I heard her describe the things you used to say and
how peace brought the worst news in the world:
too late the eleventh hour for her, when you were killed.

Now I am left alone as guardian of your presence.
When I am gone there will be none to maintain
our loss. Yet as my mother's love is absorbed
in me, her sorrow will form a lasting inheritance.

Poems written since the millennium

INCANTATION 2000

Navel stone of Caledon
marker of millennium
eye of seer, druid's tongue,
word of carlin: stand upon
this footprint made for everyone.

As pebble cast into a pool
sends ripple upon ripple
so this sacred stone will tell,
bear witness, fair or fell,
to our truth and principle.

Once as chiefs stood on Dunadd
our land and loyalty they bled,
our corn, our cattle and our gold –
whoso worked with hand or head:
crofter, hunter – Somerled.

Now we forward step once more
reclaiming those who walked before:
builder, makar, engineer,
doctor, printer, traveller,
lad o'pairs and balladeer.

A step for Scotland carved in stone
a parliament without a throne
a country each of us can own
a wisdom, knowing as we are known
a going forth and coming home.

Who among us now will work
for light that penetrates the dark
for freedom climbing like the lark
for the democratic spark –
whose the tread that fits this mark?

*for George Wyllie's millennium stone inauguration, 31st December 2000:
his central stone, in a circle of stones taken from each of Scotland's regions,
has carved on it the archetypal footprint and beside it the last line of this poem.*

JEANNE D'ARC AND HER SCOTTISH GUARD (*painting by John Duncan*)

Who had departed from girls they loved
from home and land in search of adventure
fostered together as friend and brother?

*Jeanne d'Arc could offer no reward
to the pith and pride of her Scottish guard.*

Who could see her as saint and faery
who believed her, who protected
placed upon her their minstrelsy?
*Jeanne d'Arc in secret accompanied
night and day by her Scottish guard.*

Vision and voices, growing passion
violence around her, silver armour
fleur de lys and a night-black charger –
*Jeanne d'Arc mounted at the head
to right and to left her Scottish guard.*

What if deluded, what if it ended
the powerful in fear of her burned her to death?
Fire to fire, her flame has not faded –
*Jeanne d'Arc escorted heavenward
by her fiercely angelic Scottish guard.*

PHOEBE TRAQUAIR'S ANGELS

Phoebe Traquair (1852–1936) was an Edinburgh artist working in tapestry, embroidery, jewellery, enamelling but also in large-scale frescoes in Edinburgh in notably a Catholic Apostolic church, the children's hospital chapel and the music school attached to the cathedral. She was Irish, married to a Scottish scientist and aligned with the arts and crafts movement who believed that art should enhance the daily lives of the general public. Her four-panel tapestry, The Progress of the Soul, is in the National Gallery of Scotland.

This red-winged angel of rapture
receiver of souls after
torture, the kind that life inflicts
stitch by embroidered stitch
The Progress of the Soul.

Is this red-winged angel
from the ranks who swell
the Song School choirs
in *Benedicite omnia opera*?
Or from those who cradle
souls of dead children
in their hospital chapel?
Or one of the seraphim
frescoed in serried praise
in the Apostolic church?

Pinions. Spilled blood. Tenderness.
Restoration. *Comfort-ye*, against
all odds, against indifference:
Take courage! Be not afraid!

Yet the red of these fluted wings
is fresh-blood-bright
and swan-like in grandeur.

Tapestries of the soul; *improvisations
of spirit*, plucking the strings
sewn on linen in spiralling silks,
gold, silver, satin stitch,
sumptuous.

Who receives today's dead children
blasted by bombs dropped 'collaterally'
or left for them in markets and buses
or infiltrating their schools?
What wings could sustain or soothe,
What colour depict? What linens,
what shrouds for wrapping the remnants?

And the bodies of children who slowly die
of infestation, infection, starvation, neglect ?
Stretch your hands out gently for these
and fold your violent wings.

Who receives the bombers crimsoned
with rage and despair
red-winged
O angel of rupture?
 Stem-stitch, split-stitch
 Triptych.

POEMS IN RESPONSE TO TITLES OF OSSIAN-INSPIRED PAINTINGS

by Geoffrey MacEwen in the Scottish Poetry Library

*Paintings sponsored by Callum Macdonald
commissioned by Tessa Ransford and James Coxson
for the new building for the Scottish Poetry Library which opened in 1999*

The Landscape of the Golden Age

deer at sunrise climb the sgurr
above the golden valley
kings of the golden river

mountain oak, rowan, pine
where water cascades over
shield of shining granite

fertile glen, abundant sea

finest horses and cattle
great hounds at heel

a long dark or a long light
land for heroic people
bound in a tribal feu

Totem and Taboo

my cup my shield my sword my field
my white-breasted woman
my son my clan my race my kin
my life my death my poem

The Warrior's Premonition

when the wind blows from the north
when the tide is full in moonlight
when a door bangs in the dark
when a stranger crosses the path
when a heron flies downstream
when a kite cries through the mist
some death will surely follow
some blood be shed

The Bone of Contention

See the huge white hound at the dark cave's mouth
who will not leave though his master is dead –
the crone will bring a bone from the deer
his master slew the day he was slain by an erring
arrow from the bow of his brother
who loved the same russet-haired girl

Steeped in honour they all must die
for they cannot live with the shame –
poor loyal dog who remains to mourn
among old grey women and men

The Hunter's Moon

Gold torque on noble warrior
gilded path across the water
huge moon blood-red and hanging
low over timbered rafter

Hot summer on the moorland
lazy days in long grasses
flowers, dragonflies and swallows
agitated in pre-migration

Time to hunt but not for deer
time for music and lamentation
time for lust and procreation

time to seed, replenish the furrow
follow the heart, its ripe desire

The Beach of Exhausted Desire

the harp is playing, shadows falling
the highway of the sea is closing
weep no more, weep no more
leaves browning, bracken's burning,
winter lulls the season's fever
want no more, want no more
wind is keening, fiddles tuning
bring in fuel and build the fire
wake no more, wake no more

The Tomb of the Warrior

not marble mausoleum but simple cairn
not chambered labyrinth but narrow pit
too many bones
a gleaming brooch
his rusted sword and carnivorous teeth

Feasting and Song

Put on the ermine, don the plaid
skirl the pipes and batter the drum
dance and be merry
let whisky flow
it must be a wedding
youth is now
the calf has been killed
bread has been baked
fruit is gathered, juices spilled

grief turns to joy turns to joy to joy
for someone someday again somehow

IN MY BONES

Bones in dust, dust from bones
of pre-ice-age humans;
tests discover how they fed:
mammoth, reindeer, bear, fox
salmon, seal, wild cats.

What I eat in my bones:
chocolate, pasta, tinned tomato
and a lifetime of potato;
fish, butter, bread and rice
tea, marmite, orange juice.

Drill my bones, shake the dust
nothing shows how I am fed
by poetry, music, children, friends;
paintings, letters, photographs
undetected to those
who dig my bones millennia hence.

FOR CALLUM, a year after his death: 24.2.2000

Now sleeps the crimson petal now the white
and you sleep on, a year into your death.
The white of silence and the red of grief
like tulips lean and bow
from my vase of sorrow
whose very ache and emptiness
contains your lustre and largesse.

Hekla, the volcano, brims in flames
where once you flew in Iceland's winter war,
and ash is clouding in the atmosphere;
the great Limpopo spreads
its waters in wide floods.
from north to south and over earth
unbalance and abnormal death.

The equinox approaches, gladly finches
sing, but still the wind is crying snow.
How slowly, gaspingly does winter go.
Your love a buried root,
a constant loyal thought,
despite my sad impoverishment
provides some kind of nourishment.

Now sleeps the crimson petal of your life
but white of memory is translucent, clear
like pearls, like poems; all that we endure
is glinting in the glass
a feast, a candlemas,
for merry days and Sabbaths too,
the books you made, the love we knew.

PAPER

I'm defrosting my study today
and mopping up the leakage.

I'm emptying out my old thoughts
and the work of gone decades.

Tomorrow I'll be lightened, free
de-junked of letters, files
essays, talks and storage jars
of notebooks and poems.

On the radio I hear experts
talk of things as if they were new
that were discussed and debated
long ago . . . *mutatis mutandis*

I begin to understand
why the wise keep silent:
new concoctions are insipid
and regurgitation unpleasant.

Can nothing halt this habit?
We ask many questions and
invent brilliant replies.
But the children are thinking, thinking.

Their thoughts need no paper
but go through brainwaves
cell to cell and screen to screen,
electrifying the world.

GRAVITY AND GRACE: ARCTIC TERNS AT BALNAKIL

Arctic rhapsodist from Celestial North
or stellar emanation at speed of light
a dancing wheel around *Polaris*
Dubhe, Arcturus, the great, the dark one

Flier in diagonal cruciform
on angled tapering wing with festooning plumes
indented tail your daring signal
mackerel clouds as your chariot-bearers

Come wind come storm come darkness come Great White Bear
our navigation sure, our direction set
from Callanish the pillars point us
upward and northward beyond our knowledge

And every step we tread on our stony ground
reveals the elemental, the fiery pull
from airy sky to water-lilies

arc of your flight to translucent petal

Black your diving head into white sea spray
with blood-red beak as you rise and soar away
like Orphic music you transpose us
where the horizon turns earth to heaven

FIELDFARE

Are you bird or butterfly, *Fieldfare*, how do you fare?

The young woman knew she knew:
you couldn't be a butterfly. Why?
Her childhood book on butterflies
was open, clear, each page in her mind's eye.
She knew each one by heart and *Fieldfare* wasn't there.

Bird then, bold and handsome, speckled breast, long tail,
berry-seeker, tree-top flocker, 'rakish', says my bird book,
'gregarious and noisy'. You sound more of a *Streetfare* to me.

Not one for quiet retreat, with burst of wing-beat
you take flight then close your wings and glide
from wood to hedge to farm to field,
as you cluster in the park for nesting conference,
enjoy your travell'ing name, your country-loving attributes.

Farewell *Fieldfare*.

I too believe in force of fields and try
to let them resonate about me.
They make my daily fare to feed, to fly, to gather,
to tell and to take in

till, after burst of wingbeat I'll fold them and glide
to 'pastures new' – as Milton saw in his mind's eye –
beyond this life's extraordinary day.

BLACK SEAS

Till all the seas run black
thick with oil
sludge with oil and
clog to death with oil
cormorants and gulls
their livid staring eyes

their beaks that turn to preen
and taste their own slow-choking death

Till along the coast
in swarms the fish die
and all that lives on fish
a burning sea
a searing land
a poisoned world
by the hate we humans never fail
to foster till we choke
as we preen our blackened feathers

SEA-SCENES FROM MY LIFE

the dogged sea

*What did I see? A dog being drowned
black and dangly down by the harbour in Bombay.
I was six and looked out of the window.*

Not long after, a cargo ship in the docks exploded.
It had been carrying dynamite packed below bales of cotton.
Everyone thought the Japs had attacked (1944).
All the rescuers rushed to the harbour
when a second explosion killed them.
Bodies were blown all over the city.

The floor-to-ceiling doors of the room I was in
fell crashing down;
servants came running, my mother came running,
I was unhurt.
My father hurried back from work expecting to find
his family dead. We were safe:
the doors and windows blown out and
gold bars from the Mint scattered over the city.
They were laying out the dead in the hospital corridors.

The day was announced we had waited for and we steamed away
in convoy heading for Britain, an unknown country to me.
We wept goodbye to our servants in tears, to our little dachshunds
our ancient cat. Packed in cabins for women and children
we contracted diseases; weak and fearful lest the torpedos
attacked. At Port Said I watched from the rails as Italian prisoners
dressed in grey, were marshalled into the hold.
I swung from the bunks and cut my lip; then fevered
with tonsillitis endured the rest of the long long trip.

The stunning cold North Sea was my new ordeal:

a shivering skinny child versus the dread rock pool.
We'd run down duckboards and throw ourselves
into that high tide over the concrete side
pitted with rain in the east wind.

Never again, I vowed, would I ever be made to swim in a Scottish sea,
though sometimes I paddled.
One such day our dogs were stolen:
our Border Terrier and my mother's adored Jack Russell.
We never saw them again.
So dogs, so death, so the sea.

SWEET AND SAD

Children of India we chattered the lingo
water and dust plants and flowers
as verandah players
insect crawlers bird callers
with kindly people smelling of spice who
would squat at our level or carry us
swaying barefooted and cool

Children of India
we ran in and out with our brown-limbed friends
sat beside them on charpai or durry
yes, the chapatis slapped together
nimble the rice juice-laden fruits
sugary tea coconut sweets

Born as survivors siblings who died
children of India we never went back
or home or where our lives began
or travelling back we were awkward and old
language slippage friends dispersed
emerging as pictures fuzzy ghostly
held in the mind for generations
in sepia light of all that was passed

Children of India we never returned
but nor did we lose that strange
intermingled scented colourful
wearied drenched dried-out tested
born to die by-gone gone by
tears in smiles good bye, gone, good bye

HOMELESS OR HOMEFUL

Before I was ten I lived in eleven dwellings

and eleven more before I was thirty and three.
Twenty-two homes to live in and leave
in thirty years, and you ask me where I come from!

I hear of homeless immigrants and know that I know.

We rented lonely dark places, stayed with relations,
were 'paying guests' with friends or strangers
and this was in war-years, the rationing,
the making-do and managing,
waiting still and hoping times,
not quite sure and maybe if and
thankful for small mercies times
when 'home' was where we were just now,
where my mother was and where she made
what beauty that she could as best she could
and never thought it not *worthwhile*.

A garden or a picture, books, colour,
the book of nature too and always
getting rid of clutter, all we couldn't carry
and a clearing-out and placing-in of us:
our stories, self-respect, the friends
we had to leave, the memories that nobody
could share with us, our dreams, dream-houses
and our need to hold together to exist.

I've said goodbye to homes where I have worked
to make them clean and habitable.
Perhaps I was a slave to them, never ceasing
in the daily task of damming dereliction.
There is some freedom in forsaking them,
in letting run unravelled the woven toil
of years, made up of minutes, that was
tight, so coiled around me.

I alone now know about those places
which I laboured to sustain and then destroyed
by simply ceasing, moving on. What marks
of me remain will be anonymous.

Don't ask us where we come from; where we go
is more important. Yet we leave a trail,
a string of beauty, broken, that we made,
homeless yet homeful, scattered now.

KASHMIR

You speak with me in dream – eastern ascetic man
commune with me whatever we seem to say
when I ask you where you come from
turning you look at me telling 'Kashmir'.

High land of sapphires, walnut and mulberry
whose lakes reflect the hills in their violet depths
glaciers melt to crystal rivers
kingfishers skim amid water lilies.

The Fisher King may dwell in the Shalimar
and we catch fire – to serve and to bear the light
whose the face we each reflect?
Jesus the one and the thousand thousand.

Kashmir afar I love and remember you
fine wool, fine rice, fine silk such as dreamers find
once in life and ever long for –
now I must rest in the bluebird's promise.

THE DREAMS I HAVE

The dreams I have are all of the dead
my mother and father who never fail
to encompass me wherever I'm led

The husband who loved my poems and read
them with often a believing smile
comforts my dreams although now dead

The kindly woman from Wazirabad
who helped me when the children were small
is often around wherever I'm led

Long-ago friends and Vera who fed
my mind and heart with talk and tale
appear in my dreams despite being dead

It seems as if they are free and glad
to emerge as if in answer to call
and encompass me wherever I'm led.

SPILT MILK

Milk from the breast does not run dry
but overflows in quick response

to heart's need and slightest cry

A wasteful surplus in a way
but natural change of circumstance
allows a mother's milk to dry

Yet as we live until we die
whatever pain or distance
we answer every slightest cry

Demeter and Persephone
were separated by mischance
and Nature's milky sap ran dry

Without demand there's no supply
of kindness and tolerance
it was the mother's turn to cry

But as night returns to day
and earth resumes the season's dance
the milk of love does not run dry.

OF GRAMMAR AND LEOPARDS

How to measure language:
in dollops, in lollops, in gulps, in
sentences of course; which course:
phonetics, syllabics, linguistics or
song, dance, teeth, breath or
phrases, gestures, leaps, pounces,
sprawls on branches, long loops
or short straights, accidentals,
occidentals, pictograms, rosetta stones,
characters, brush marks, chisel marks,
pencil, plume or scratch marks or
tongue, tongues, people and peoples.

How the child's voice speaks a word
a clear first word consciously: is it *more*
or *hot* or *roti* or *shoe* or *cow* or
non or *nini* or *merci* or *dog*?
Each one's word is unique and each
one's voice, yet language shared, given
to us, a given, not a gift. *For god's sake*
was Alistair's first word: a three in one.

To grammar language is to measure it
and work with it as if it were an element

we live in. The leopard works his whiskers
as we work words and with them tell
a fraction of what we know. The rest
is body language, *parda grammatica*,
no parsing: tawny grammar Thoreau said,
fiery summer, the way it has to be
until we merge again with wind, water,
earthy silence.

STRING THEORY

The universe is knitted out of string
that must be why we used to play 'cat's cradle'
hand to hand as children *naturally*
unravelling and ravelling the patterns
unending unbeginning in the loop
our fingers stretched to keep the needful tension

Vibrating space is bendy now and warped
according to what energy and mass
what light or dark what cavernous black
holes or wormholes too miniscule
to comprehend may happen or come around
at any time. But Time is a dimension

of the whole if whole there is in such
a fluid gas or solid interweaving
in and out above below a field that
can transform, a field of forces weak
or strong, nuclear, gravitational
electromagnetic pulling and pushing us

beyond our mind's control much more
akin to what we sense and feel and
even what we think we might believe
of angels or thought-energised-by-love
with five percent made visible, the rest
seductive dark ex-static energy

Oscillating filaments spin particles
as messengers across the mind of chaos
through branes, (yes spelt like that)
and whorls of branes poised in dimensions
of their own and even in another kind
of universe we hypothetically surmise

Vibrating space is bendy now and warped
fluid gas or solid interweaving
seductive dark ex-static energy

messengers across the mind of chaos
fingers stretched to keep the needful tension
a universe that's knitted out of string.

POISED EQUILIBRIUM

written to complement George Wyllie's sculpture, The Cosmic Tree

Lithosphere

earth's cover
frail protector
rock hard stone crust shield
test and feel
base and heel
is it real
matter takes the weight magnetic field
Earth our spinning planet
whirling gases
meteor-trailing comet
gravity amasses
dependable
physical
mineral
daily stuff we knock against about
stability
visibility
solidity
what we all can know and never doubt

Biosphere

creature
water
living forms and flesh of every kind
animal
vegetable
renewable
regeneration spread upon the wind
never just the same
interchanging
life a dance a game
rearranging
dynamic
systemic
totemic
only relationship is real
temporal
exchangeable

excitable
it takes more than one to make a whole

Noosphere
here and there
in the air
made of mind and making mindfulness
reflection
attraction
interaction
inestimable thoughtful playfulness
we see what we imagine
capture an *idea*
transfiguration
we fail we aspire
make special
perform ritual
this is spiritual
holy ground we tread on sacred earth
archangel
save and heal
make real
transform every death into a birth

transform every death into a birth
it takes more than one to make a whole
what we all can know and never doubt

ADDING TO FAVOURITES

What is our favourite in all creation?
Air cried, 'let there be breezes.'
Water declared for tides and wells.
Fire wanted new-found planets
but the goddess of *Earth* said 'let there be bees.'
Mother and child agreed
and the cowslip bells.

HAD THEY BUT DEIGNED

*Had they (Adam and Eve) but deigned to keep
the word of the Holy One bright in their breasts . . .*
(from *The Exeter Book, Cathedral Library, Exeter*)

Had they but deigned, Adam and Eve,

what common weal might have sustained
life on Earth, what blood unshed,
the tooth, the eye, the claw, the red;
pride might have died,
with losing face, with shame, disgrace.

That bright word, had it been nursed,
might have restrained the jealous brother,
saved us from our meat-making slaughter,
taught us that humans in their true nature
work together.

The snake's connivance then unneeded
a search for wisdom could have tempted
within the precincts of Holy Earth.
Men and women might have retained
that word in their breasts: illumined *love* –
had they but deigned, Adam and Eve.

GOOD FRIDAY, LEIPZIG

Church bells keep on ringing
as I struggle with my grief:
O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden
as you composed it, Bach.

Nightlong translating poems
that hurt me to the bone
till frozen in my being
I fell asleep alone.
Life and death and children
our terror of rebirth:
what were you meaning, Jesus,
in that last sighing breath?

Like me, like any woman,
you sacrificed your life
but not to burden others
or to drag them down to death,
rather as a freedom
a shaking loose of bonds
that trap us in our safety
enchain us in our wrongs.

The streets are full of people
quietly on holiday
for shops are shut and markets
have put their wares away.

The sadness of children
I find it hard to see
and yet a child of sorrow
is crying still in me.
Much has been forgotten
that has formed what now I am
and what I become for others
is not subject to time.

My heartscape is sufficient
to hold and to release
what memory can't forgive
or hope rebuild in peace.
As we grope for resurrection
only one more day or
ten thousand years, it's with us,
haunts us, keeps us, every way.

EASTER IN LEIPZIG

*We came here to translate
and have been ourselves translated.
We came here to portray
and have seen ourselves portrayed.*

We had rational intentions:
Leipzig and Edinburgh after all
are cities of books and music and art.
But who has created these things?
They don't appear out of the dust
or from desks of bureaucrats.

Books are the printed flesh and blood
of those whose lives have written them.
Drawings are just that: drawn
out of human bodies that know
the terror of living. Music sets free
only those, like Bach, enslaved by it.

What is it we have to forget
in order to think in new ways
and what must we always remember
in order to know who we are?
Forgetting, a kind of death,
remembering, a resurrection.

We came here to translate

and have felt ourselves translated
out of our normal lives
wrenched from our children and friends
flung into this alembic of fire
and other people's lives.

We came here to portray
and have seen ourselves portrayed
through the eyes of poets and artists.
Amazed that we want to know them
they come to life before us, emerge
from their self-imposed resignations.

As we follow the golden thread
through the labyrinth of living
there is no art without adventure
no mercy without fire, no new
life without death and back to art:
portrayal and translation.

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

EARTH IS NOT MOCKED

The earth will rise, the worm will turn
obedient to natural law

to bury us who bomb and burn

What is it we would shock and awe?
This planet that we live upon
will spin and orbit as before

Grains of sand the wind has blown
water systems running dry
soil where nothing can be grown

Poison in the land and sky
pollution in the sea, and war
launched on wilderness and city

Flood and famine, fire and fear
would surely halt us, seem to warn
who will notice, who will hear?

Grains of sand the wind has blown
the earth will rise, the worm will turn.

THE STORY OF ANDREW GILLIGAN

I'll tell you the story of Andrew Gilligan
beware – it may make your blood run chill again:
the sexed-up dossier may make you ill again
that sent our lads to be killed and to kill again
the weapons-inspectors finding nil again
the holes in the desert we dig up and fill again
the contracts for oil and rattling the till again
the public who has to, yes, pay the bill again
for spin and lies, the won'ts and the will again
the beans the media's forbidden to spill again
David Kelly they can't now grill again
little Jack Straw tumbling downhill again
sipping his bedtime *Horlicks* swill again
Campbell's marching on-off drill again
Blair-Bush cocks of the world's dunghill again
Gordon Brown sitting quiet and still again
Kofi Annan goes through the mill again
Robin Hood Cook with his bitter pill again
Greg Dyke waving defiant farewell again
Butler says *they all meant well* again
it looks as if no heads will roll again
we could join 'old Europe' and bring back the guillotine:
it's enough to make your blood run chill again
the too true story of Andrew Gilligan.

TO THE LIBRARIAN

who prevented the banning of Michael Moore's Stupid White Men in Sept. 2001

Just a librarian
just a woman
you had your wits working
your five good senses
and fired-up brain

Not important
not influential
you had your profession
clear principles
standard practice

No spare time
no extra pay
no self-interest
you took some trouble
you took a position

Thank you librarian
professing professional
thoughtful person
undivided mind
action woman

Like Mairead Corrigan
like Karen Silkwood
like Veronica Guérin
like Lorraine Mann
like Angie Zelter
like you or me.

PRESCIENCE

ferny path above a glittering sea
beneath volcanic crag where eagles nest

complete a rabbit's entrails on our way
stripped of flesh and fur and yet intact

pointing north as we are in our walk
the stomach full of grass lies separate

what augury this means, what sudden death

what eagles swoop above our rabbit lives

on all that we have painfully digested
our little bag of membraned 'this is me'

as dragoned eyes, beaks, talons feast
on all that clothes essential inner life

we look up, out, beyond and round the crags
a waterfall is plunging to the sea

and birches hold the soil as mosses make
a tenderness for living and for dead

TRANSCIENCE

I tell too much, for there is much to say
complexity, how can we understand

fragility, the work it takes to build
yet one mistake can make it all collapse

incompetence much less than ignorance
not knowing what it takes, misunderstanding

that aim is not the object, and the means
are likely to usurp the place of ends

without a subtle making of conditions
in which things happen seemingly themselves

without a constant questioning of purpose
in order to achieve the unintended

to let what happens speak but careful words
encodify the silence, the accompaniment

INTERVENIENCE

green cool in the cemetery on paths
between the graves as if in dream I pass

shining lilies fallen with their vase
I, thinking nothing of it, pick them up

the vase is broken and my hand is cut
I lay it down again the way it was

to staunch the blood I gather longish grass
then set to work to weed and tend, and tend

for tending is all I now can do
tenderly intend, in death extend

once love through tying up the irises
we planted, and I clean the listening shell

I should have left the fallen lilies lying
there would have been no blood then on the grass

QUIESCENCE

one butterfly dead in a curtain gauze
antennae like black threads and tortoiseshell wings

outspread where rickety window prevents escape
to unkempt garden of waving grasses and rushes

another butterfly flutters on the sill
weakly enough for me to set it free

a host of butterflies out on the moor
and in the woods, their wings a dusky brown

almost black with orange-spotted edge
feed among bog-myrtle in the bracken

Scotch Argos, as if Jason learnt again
the shadow side of chasing for the sun

Northern Brown Argos, paler, more delicate
I'll take you for my emblem of the spirit

the kind we need to weather Scottish islands
to flutter in the light of so much sky

to value all that grows in wet and dark
and smells like woodsmoke tinged with honeysuckle

the one that dies, the one that lives
that lets itself be captured and set free

WINTER, EDINBURGH

my children's friends have parents now retired
and fled to Spain's apartments in the sun

* * * * *

down the laddered steps towards the weir
white water brown with frothing turbulence

I plod on muddy paths and watch the rocks
for dipper or the heron's flustered flight

yellow leaves hold on still to birches
tokens of the sun in dark daylight

mist, frost, a kind of underworld
or pitiless affronts from gale and sleet

head down I reach the bus stop; starlings whistle
from slatey roofs; the lumbering double decker

stops for me; passengers together
warm for the moment, settle for the ride

our streetside trees bear lights like fallen stars
caught in their branches where the leaves have gone

will we see the moon again and planets?
we never can predict and sheer surprise

at what is commonplace signals our winter
our patch of globe cold shoulder to the sun

SIGNS OF MARCH

This full moon shines indiscriminately
on Glasgow tonight and Edinburgh

on Arabic and Persian poets, Albanian artist,
Rwandan lady whose own radiant visage

competes with the moon, on interpreters
translators, photographers and actors

and all who work to make things work together
for good, for wine and vine-leaves filled with rice

couscous with herbs, oatcakes
and lemon cake, iced tea and water –

Our poetry addressed the moon as curved and carved
a barque to sail the inward skies of vision

but tonight there is an eclipse of the moon, for Earth
will come between and block the rays of sun

making the moon blaze like a blood orange
in dark of night until the shadow passes –

Our poets and the translators have now dispersed
but their words are travelling who knows whither

with old and young from diverse countries around
our turning earth as they follow their destiny –

In full countenance or in passing shade
the radiance floats on and comes to harbour

AUTUMN AT KINCRAIG

Yellow birch leaves fall like flakes
on rooted rutted forest tracks
rain splatters
on plastic hoods among the woods.

Tawny oaks and bronzy bracken
beech leaves thickly dark and molten
as we walk
in single rank along the bank.

The living river far below
a dark brownish steady flow
then shower of sun
gently catches golden larches.

OIL PASTELS

sketched in *blue* with gaze beyond view
artist's image spoke to me of you
a silhouette and turned away
no eye
no feature to identify

your presence is not visible no face
nor can I recollect your voice
recognition, a photograph
I find
still out of focus in my mind

you are too much a part of me internally
for me to visualise you properly
this present absence strangely seems
the basis
for *gloria in excelsis*

SUITE DE POÈMES

Prelude:

This is our mantra
pater noster
words our voice said
phrases repeated
spoken together
older younger
matins vespers
now forgotten
as meaningless jargon
thy will be done
What will be done?
– desire of the universe
Who will do it?
through whose life
when, where, how?
Questions unanswered
answers unquestioned

Daily bread is not tomorrow's
tägliches Brot not yesterday's
carpe diem, seize the message
open-minded receive and learn –
deep in nature's curious kingdom
we arise, adapt and change
while beyond our earthly planet
our intensive brainwaves range –
Do we trespass? Who'll forgive us?
Can we forgive our trespassers:
those who would confine, prevent us
listening to the messengers?

This our mantra
our chant our dance
our gathering, feasting
our wisdom-field
pain de ce jour
draw its sustaining
strength for the step ahead –
breathe out the wastage
from mind and blood –
we will be tested
and misunderstood
yet we keep balance
hold hands with each other
dancing onward
like fireflies in darkness
shining our weakness
through the strewn minefield
of little brown Earth

Allemande:

Steady now forward march
step by clichéd step *langweilig*
we want to run, to fly, to break-
dance, to climb, to mountain bike
to snowboard, surf-ride
deep-sea dive, rally drive –
Why hang about for word
from philosopher or poet?
We'll taste and see, vision blinded
addicted to the latest gadget –
Zeitgeist? Zeitgemäss?
Keeping time? Outdoing time

We put to death whoever warns us
everytime, we will not hear;
yet when Mandela speaks forgiveness
we recognise his great-heartedness;
why not Israel, why not try
another way, the other cheek
ecce homo Palestinian
why not listen, why not speak?
Words are gifts we have as humans
to sound us out and understand
yet we tie our tongues and exile
heart and sense in no-hope-land

Out of time and out of place
out of kilter the human race

running out of food and water
squandering the oil and gas
wind and sun and wave may save us
not without exacting price –
Will we respect them, realise
love:
the required sacrifice?

Courante

Down by the river
le pont d'Avignon
we float on for ever
like twigs on the water
we find our way further
and into the mid-stream
bearing a sun-beam
divided re-gathered
we dance on the ledges
caught in the sedges
skid under bridges
not fishes not midges
not dippers not divers
we are the free floaters
who cares where we're going
as long as we're flowing

Sarabande:

we *dare* say, we *can* feel
we *must* think and *these* three
in community, make humanity

don't *ask* much.
expect work
for *children*
we *listen*
we *love* them
we *earn* them

look *after* us
the *unborn* ones
be *there* for us
we *grow* minds
to *fly* with them
and *still* you
peck *around* the pen

we *dare* say we're *dancing*

support us, don't *thwart* us
we *give* the world
as *we* are given
duende
a *destiny*
we *can* feel, we *do* think
we *dare* say, we *must* speak

Gigue

if life is a jig or a twirl or a whirl
or a neat minuet where we practise the steps
or a g-g-gavotte we do – or we're not
going to – join in the dance
while particles spin through the world
and the brain and we seldom can tell who
concocted the spell or if not interfered with
life could work some magic yet we
want to enjoy once again (ere we die)
the tune and the turn
so we take up the fiddle and step to
the middle till mopping the brow we finish
and bow

FOUND POEM

Guardian Weekly (29.09.06) article by Ian Sample

Planted in pages, bound in a notebook
buried in archives two hundred years
thirty-two species in tiny packets
seeds will be scattered
windblown earth-sown
evergrown

the seeds of melons –
wild melons from banks of the Orange river –
and seeds from *the tree with the crooked thorns*

Among crates of tea and bales of silk
embedded a leatherbound record book
dark specks enclosed in dusty paper
more than a thousand immigrant seeds

A chance discoverer chanced upon them
a find was found and the parcels opened –
like seeds themselves –

over water through fire and returned to earth
where shrubs have bloomed and trees have sprung
even *the tree with the crooked thorns*

Life is patient. Life can wait
when all are her agents
with space and time and the elements
seeds will be scattered
windblown, earth-sown
evergrown

A WALKOVER

Three feet deep the leaves at Walden pond
copper gold bronze a wealth from year
to year never swept away but melted
slowly in a natural alchemy
that bears the weight of being walked upon.

A wide-scattered cover for the lawns
in our Botanic Garden copper gold
bronze a wealth from year to year swept
by winds aside and raked up into heaps
scampered over by the busy squirrels.

The mighty beech-hedge retains its leaves
within the trellis of its twining twigs.
They lose their glossy green of summertime
but stay in place while russeting to dark
illuminated by the fading winter sun.

'I'm asking how to die', my friend explained.
'What I want is a creative death'.

A transformation surely? Either hold
your leaves entwined within your trellises
or let them fall, fall singly or in gold
cascades where they will mass down deep enough
to bear the weight of being walked upon.

BLUE GATE

after Winifred Nicholson's painting Gate to the Isles

Blue gate alone on the hill
no attachment to fence or wall
no pathway before, behind

open to nothing and all.

Faded gate on the machair
broken, blistered your paint;
the homestead once you guarded
a heap of rubbled neglect.

Once you led to the grazing,
to garden or lazybed;
the sound of a click on the latch
brought neighbour, welcomed, fed.

Blue gate where do you open
out of and into the blue –?
We pass with a wistful smile
and let our wishes through.