

MOUNTAIN

A Poem in Five Seasons

Mel Witherden

INTRODUCTION

It's difficult to dismiss the view that there must be something wrong with the poetry when a writer has to resort to explaining it to readers. In this case, though, the more glaring defect is perhaps that there are too few readers to worry about such subtleties. This Introduction is not intended to offer a full interpretation of the *Mountain*, but to provide a few signposts to invite you in and help you find your way around.

The first point is that the writing of *Mountain* spanned 25 years (nearly half my life so far) and getting round to publishing it has already taken another two and a half years. The idea for the poem started to form soon after I came to Wales to live in a valley under a mountain in 1971. I've abandoned many of the features of the life which gripped me then - the institutions of journalism and marriage immediately come to mind. But one thread of continuity has been the containing hills (which qualify as a "mountain" more because of their engaging expansiveness than their modest height) that have shadowed me with their gentle power and beauty ever since.

My old friend Pete Rowlands, who suffers more than most with the burden of receiving copies of what I write, and has a greater influence on it that he will accept credit for, once asked how it was possible to hang together a poem over such a long time when the life events, ideas and feelings which go into it are moving faster than the writing. Fortunately, one of the more obvious themes of *Mountain* is change itself, in the natural, human and personal worlds. But he has a point.

The format for *Mountain* follows the approach I used in *Weekend*, another long poem written at comparatively breakneck speed between 1969 and about 1980. They are both basically strings of short poems, joined by explanatory linking lines, or welded together with varying degrees of discomfort. This time I have bowed to the advice that readers need guidance about what is going on. So I have provided titles to individual poem sections and groups.

But there is a serious point to this general method of construction. Poetry is irrelevant to most people's lives these days not only because they have so many other things to do with their time and minds; it is also irrelevant because, in short packages of ten, twenty or fifty lines, anyone could be forgiven for the feeling that it really might not actually add up to much. A poem may aspire to say more than a four-minute rock music video or the thirty-second TV ad. But in most cases, the creative energy, the emotional impact and even, sometimes, the intellectual challenge of these various forms of snappy communications media are much less distinct than purists would like us to believe. So what is the point of poetry?

This scepticism about poetry itself does explain why I spent much of the last 25 years not writing it. But the alternative approach of attempting to say more than the average TV advert by making my poems *longer* is a far more exciting challenge, particularly when people are reluctant to read even a few lines at a time. What *Mountain*, and *Weekend* before it, are chasing after is perhaps the writing-with-wide-margins equivalent of combining a string of accessible pop music videos to produce a complex and engaging movie. Then it is the juxtapositions, the contrasts, the verbal, metaphorical and thematic resonances which should help the individual poem segments to add up to something more than the sum of the parts. You will have to judge whether this is in fact what you get, and whether this 25-year mission was really worth attempting.

And so to what the poem is about. I'm afraid I have not helped the readability of *Mountain* by minimising its narrative elements. It was always going to be partly and loosely about a person, or perhaps two people, growing older. The passing of the seasons in the poem fairly obviously represents stages in the lives of these people. *Mountain* is not especially autobiographical (except for the philosophical journey and unrequited teenage lusts described in the *Autumn* section). But I can't deny that, as I grew older myself, my views about what should happen next were changing ahead of the poem, so it's always been hard to foresee where the story would end.

Here then, in retrospect, is what seems to me to be going on. In the introductory *Winter arrival* section two people move home to live beneath the mountain, bringing with them a van-load of domestic detail which rebels against them later in *Summer*. *Spring opportunities* fixes the co-ordinates - literally for the house, and also by setting the "I" of the poem in the context of a landscape and the natural world. Nothing much happens in *Spring* except for the curious *Visit to a friend* which feels right as the centrepiece of this section, but which hardly advances any plot. *Spring*, then, is really about nature, not people.

Summer, the Great War is a sweaty account of madness unleashed by a relationship and the weather both going wrong. It is about intense and claustrophobic feelings and a breakdown of reason. A friend who read an earlier draft of *Summer* complained that it was too intensely personal. He was right, and I later hacked away at the more indulgent elements, losing nearly a quarter of the lines. I hope now that the description of the 1976 heatwave is closer to my personal experience than the blistering personal relationship described here.

Autumn complexes is an only slightly more mature reflection on life. At least it is viewed from the perspective of an older person. I'm not sure whether it parallels philosophical development with sexual activity, or suggests intellectual activity as a form of safe sex. It ends with the proposition in the fourth part *Complexes* that any meaning to be gleaned from experience is likely to be found in the points of contact between different and perhaps contradictory moral views, rather than in the uncompromising either/or position of conventional ideologies. Finally the real world of adultery and warfare intervene, presumably to put vapid philosophising to the test.

What happens in *Winter Borders* is intended to be an antidote to everything which has preceded it. After the single day of the *Winter Arrival* section, the elapse of time has been accelerating. The "Day we came" which opens the poem resurfaces as "the year you came" and later switches to the "age they came". The voice and perspective of the poem changes from "I" to "you" and then to "he and she". (I think they are the same two who had the tough time earlier on, though I originally planned a change in domestic alignments too). A harsher, more uncertain outside world intrudes - through nature, events in the news and other nightmares - into lives which have become more settled. In the end the couple become pinpricks and vanish from the poem as the scene suddenly leaps to a new character beneath another mountain in another continent, with faint echoes of *Summer's* drought. You may not like the ending. But that's life..

Beyond the decidedly low-key plotline, there's all the other stuff you'd expect from poetry - symbols and metaphors, feelings, arguments, iambic pentameters, a few rhymes and jokes. If you can't be bothered to read it all, then why not home in on the shorter internal poems? (These are mostly the bits in normal non-italicised type with titles in lower case.) However you read it, though, I hope you find something in *Mountain* to interest and amuse you. But what I'd like more than anything is to hear what you think about it. Please let me know.

Finally, many thanks to those people who encouraged me to finish *Mountain* by diplomatically refraining from telling me to give up years ago, and Sue in particular who has handled more drafts over the years than the US military.

Mel Witherden
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MOUNTAIN

Part 1

Winter: Arrival

WINTER: ARRIVAL**1**

the day

the day? the day that I came we came somehow I was mist
from a can and molecule mashed and spray that day the day
that I came

the day the townscape landscape landshape changed to
liquid and flowed in rivers and roads, rode ripples and rose
like a blink on the road in mist and in rain a mistake on the
day we came

the day that we came out of where out of who we have been
I was frost on the trees you were lost like their leaves and
frozen and free

the day the day drove on M-ways and A-roads and laybys
and byways to doorbells and hallways and stairwells and
wallways we arrived in a dust of vacant possession to say here
at last and at least we can say we are here

this is the day where we spilled from the clouds on the hills
when we filled up the shrill walled slim noised house in its
stillness making shrieks like far shaken marshbirds as they
scaped in the flowerstalk air where we came

and the day when we came with our load came the blend of
the road with a home an abode where we slowed and the road
closed behind

yes the day yes today we have come to what place and what
space at what price and harm and hell how the sun kills the
sky and the whitespeck mounting mountain farm and christ
what grace fills this place stills this day the day we came.

2

the day that I came came I that day, the
door reverts to numbers, my face becomes
the name that even neighbours cannot know,
the mountain shadows slip at dusk with all
the plain air, plane air, plein air city stare
that faced me, placed me in their world till now.

people pour from doors to applaud the home
we've bought; they muzzle round like a family
bereavement, forming final memories
of features they still cannot recognise.
the city was a bow-tied phone-tied low-
tide gnome, my diary was numbers, the dates

all names, and there no face was ever new,
no unknown place was strange, no entry the same.

tonight the doorways sprout with neighbours out
to catalogue our lives, executors
of a doubtful will, executioners
they seem of our still doubtful wills; inside
at last we fight to find ourselves behind
the numbered door which beats with urgent dawn
enquiries who we are, and why and what
new indifference these digits will inspire.

The neighbours, chained to garden railings, fix
us now for their feminine cause, beeing
to prove the point of being's being seen ...
"like being free," we figured, moved to be
the people we would like reframed, when
came I that day, the "the day that I came".

3

The day that I came, "come in," says the gate,
an arm open wide, "this way," says the path
leading on like wishes, up to the hearth,
the last owner's ashes lying in state.
"Cover the floors" snort the boards; "hard to" laugh
the carpets, and "steady that edge" swears a chair
as the wardrobe wedges itself unawares
across the stairs, parting bedrooms and bath
from the tidal arrivals that still find air
to displace: "quick" click the fixtures; "one more?"
explore the storage jars in place before
the forks, the saucepans and the earthenware.
The furniture shifts through chaos door by door,
changes place and order in order to lose
us thinking it might be letting us choose.

4

"The day that I came here," you said, the day
before we came away, "I cried to come
so far from home." We'd dragged through space like strays
from squares and yards, by foot, by rule of thumb,
we'd measured our trail in smells of the slum,
in bags, in cars, in vain to rebegin.
Today our home has filled a van and some
new distant hope. "My love, please come on in.
It's the day that I came, again," you sing.

5

the day that I came to live with the mountain
will start with the end of another day
a thousand billionth time; I sink below
horizons into sleep, below the line
of hill and sky that lies on everything
to come, while space and time at last stand still.
yet, at once, an ice hard sun smashes through
the pane inside my eyes; tiny fragments
of morning light strike off glazed rooftops,
flash back across windows sharpened with frost.
once I had time. the readiness was all;
I pushed back deadlines, made space for the news,
waited for paper boys weighted by Sundays,
and read them all through till Thursday or more,
and learned all there was to know about war.
now the sun snipes at the uncurtained glass,
and picks off houses in steps up the hill;
it raises its sights on barnyards and fields
and takes out one last human speck – a house
high up with whitewashed walls hiding in trees.

I reach for a watch and wind it declining past
the passing of the year, past the starting,
past arrival and all that passed before,
before the day I came to live beneath
the mountain, at the end of another day.

MOUNTAIN

Part 2

Spring: Possibilities

SPRING: POSSIBILITIES**house 1**

house.
I watch rain through windows
in thought.

the house is neutral,
the house is nil, streaming down with rain:
there is no room in the house
no room for acting right or wrong,
only rooms where we go in necessity,
right and wrong.

house,
sharp brick, wall after wall,
contains feelings
excludes starlings
beyond windows of rain,
floors roof and ceiling -
levels of the eye,
windows like rain
and stares like a thought,
almost vacant now.
I must learn to distinguish a house
from a home.

*so it begins, the spring,
with windows like rain,
incessant, unremitting,
a routine confirmation of change*

water

after rain, sometimes before ...
osmosis, capillarity and flow ...
among the grisly mountain grasses, black
in pools and edging for a common course,
squealing through the pebbles of streams:
gregarious, ubiquitous, the fall
of a body, the pulse of cells, running
pouring, parting the soil, permeating
the forest and sandstone skull of the hill;
fallforce, not one part in a thousand held,
out-channelling the reservoir and down its

concrete walls, beneath its crushed foundation,
and on to be deep in fast sloping fields
and lush in grasses tramped by mud-shod cows,
down to the swollen pocky faced canal
to the swill of puddles, the spitting overspill
of gutters and drains till, creeping secretly
in the chemistry of the cottage walls
and clamped as life in the boughs of trees
... osmosis, capillarity and flow ...
after rain, sometimes before,
water seeps endlessly to the heart of things.

routine confirmations

I see I believe
with windows of rain
the shudder of a swallow's wing,
a flicker of shadow on rooftops,
bird black streak on the slate grey
hauling in a new skimp spring.
at a distance the shape of rising fields
softens with a hint of green,
but signs are sparse so early
and so high on life's chain.
rain runs warming hands round the walls,
light dives for the dust
in winter corners of the room
and the air day by day
eases open windows and doors.

beyond the door, behind the wheel
all days are the same -
rolled up in commuter speed,
spray-grey on the tyre black tar,
while, steady and mindless
as a horse flicking summer flies,
the wipers sweep rain from my eyes.
it's a five-day eight-hour oscillation
lost in confidence in paper words,
paper deeds, new friends,
wallpaper conversations.
I see, I believe,
through windows of rain:
incessant, unremitting,
runs a routine confirmation.

house 2

house
is the point,

the finest point to which all lines run.
I am surrounded by space
where the flood plain and the mountain meet.
they are recognisable externals,
passing through me,
through the house of lines,
the house in line, parting, departing:
the first uneasy steps of the fields,
the last heavy shove of the town.

stripes of rain run lines across our sleep
we doze and wake, strain our eyes
on fields and buildings poised outside,
desperate that we might miss the change
in the sky in the rain.

house, a point in space
where all lines cross
its windows on the rain,
windows painted by Victorian ladies,
drawn back in surprise,
drawn black in death;
inside outside
the length of the street
summer and winter, year by year,
measured one by one by those who died.
but when the stones pass through the pane,
who throws, and from whose side?

house
stands in a depression
by running water.

visit to friend

Spring is the time
that happens to the place you're in,
alone or together, together and alone;
there are no easy alterations
in the ill-tempered breakfast of streets
where novelty slips like new love
to bland familiarity on the quest
for an old friend's home.

in the wood beside the canal
dogs mercury scatters itself
inconsequential, green;
the male, the female
seek a resolution.
wild arum sheathed erect

spikes through a hedgebank
unready yet to enjoy its grandeur.

in among the traffic signs
disordered shoppers
set the childlike pavement free,
striking out to meet
the slide of the street,
the swing of the passing cars.

stream bed laced with wood sorrel green:
the smell of wet leaves
the mud and the trees
hang like a velvet coat.

feet pass securely on tarred camber,
on stone pavements, on iron stairways,
on concrete parks where stainless steel jets
toss sodium water on the night;
a fibreglass sculpture not yet understood
turns slowly white to grey,
while buses gyrate beyond,
bearing illusions of destinations.

consider the quality of the celandine
like but unlike any yellow headed daub
on a green brown canvas:
star fingered
sheen wrapped for a while,
striking first for the sky
before woodland leaves,
first with their own light,
first of any buttercup to try,
first alive and first to die:
opportunist
in self sacrifice.

turning his name inwards now,
James Davey - died 1905 -
on the island remnants of public gardens
studies the streaming traffic
that's pulled like laden wagons
from the dark of a highrise adit;
earth movers judder offside
and clip new roads from his kingdom.
plastic bags and aluminium foil
perform derisory genuflections
in the bushes at his feet,
and inscriptions on the plinth
make concessions to a less certain order:
"United are magic" "United are shit".

stiff and bronzed in indicator pulses,
James Davey perseveres a century on,
coal owner, benefactor,
man of revolution,
slowly absorbed by the panic of change.

the white mountain track
curls like farmyard smoke
to a white house fleck on a green smudge slope.

a gull swoops across a storm-wracked ocean
of last year's bracken whose brittle brown fronds
snap at a touch –
no hint of the rootlife
soon to grab the hillside for its own.

in a spineless road
in an aching room
a friend claws for listening to go on,
smashes his brains on the beer
like the front of a bus.
loneliness clings in the coffee cup rings,
desperation peels from the walls.
separately we search for bearings,
not for places to go;
but the sound of the question
is the answer we need,
and shoved up the arse of a tenement block
in this bedsitter gut
we care little for distinctions.

hillcrest pineforest
spring is mute,
the rain pretends
not to descend,
hangs in the sky
like a kite.

in the flat below
a neighbour feeds rabbit,
tinned and jellied, to his cat,
plants horse shit in his window box.

a horse is a slab on the moor,
rabbit a crash of gorse

I've measured it from side to side,
he says with his hand on the window glass,
it's ten miles long and two miles wide.

imperceptibly the mountain diminishes

beneath remorseless running water.
suddenly a crevice fills with primrose proof of spring.

house 3

house,
a town of intersected parallels
wall by wall dividing.
wet streets strike out
choice by choice to arterial exteriors.
town, house,
loosely bound by the ends of alternatives,
a circle at the rim where the line is joined:
the inevitable choice.
a dog runs sideways down the road,
its tail clenched hard between its teeth.

house,
the starting point of journeys,
meeting point of friends
and journeys out to meet
the friends whose meetings journey in.
beyond the town the hedges tracks and streams
- divisions stacked against escaping -
shapes of containment,
town by town, field by field,
shapes that close and open
like the jaws of a tired lion:
the nation also yawns,
growing effortlessly green, compact
within its cubicle of change and spring.

house.
the people at the crossroads
bent by umbrellas
question a decision;
families passing through the house,
its streets paved with deathly mythologies;
people crossing, lying like slabs,
irregular, uneven, some broken,
reciting their lines -
word by word, choice by choice,
deciding a question.

connections

Time is a telephone -
it rings all day when I'm not at home,
then I call you up to put things right,

and still it's the same unobtainable tone.

Death is a microphone -
takes the voices of folks I've known
and silently, unamplified,
it feeds me messages of stone.

Birth is a megaphone -
look how fast my son has grown,
his first cry was a miracle
that's caught up by the wind and blown.

Love is a gramophone -
diamond on a plastic throne;
I seem to give you nothing but
the words "I love you" spinning to a drone.

house 4

house
eyes mouth town fields
open and closed
the conditioned blink of necessity.
the hand on the window,
or hand on the eyes,
hand on the want,
the hand hand in hand.

there is no mistaking the sense of what I see,
outside the trains and buses shuffle by,
roads spray, skies change,
light and dark, wet and dry:
the mountain slips from brown to green.
there is no mistaking sense,
my head beaten to a pulp of wine,
the constituents of change -
the earth too rolls over and over in pain.

We must become transparent like water,
colourless flesh that hears
with the ears of its body
against the fathomless sway -
free as water -
sea to its cellar, river to its bed,
house standing nearby.

We are mistaken, there is no mistaking
the two ways, knowing and feeling,
the one, the many,
the sense in the acid of music and love,

the sense in the easy argued night with friends,
the steps from protein to cell.
bodies, greater or lesser:
I draw the house in outline on the page.
I blink and step deliberately inside.

rush

"I'm in no rush,"
boasted the smug swamp water;
it paused in pools glazed
by glancing early sun,
and soothed away the solid root-clamped soil
to a soft enclosing velvet ooze.
Still and cool, the water
reckoned without osmotic pressure,
entertained no notion of root hair power
and its own dendritic destiny.

So in time came the xylem slide
upward to the sheathlike Juncus leaves.
When it hit the surface, sunlight blasted
its molecules to another state
of being, where, airborne and freefalling through
three dimensions, all semblance of control
evaporated, or so it transpired.

house 5

house.
universal possibility,
it winds round every point of the circle,
round all the circles
and wraps them as spheres;
clear and clear, sense and sense,
house and house.
but I did not choose all this choice -
town and street, field, tree and rain -
I'm lost in a country whose language is growth,
in the city whose syntax is change,
lost here in the space of binary spirals
and the moment that follows.
touched or untouched, it follows the same,
instant, consecutive, again and again.

one by one
every line, yours and mine,
every point,
every phrase, every sign

a beginning an end,
one to one, one to nil,
the baffling significant of endless choice.
every move, every moment
a circle that turns to itself
secure in exclusion.
with the house, and or without,
within the walls, without them,
house or no house,
house and no house at all:
at the edge of the cosmos
lurk the alternative digits;
the highest that we can aspire
is perhaps to be ready.

breakthrough

The trees prevail, while
woodland plants survive as dark ideas of themselves
beneath the beech and holly and oaks,
beneath the leaf mould soaked in surface run off
and beneath the soil.

They bide their time.
Woodland is defined by a dominant autocracy,
but who could deny that some day, some year
the canopy might fail,
that soft silk-coated petals, white and yellow,
might master the forest floor with their brilliance?

On a given sign each spring the ground erupts
with the singleminded madness of their chemistry;
a brief flash flood of colour
washes out the greys and browns -
wood sorrel, celandine, anemone -
till the fresh olive green of tree top leaves
poisons the petals with their darkness.

But, what if,
when the flowers break from cover, trees have
the sun in their eyes, not knowing who is for and against?
and, when they push in blindness to the surface,
they have already planned the campaign?
what if they arrive with unity of purpose
and not in competition?
Could they then supersede the trees?

Spring flowers preserve their possibility unfailingly;
and each year dogs mercury comes and goes

in green obscurity,
ignominious, prepared.

MOUNTAIN

Part 3

Summer: The Great War

SUMMER: THE GREAT WAR

Summer comes down like an iron on the town
scorching out lawns and slaughtering
the mornings underground;
tar flows on main roads
like sleeves on a nylon robe,
the season is on overload;
it's hot like a daydream
milk in a solid cream:
the dogs pant, the roofs rant,
the sun is an elephant
that sits out on the pavement,
and stands up for the government;
then ranks of drivers, speed survivors,
arrive as substitutes for breezes,
trickle into traffic seizures,
while shop assistants run resistant
lick their lips and lack their tights,
and glossy office girls upstairs
scoff at bosses' cream and coffee world
so true to type and slow to stir;
and mothers under trees release
their children on the heaving park,
ease their eyes closed, breathing grass:
heat presses down and no one speaks,
all effort lessens, sense recedes
as each of us surrender to the shrieking dark.

air falls on the town with a sullen blow,
fields, forests, mountain turn to hay
the day they take the cool away,
and diesels barely shift their fumes as they come and go.

1. DECLARATION

I'll leave, I swear I'll go," she said.
"It would be the end if I was not the only one."
"You might, and so might I," is all I sighed.
Ownership was nine tenths possession then.

The declaration comes in heat:
we recoil in alarm from the years of preparation
when the curtain of finality is drawn on the world -

nothing is so sudden as choosing the point of no return.
the declaration comes in speech
dispensing with its impulse, depth and feeling,
just the reason in definitive, the statement of intent,
nothing but the invocation of a double-booked god.
the declaration comes in affirmation:
nowhere before was there such positivity,
never again will there be such serious words
now nothing is denied but contrariety.
the sterile syntax makes commitment real,
maintains it when the bodies have grown cold.

She'd come running loose on waves of abuse,
the woman I tried and failed to seduce
with reason, logic and news. "A little
philosophy goes a long way," she said,
"and they hardly come much smaller than yours."
No one had told me that before; no one,
she'd said as we married, would do so again.

"I'll leave, I swear I'll go," she said
"I know that you don't care."
but if the woman designated mine should leave
I hope it's since she's free to go
and not because the price is low.
"I'm sorry, but," I said,
and it sounded right the first few times around:
I fix it with my tired repetitions,
and never through my verses and reverses
mentioned love.

old friends new friends
I follow where our love tends
past the point where the peace ends.

heathaze

The summer is an anvil forging iron;
that beats a permanent crease in my mind.
I left it airing in humid midday peace
watching all the million things I seized
in spring and could not recognise as change;
have I really reached the end of my range

The day they take away the motion
I reject the smallest irritations now,
like sticking to my clothes, my diet and the truth;
day by day is another overstatement
as radiators boil and rail lines warp,

as aviation instruments aberate
and junk their jets in the field outside,
as government computers unload the bombs
that melt the polar ice caps and the moon.
Good god, isn't this the time for escape,
when madmen sprint for a long distance bus
not because they have anywhere to go
but because it is leaving without them?
The vast mountain mass deflects direction
and girders of heat arching low on the town
strike out the brains of my racing intentions -
I do not hear a word that others say,
nor have I been moved in any way.

Is change then just a diminution, the scrap
of a pause with no finality, no spool,
no last tape of circumstance, but the stool
of a long luxurious ecstatic Krapp?
the moments left to savour seem so small -
the light of candles swimming into wax,
the rustled wrapping of digestive packs -
the rest flash by like epics, if at all.
I sit inside a heathaze, edges growing blurred,
and take the time, since no one wants to give,
to shake out contradictions from the sieve
while the grains heap up, identical, absurd.

2. CONFRONTATION

"I know, I know you don't love me,"
she hissed, insisting I did.
"There's nothing to say then," I said,
saying everything.

a landscape black with force stands still,
far off stalling armies
align to wage the status quo,
and we rot at home, the prisoners of the peace,
paralysed by freedom
that trails us as we come and go.

then who's kidding who in the phoney war?
who's killing who?
when front faces front in silent preparation.
we wait at home, victims of inhostility
stripped into uniform
and stiffening from repetition
on the barrack squares.
we count the steps, count time

count the cost of war
before a shot has been fired -
the deadly blackout blindness,
the constant curfew,
the frantic treat we tried to complete
till contentment by order,
parades in the street,
till affection becomes
this military disease
that lasts a lifetime,
sends you blind.

we train at home, allies still,
subject to the discipline of principle:
she must whisper what she feels
while I disguise myself in what I think -
our side will punish us
for everything we do
lest the enemy destroys us first
for being what we are.
and there's no assurance in a warcrime trial
till we know who's lost and won.

war games are for warriors bent by time
past potency like our leaden soldier pose,
but we are cast too real and close to play,
and though I fired a hundred shots when I
was young, that was nothing to this outbreak
of moral obligation, this puritan
annihilating, loneliness we've found.

So does our jealous ageing god still play
the Bride of Christ, or, when he's on our side,
does he have something on the side himself,
regretting declarations made in heat?

situations vacant

The summer is an overlord, it holds the earth in irons;
the sun is god's great subcontractor in the sky,
it does the job it knows (you don't ask why)
and builds the town an hour after dawn,
wakens thunderstorms, the acorn, stinkhorn,
or makes your day if it bothers to perform:

*then, when it seems the Earth might have a soul,
clouds roll and situations take control.*

stuff your self-sufficiency, settee,
sod you, shelves, and you bastard basking

bath, don't you know it's hot as hell?
a fart to the fridge and tits to the temperate
teak-topped table - it's hot, by god, it's hot.
I pace among les objets of home preserved
de jure in superior equilibria -
the dry emphatic books, serenity
in soaring stairs, the cool of spoons and forks.
an unflagging hifi hacks away the back-
breaking air; unyieldingly outside gross
garden gnomes ignorant or insolent defy
nomenclature, and only the tortoise knows
the score, tetchy in its grass non-perspirant
corner, with thermometric blood that drums
in agitated unison with mine.

*but just when it seems life might be the goal
clouds roll and situations take control.*

you thought you had a contract that assured
your development as right and not reward,
but you find in the small print that you've lost
your probability, your wife, your costs,
your property and half a million years.
now everything else just bores you to tears
and you find the sun to be both instrument
and measurement of time, an incident
contained in place, direction, change and pace,
agent of fate, not universal grace.

*but just when you think the Universe is whole
clouds roll and situations take control.*

merde to the mountain, crap to you crass
unpractised scrap of stone: what in hell
do you know of the knot at our necks,
the menacing madness that prevails
on the frying pan pavements of town
where people cook like eggs for fun
and sirens pause at every wild
voluptuous corner, their crazing
surface parts in filmy summer
clothes taut and clutched like onions
in tight string bags; now for sure
there's only one thing left worth breaking
through the heat to do when even
tyre-faced traffic wardens massed
in pairs amaze me with their breasts:
fresh insight brings me almost to my knees -
that half of all the human feet
on earth end up in female parts.

*just when it seems that I might find a role
clouds clear and situations take control:*

the numbing heatwave ramraids into town
I can't stand up, I'm done, I'm coming down.
it's finally your head the sun contracts,
cracking you, sacking you with its cruel facts.

sirens

I

"I know, I know you don't love me,"
I screamed at the bare rolling hills of another home;
I buried my face in the coarse downland grass
and the loneliness burned in my innocent eyes.
Each girl back then was geographical,
a study in place out of time, a star
in an album who never made the screen;
falling in love was a camera trick,
I gave and took no more than light,
though sometimes she, whichever she she was,
would take the taking further still till one
or both of us gave in or love gave out;
yet in all the times when she and my view
appeared to co-incide, I never once
with that tense relentless lens succeeded
in making her real, in making her reel.

II

yesterday a fire burned on the hillside,
sirens scowled past, trailing gazes, and men
in uniforms took brushes to the brush
(by dusk they'd beaten out the light and gone:
the cost was small and borne by the county).

tonight the street lights die all over town.
it's not war, but darkness on domestic rates,
which alone have seen no cuts this year.
old people trip and plunge down ill-lit steps
(the papers howl) and vandals go plundering
by shadow and example; faintly they
perceive a change beyond their reach, but like
the blackened hill that bears the scars, they know
they are not the ones to throw the switch.

the dry smile of the office girl arrives
like a sensation: I do not recall
her face before this loss of life on the hill,
before this loss of face in the town, yet
she taxes me with her eyes and sets the rate
on my borrowed plot of infinite space.
her song is like a fire, it glows and fades,
and though the siren calls, some things
must be allowed to go out on their own.

III

a new girl I guess would split my thread in two -
it's all in the mind, but I'm still on the reel,
a guilty schizoid paranoiac heel
who might straighten out unwinding with a few.

IV

so I'm Dr Jeckel in the shopping arcade
looking for a miss t'hide:
I wear a collar and tie
over the dirty raincoat of my design;
but is it all mine,
this polite lecherous stare
that sees women with shopping baskets
and streamers of children
easing off tight sweaters and skirts
in upstairs rooms,
in public parks,
in the doorway of Woolworths?
oh yes, it's mine, for suddenly
a mental policeman erases
my masculinity with his truncheon
and I'm dragged off limp to an inanimate cell
screaming out loud:

I wish only to say
as they drag me away
that I wasn't to blame
for this terrible flame;
I was hurt by the bliss
I thought I might miss,
I meant no assault
they were loved by default.

V

confusion pounces, longing holds me down
and questions what this loneliness is worth,
when dreams, like warfare, like the glowing earth

and sun, will only burn out on their own.

3. ESCALATION

"What is it, what is it you feel?" I said.
"What is it, what is it that's wrong?" she said.
Hour by hour, and month by month
breath for breath and mouth for mouth,
our voices are strangled of meaning.

- talk cost lives, trust nothing, warns the propaganda
we tell no one what we know, know no one as friend,
not even the one who calls me in despair
in separation from the love of his child,
not the great old man who filled me
with what I might have been and died
because the world grew tired of honesty;
the news reached me today but not his death.

sheltered underground by an arch of reasonable fear
I have become familiar with endings -
truth and beauty stand naked in destruction
like the luxury of thought; now in austerity
sex has become another such inviolate thing,
silence and privacy blot out the pain.

we stay in hiding indefinitely,
the best of friends cannot say what is wrong
but speak of love from a trench of words;
a girl out of uniform caught breaking free
flinches and slumps for a firing squad,
and all around the battlefields and cattlefields and towns
the people flex their lips in desperate exchange
needing like their leaders the formal declaration
of war, and cursing, like their leaders,
the anarchy of information
that screams their secrets in the street
and leaves their battered mastery to bleed.
mouth by mouth and pact by pact
the torpor spreads like a plague;
- I'll keep out of your war
if you'll keep out of mine
the Kissinger emissaries say.
nation after nation lifts its paper fist,
empires falter and divide, continents
bury their heads in the sand of the sea:
they're all complicit in neutrality.

now we have no allies here

no one knows or cares whose side we are on
so long as we expose the espionage
of friends before they can uncover ours.
- though war's first casualty is truth,
the honest commentators say,
- its last is love, hang on to that.

Yet when I spoke to one beyond propriety that day
I knew her only as a clench of terror
at my neck and silent blind retreat;
I fell back with the rest, I said no more,
but waved the eager Treaty in self deceit,
and defined my acquiescent love discreet.

interstitial sonnet

summer runs red like iron into steel
hardening, maddening the land. I need to sort
things out of course, get my thoughts thought out, my oughts
sought out on course; I reel confused, I reel
the line back in, and I'm real at least in my
confusion, not quite searching for my self
(that's with me here) but using all my stealth
to find another place a self won't die.
nothing takes so long as nothing counting
time, so here is decision, presence of mind
that would cripple presidents, send them blind -
suddenly I leave to climb the mountain.

journey to the centre of the Earth

I take the long way up, the path across fields
burned brown by the sun,
and the dust track pours recklessly down
thrusting underfoot a stonegrey desert
that's wrapped and ended in a barbed wire field.
I ache to overcome the fall of a dried stream bed;
I rise above the pall to a grim stonemasonry of oaks
that die ahead of the rest of the shadeless world;
higher a tractor storming white
lurches slowly out from a whitewalled house
and tracks a contour of the hill:
at a distance our co-ordinates cross.

I think that thinking is a way to kill the pain of climbing,
only finding pain has killed the thought,
and fix on that as empty as a newscast -
an item on the ageing nation's health,
a gull that hovers, strikes the air and flies.

the sun, the bastard, sun, leans on my arm and neck,
earth grabs my feet and holds me down
and a gang of unreasonable terrors punch my head -
how far how long how crazy now?

at last at first the farmland ends
in a rising rhizome allmansland of bracken scars,
black with toothmarks where the fire rat
chewed the face of the land.
speed soaks away in blood,
limbs are all dispute,
mind is a fuse that does not blow,
and has no excuse
for the last two hundred convex rolling scrambling dying
flatland feet to go.

but even the top is not the top,
even flatness flattens more,
even the end goes on,
even grass is not the grass
sedge not the sedge
sand not sand
dust not dust
even not even until
I am there -

there am I
on the plateau cleft by forestry and sky
on the darker sharpened other side
where the timewater tiger has torn the belly of the hill
and spread the mountain's splayed and trailing guts below.
it falls freefall away earthfirst,
the crossleaved heath, the coarse-leaved grief,
and suddenly the trees,
and a stream course chopped
and hung from a noose of rock
above the winding widening vast unplummeted
vertiginous obscurity of green.
down slithering down I follow them all
to the lost silent island
crouching at the centre of the earth.

remote and part-shorn sheep
flap like wet washing in sustained escape,
a solitary bluebell fades belatedly to straw,
and a fox slopes down to privacy in a tree root hole.
the sun strikes a firebreak match among the pines,
suspends the falling dancing slanting
storm of needles like dust in its beam -
they vanish from the air, weaving unseen
the tapestry of the bare forest floor.

there is no rustle underfoot from these
last year leaves, just the flicker of magic
unrelieved by the muted mountain light.
a farmer's groundplan long-raised lodge submits,
unearthed by groping roots, earthed by the rot
of years; wood sorrel leaves lace the course
of a stream sunk out of view, and strata rise
to meet an ancient quarry's squandered stones.
brown pine vaults fake a low-roofed church, sunlight
falls at an end somewhere utterly gold
on a springwater altar of rock and earth:
I'm lost to space in an aisle of silence, near
perfection and approximately real.

I'm your quarry now, woods,
prize me open with your claws,
I am the clause too, woods,
pass me into your lore.
this then, this is the place
the saxifrage and moss
the pulse of water
the veins of the hill,
fingers of a time before
even history could
brutalise knowledge;
I am a stranger here,
how can I tell what forces stranger still
come creaking through the noiseless deep?
sulking through this soft green fullness
that two millennia held still?

here at last came the last man of the tribe
when breakers rolled across his kingdom's sand
sliding the hopes of his race beneath the swell;
occupation was an intrusive sea
that tamed the coast with a wrack of slavery
and tossed the limp defenders high inland.
embers of the dying battle lit the hill,
the blood of liegemen burned the heath soil white,
and at last by dark the last man came, sunk
in defeat his land's lost heart, and opened
his wounds red on green in the spring where a moss
of death clamped his mind in the rock, and closed
on the secret of his legendary line.
the enemy maintain their own heroes now,
they fly fantastically beyond the hill;
but time and vanity have washed all trace
of that other early wisdom from the world,
all but this primeval certainty
locked deep in the cold wet evergreen spring.

a plane passes
the spell and the sky break
myths cancel out:
having sought free thought
free action and free speed
I have lost the will to turn them into deeds.

4. DISINTEGRATION

"why don't you love me?" she said
when she wanted to hear I did;
and inside I tore down the walls of the room
and pressed the button
to release the maniacal bomb.
"that was never what I said," I said
as I drove off my mountain edge into the gentle air
of another silent empty gesture.

- the state of insecurity needs you,
the propaganda pleads in parody
the day they took my friends away.
no one could tell whose side they were on:
orders arrived by night, plain clothes, plain car;
normality disperses, reason flakes away
like faces in ancient stone.
"why them, not me?" I said,
then, another way alone, "why me?"

the random recruits march out at dawn
pulling with them the front of the war;
everyone I greet has a weapon of their own,
stares me in the face,
demands mine is shown.
"it's hatred by default,
love by assault, I apologise,"
says one I have known for years:
"the enemy may just be right,
so get yours in - you may not last the night."

should I defect then,
become the enemy of state they need,
the one who'd press the case for independence,
the one to take the blame
for glib guerrilla armies raging in the brain?

"our marriage is a magic ring,"
says one I have not seen for years
who found his absolute in love;
"if she broke it once

it could never be repaired,"
he cried in despair.
for christsake, friend, if love was so perfect
we would never know the thing at all.

The day they took my friends away
no one could tell who was on his side.
orders arrived in a plain brown envelope.
They marched out rank by rank today,
the enemy guns were trained on their chests,
their friends on their backs.

the day they take my friends away

summer is down like iron in the land
veined in the rocks, hard and deep; I return
to the ore of people in the town and burn
with them, dead at heart, to slag and sand.

On the winding path was a crooked man;
half an age in climbing to the top,
half a day coming down.
"When he opened his mouth," he says,
"his words came like a pain,
like an old man who confirms his life
with remorseless details of the past
and sometimes misses time from his tales.
age for sure is not the thing
that's so intently killing him."

What did it mean, that time together,
mouth to mouth and breath to breath
till love became a Turkish bath
and fresh air turned to sweat?

I find a pub on a high mountain road
where the sheep men and bike boys come and go.
"a wild one, yes, with his hair in his eyes,"
the familiar barmaid smiled;
"said he'd walked all day
and didn't seem to know quite where;
he talked overtime on the edge of his stool,
and over my head on the ledge running cool
soaking up the beer like the mountain air."

after all those years
with the thrill and guilt still grasping my crutch,
and despite the life and people between,
I think of how she might be in the dark,
and, unwisely, unrepentant,

I wish she were here from time to time.
so I work out in detail that spare weekend
of mad debauchery in a postcard hotel,
signed in casually, "and friend",
whichever friend she might have been.

"He blurted like a winter spring,"
berates the farmer at his gate
"He said 'good day'
the way you mean 'goodbye',
a man in decline, dissent on his mind."

what if feeling in love is just
an excuse for failing in bed,
and failing in bed just an answer
to fouling in love? I said.

"Who was that silent man whose eyes met mine?"
asks the woman passed in the park;
"Maybe we'd have made it if I'd stayed.
it's not simply who you know, you know,
but just as often how."

one old friend could still touch that nerve,
I thought I'd know her features anywhere;
sometimes in the strange face streets
of the town where we lived I'd press
her faint resemblance on the shopping crowd.
I could be so lonely now in the cities we knew
with the odds of us meeting
stretched out of belief:
it's not our faces
that our independent movements change,
but relativity
and needs and places.

"his words came like a fit,"
says a neighbour from her door
"there was something so desperate he wanted to say,
so maybe I was wrong never hearing a thing
in my effort to agree."

I've come from mountain to dismounting
from hillside to hill-sight, from moor to less
from motion in two planes to flight in a third -
this day of thought without a spoken word.

and then comes the day,
the day they take the words away.

the day they take the words away

clouds flamed on the mountain
I'm writing every waking moment
working sadness into torment
day came, night came, day again;
I work the anguish into irritation
like cats that rattle dustbins at my door
or the aching sun that burns my body raw -
no entry, one-way communication,
as the sleek bird overhead
flexes wings on the rising air,
curves its flight to the valley and the sea.

"I demand to have ideas," the poem screams,
"ideas to hold the words together,
words to tear the world apart.
it's only time I need
to overthrow the torture,
the meaning and unmeaning
of the gangsters of state,
to break the verbal irons
that order markets and machines,
production, power,
loyalty and law.
one day again," the poem ends,
"we will gain control."

*the day they take the words away,
the three-second image takes control:*

"State in peril," the tabloids shrill,
"Poets are to blame for all our ills."
wide margins always mark the weakly, free verse causes
promiscuity.
Beware the man whose
pithy haikus refuse to
scan;
and couplets which diverge from rhyme
are on the slope that leads to sin

Everyone with messages to send
hires admen to select the type,
has managers to choose the where and when,
and actors to recite the lines;
their egos, though, retain control
under contract to supply the mime.

*the day they take the words away
the papers call for more control:*

then flash to pictures of a nation stunned.
as radio follows with an in-depth probe:

"The situation, Minister, has been
described as out of your control."

"But I have said before there is no truth
at all in what was said before, and though
we've never been unwilling yet to take
dilemmas by the horns, simple answers
always underestimate the truth; and that
is why the country needs to know that we
are taking, vis a vis the situation,
full control."

then phone-ins supersede, and I draw crowds
in town buying up detergents so new
I hardly know how to tell if it's true.

*back home at the day they take the words away
generalities assume control:*

"Man has come from the dark of caves,"
reads the bookclub bargain for escape,
illustrating everything but the small print of the terms,
"we have come from the chilling hills
where fire beacons spread their message
through the kingdom in a day;
and we come trailing clouds of glory
throwing names like light on the world."

"cat" predicts my son shaking a hand
in triumph at the stuffed blue toy
looking vaguely like a dog.

*so bloody what, I say, the day they take the words away
as art and silence battle for control:*

art renders nature legible,
makes comprehensible
that infamous condition
Humanity is in,
which our language is, and how,
absolutely out of now.

(my words become a socket set,
screw me till I squawk
but slacken off or tighten it,
they can't make me torque)

all meaning is an onion

constantly unpeeled,
and I am just the someone
whose effort has congealed:
now thoughts are just an apple
toothless like the prose
I surrender to the crates,
cases, names of things,
vacant unrelated states,
roundabouts and swings;
words trail out and symbols ride
ordered, separate,
absolute in freedom, pride -
whole, without support.

I'm searching for the seeing,
and blind to the seen,
I'm living for the being
dead to what I've been,
dead to truth, dead deceiving,
endlessly between.

*at the close of the day they take the words away
nonentities have won control:*

I lose my voice
I lose communication
lose my choice
lose all relation
I lose departure lose arrival
lose joy lose sorrow
lose my plans and lose survival
till at last I lose tomorrow

I lose direction
lose the media of thought
I lose perception
lose ideas, the last resort;
I lose imagination
lose all truth science art
I lose creation
lose my progress lose my start
lose love
lose heart.

the noontime sun stuns the hill,
sparks the television mast,
shouts the news out louder still,
brings the mountain down at last.

I step in the dust that wraps the house,

leave my print in the hall
the heat too much to bear;
the bird swoops, cat drops,
light falls on the mark on the floor;
they land together in the vacuum.

afterthought

Never never never, not again
said the world
to Auschwitz, Belsen Buchenwald.
It's not enough to count the dead
if no one's left to claim them,
and even if we count the dead
humanity must name them.

Never never never, not again
said the propaganda
to Flanders, Vietnam, Ruanda.
It's not enough to film the dead
while statesmen hack our brains,
not enough to crank up dread
when their principles block drains.

Never never never, not again
said the story
of history and victory and glory.
It's not enough to name the dead
if, dead, they're all the same –
we have to know what they have said
and who each one became.

5. HISTORY

the day they take the time away
again, "let's talk it over, again," I say.

in retrospect we master war in archives
of great speeches, and live to quote ourselves
at will in passages of public pride;
our table play of soldiers, borders, arms
retraces geometric moves of old
campaigns, and mellows their disputes in
feats of memory till all else dissolves

in the fading smoke of the big cigar.

"I know there's nothing left to say," you say.

the lads trailed back, shell-shocked, dumb and sane,
unspoken scenes from the front locked inside
their helmets, trapped in mud that moulds their boots;
they fell in the arms of promises, plans
for homes fit for heroes, the high-rise hopes
of independent housing states - and all
the country lacked was the heroes to come home.
today united leagues of nations talk
and talk while god in his wisdom holds back.

"well, let's find something new to say," I say.

our voices drown in the mandarin's drone.
and we take it sitting down, fat in triumph,
fat in defeat, news bullet in the back
before the screen where repetitious ghosts
march on - Bronovsky, loveable but dead,
grasps at ancestors in the death camp clay,
Sir Mortimer toys with the garbage of Troy,
and Lord Clark himself is Civilisation.

"it would change nothing anyway," you say.

nor the death of an archduke, nor even
a couple of defenestrations, not
a captain's ear, or a spurious party
for native Americans at the docks;
it would take a Reformation or Das
Kapital, the advent of the city state,
or some new prime cause to get history
moving again down in this neck of the woods.

I said "I love you." "I love you," she said;
war is no endgame won and lost
but terminal sacrifice, absolute cost.
even when the war ends
forget the help the peace sends
for the old friends' new friends.

summer is an element, the iron in the earth,
while molecules in chains contain my total worth;
the air moves with the evening, my room
shifts in a current of retreating light,
a mountain of detergent bubbles built up by day
subsides at night to a sink's dirty scum,
empty bottles lined across the floor

reach backwards from their point of no return,
soot and smoke creep into corners,
meander in unforeseen crevices,
and embroidered messages disappear from the edges of blankets.
some small chemistry meanwhile passes
predeterminate in the blood and lets me think
that I, without the cubes that curve the mind,
could mend myself like New Orleans iron
round a template of time, could sit the night out alone,
to be the only one alive by morning.

darkness

four hours out of twenty four the town grows furtive
like a steamed-up car in a dark back lane,
withdrawn, alert and skulking, from the strain of lights;
pavements are hard in their private parts,
blood footsteps thud with anticipation
as loneliness clumsily unbuttons the night;
tight terraces push to the edge of things,
run hands round the folds of open fields,
press down at last on the secret places of the dark.
together we go, through miles of hours
outwalking out the walking out,
the town and I, to masturbate the universe to sleep
in sterile aching contemplation.

*This is not about me alone.
This is the love which we try to cover
with lies and deception and stone,
from ourselves as much as any lover.*

and light

moonhung darkness ties the mountain to the sky,
a train completes an incessant distance,
and roads and factories retreat into
their miniature prefabricated day;
a half-way slate roof glows like a throne revealing
grainy farmyard hulks at two removes,
impotence hovers on the lifting air,
the world in fever gone brittle and thin;
a score of random pinprick stars faint
a moment in a hint of cloud, then fight
back brighter, multiplied: another wisp,
more night, more stars, more deep, and more to meet
the vastness of the highest rung, till peering stars
grow giddy, sway and totter back
to the earth in the eon just before dawn.

this is the point where universal detail
reverts to finite fact and vanishes,
the point where life, theirs or mine, becomes a smear,
the point of continuity below
where solitary human come and go.

come and go

they come in the dusk of shrivelling morning
to be husked by the light of a sun out of focus,
the packers and stackers, operators and stokers,
assemblers and cokers, political provokers,
the artisans and partisans, all the hocus pocus
of life's ghost third, all ready for the way
the day will choke them, in thin grey wafers
with silence and violence clenching their throats,
drifting to the main gates opening and bursting,
where the night shift haulers, light shift crawlers,
with thirsts and curses crossing over,
sift through a time shift as they come and go.

they come from the Northern hills,
from barrack drills and training skills,
from waning towns and overspills,
uniform in boilersuits, well-worn safety boots
all looking for the slick route quick loot
till a day can play it right for scooting;
the rain forest workers, shirkers, smirkers,
had to join the circus to know how deep the murk is;
and no one sees the heat-pall leaf fall work face,
the half-strange half-friend who cuts with a weekend,
replaced on the Monday like a change of overalls
as the men of constant autumn come and go.

they come on the hooter, by motor, by rota,
the same and the torture, far into the future,
by one and by one, by product of fractions,
by runs and by tons in vacuums of action,
living for the tea break work brake and back up
till dinner time's thinner grime and thought
like a hiccup as the mind runs in flashes
like sparks out of ashes, on how short the cash is,
on rough birds and tough words that might hurt
the family, on heatwave affections
and remedies for snow, to be cheated
of lucidity in flecks that come and go.

they come through the trap doors, steel floors, corridors,
gorged by conveyor jaws, pouring out with innate force,
the products spawned like football scores;

the doomer goods, consumer goods all come to be
successively by parts and operations,
cast from the start for artless replications,
march out aloof from nomanshand
past the chargehand's role, the union patrol,
the hard men, card men on quality control:
pressing on to be complete, inviolate
and obsolete, the stately artefacts
born with men at their feet come and go.

MOUNTAIN

Part 4

Autumn: Complexes

AUTUMN: COMPLEXES

1. OLD CERTAINTIES

At night I awake from a flimsy sleep;
the town outside leans through the window,
a street lamp throws an ochre line
down the no sleeping gutter of my pillow;
heavy lorries growl over nearby corners
and cars hiss out of a long serpentine distance,
arriving in a deadly rattle as they strike
the curtains with their headlamp flints.
Trains drag an endless jet of sound
in and out of obscurity,
flying into familiar syncopations
only for the seconds of their nearest approach;
but mostly the town just whirs and purrs
like a satisfied machine which only the random
scurry of rain can wash from my ears.
But the loudest sound is the reflex bark of memory
and footfalls on the hollow floors of hope;
from the mountain, silence falls like a stone
in the deepest well, and all the rest is waking;

First love

*there were once golden lawns, rich warm hours
and oak beamed places; there were once rooms
and walks that streamed with not yet requited
love, the accidents of words, untried
embraces; and once there was a windy night
with damp shaken leaves that became the ghosts
I summoned year to year. I sought escape
in arching halls of absolutes (in thought
not deeds) in vast and labyrinthine walls;
I lined the fields with poetry, chiselled caverns
out of words that would amaze the maze
I could control: an untamed Minataur
stood by in monstrous fascination.*

*And every line was its own image then,
blind on the pilgrimage to the shrine of light.
the world was an obscurity, while I
lived wire-like from pylons shimmering, each
atom its own to fling me through the night.*

*All nature was philosophy. It took
me in, I was its thing; I dreamed of downs,
then mountains, to absorb my wanderings
until I found another way to be
alone - to be alone with friends - to force
each ecstasy of friendship to become
a fantasy of love; to walk among
the leaves, and make the longing longer still.*

*My hope was young; I took a hundred shots:
aimed and squeezed the triggered instant, sprang
my shuttered present on a timeless past.
The girl was the object not subject of love,
I kept each elementary outline clothed
with minor facts, taking her with trees
and empty hills, and grass and sand and rocks,
so that every step was an ending then
from friend to friend, to friends of friends of friends.*

First lusts

*next
we shared a last lost cigarette
(one bloody night, one girl, one kiss)
and I thought of only beginnings
as I stood by a door at the end.
a party was a kind of consolation
for my jokes, the glasses I broke, her
fears of dietary disaster.*

*(always I intended
or pretended to have said:
one day like Jack -
that's Kennedy or Kerouak -
I know that you'll grow tired of me
or I will hit the road;
but please just wait until you see
the reasons I should go.)*

*and yet
I promised to write that
Christmas Poem
miraculously by the end of April
if I got her into bed,
though I tried instead
to make light of our differences
with an offer to screw her
in an empty socket
till she would glow again for me.*

*(synchronicity was all that we lacked:
I wanted her breasts; she wanted my tact.)*

*until
my love was everyone
who gave me anger or affection
although or because I could not love them
and everyone I crucified
with the truth or with my lies,
and everyone I ever hurt
because of, or despite, my words.*

*my love became
a thing in name,
another way to comprehend
that in the end
the love we ache
is equal to the love we fake.*

2. OLD UNCERTAINTIES

A walk in the town
glimpses of the mountain:
history

looking back

*Mars was starving in a London flat, draft
dodging and too thin for bullets to catch;
we hung out with Jupiter, ambrosial
and stoned, while Mercury wrote messages
in obscure verse that no one quite condoned.*

*Across the unscaled lunar face
shadows gripped the contours like a disease,
the razor horizon cut off without sky,
and Earth, a partial place mottled blue and white,
surfaced like a diver from the deep of space:
a marketable scene, a poster on our wall.*

*They brought an audience like a world cup crowd,
drew together one in six of those left back
on Earth to see the pictures live;
they played some golf and said a prayer,
brought a car and watched TV,
as comfortable as home.
They planted bootprints in the sterile dust,
took their snaps of Jupiter and Mercury and Mars,
and dumped their noiseless junk back
on the transhistoric dustbin Moon.*

*The view across that quarter million miles
back through our brief four million years
grew slowly tattered on the wall.
After only half a decade there was nothing
but compulsion in our looking back,
the day we tore the Moonscape down,
threw Earthrise on the coals of the fire.*

*We're busy nowadays with Jupiter's
Consumerthon down at the shopping arcade;
Mars has enlisted everyone in a Star
Wars game in the blindness of space; and my new
business is a Mercury subscriber.*

Alien presents

In the early autumn rain
the hillside rolls itself in mist,
hangs with edges blurred
like an alien visitor above the town.

It has come in close
to investigate our purpose,
explore the devices and that drive our lives.
"It was grey and shining,
hovered over roofs and spires
before dissolving into cloud"
observers go on drinking doubts
that crowd the public bars.
"Couldn't say how large it was;
it seemed to fill the sky."
Police report an ordinary day
though fog was causing some delay;
No evidence was found.
But any thought restored beneath the core
that Outside might hide something more
is just enough to satisfy the guess
that we survive as something less.

Passed civilisations

*In the buildings of the capital
buried cities stretched to a long museum frieze;
a stalk-legged bird curved down a corridor,
down fragments and remains
gathered like beer mats for all to see.
Death was ambered, glassed and cased,
the mummy after six millennia,
decomposed before it hit eternity,
is now at last X-rayed for clues.
The coffee too comes alive in machines
in the bowels of the past,
while a child in only half awareness
danced away down galleries and out of sight.*

*The subway station landscape explodes,
reordered in its cinematographic hype -
but Elliot was wrong, it's the hypodermic
space between that puts us down -
platforms skid out of darkness,
flash with cold illumination*

*and bits that don't add up,
as the city passes in a long-buried frieze.*

Back stalking the town
with all the more strenuous street lamp stars;
a figure comes lunging with supportive speed;
somewhere nearby footsteps fall on hard times.
Yet,
the mountain glimmers.

Perfect thoughts

*I was looking for some total like
Perfection of the Work - or Life -
or Art, or Science, bingo, Zen,
The Thoughts of Mau, or Bill or Ben,
not God, but infinitely worse,
Life, Death and the Universe:
Time building up to the question What,
and getting stuck on If or Not.
There's nothing you can do that can't
be done, except that most things aren't;
so wasn't it a vain pretence
to claim that anything made sense?*

A warp in the town,
and wanting to climb -
held back by the weight of the earth.

3. ABOLITION OF THE ABSOLUTE

On the hill, merely a shape in the early morning
before the black sky dissolves to grey,
the town below floats like tomato soup
in a bowl of darkness;
there are figures stirring on the rim
dimly, thin as shadow.

The impending mountain ...

touching

*Nothing
arrived, not even the mail;
there was no sadness to take
the strain; there was no pain.
we chose that way of life
that way of aching, long and thin,
that agony of sensing nothing amiss,
privately feeling the same as yesterday
more or less - still not knowing when
or where it would hurt or which one
would be the first to cry,
or how deep it would bite.
How we wished for change
for the cure for the ailment that had
no name.*

... follows every move we make ...

sights

*In the interest of
the liberation of the world
I kill the man whose loaded gun is aimed at me
I kill the man who killed my friend
I kill the man who killed our brother.
now I kill the man who took away our freedom
so my brothers can be free.
I kill the man with the poisoned mind
I kill the man who hates our kind
I kill the man whose kind I hate
and kill the man whose uniform
is not so different from mine.*

*I kill the man who breaks our laws
and kill the man who makes them.
I kill the man who raised my anger; then
I kill the man I called my friend.
I hate this violence, I say in haste,
reaching easy as breakfast for the key to my car;
then I aim its barrel down the road
on all the other loaded guns
whose sights are set on me.*

... the valley sides slump back
in the contours of a woman ...

soundings

*I just can't loose
I just can't close
that infinite moment,
I just can't lose
that sudden cosmic intuition
which slams the soul in the back of a taxi
tells the driver to pursue
the tail lights of dispersing stars
and sometimes finds me back at home
before I even know I've gone.
I just can't lose
that infinite moment
that midnight at noon
that living unison
that Grecian urn,
I just can't lose
those clouds of glory
and that wild west wind;
I just can't lose it
if I never had it.*

*some total! sum total
of any computation:
there is no (Yeats,
what have you done to me?)
true totality.*

... impassive, immense, stonefaced.

(s)cents

*no stone no tide no silence no star
no war no womb no woman no bar
no birth no curse no creature no clay
no town no crowd no crossing no way
no seed no field no father no leaf
no calm no scream no laughter no grief
no word no coin can move me now
that facts are all we can allow:
between the stone the star and me
is everything that we could be.*

The livid distance fades to monochrome,
a panoramic view in a day's-end colour slide;
edges blur, canvas streaks of rain stretch
between a leaden cloud and a greenish hulk
as the sky is pulled down like an awning;
night climbs the hill once more, and fog
comes lunging in,
landscape fainting to a darkening whole
thin as mist.

4. DISILLUSION AND DISSOLUTION

The summit draws you in, air to the fire
in warm air rising: the haul of the hill,
the drag of the sheep runs, the grab of the clouds.

solitude stumps the open track, and grants
assurance in glances back towards home;
but over the ridge, then secrecy sneaks
between the trees, belies its height, denies
the outsize hillside outside rolling round.

*There was a time when I always knew
there'd be another me another you
another view outside the window as I turned to go,
a special providence too in the fall of tomorrow.*

*the search was on for the thing I would know
to be
a reasonable facsimile
or likeness of the truth . . .*

flashes

In the interests of illumination

*in The Nude Poem
I stripped away barriers of meaning
to reach the essential ethnic groan,
losing word by word
searching for freedom
irrespective of personal danger,
word from word,
emancipating man
(and maybe woman),
scratching for the point
of time before life:
a wordless but exalting
graffiti grunting
"fuck".*

*oh Cambridge Station of the Academic Mind
on whose trains you are required to leave behind
the past, the present, your perspective and your name -
six hundred years' lost property without a claim.*

*a clock across the road
stared endlessly into the room
spilling time into the night;
lonely waking for her.*

*a stream beside the botanical gardens.
fences flowed with it too like an interrupted dream
with access to Asia, Africa, America
(rocks important for chemistry and natural effect).
rare species bloom along the way to catch a train:
statements which are true
and in relation to
subjective states of beauty.*

*yet coming back here
with the dagger of doubt;
if - half way out -
the road isn't clear;
back to my room
and only to find
I'd been out all along,
terrified one day I'd call
while I was in.
with my face clipped to the key ring
I fumbled with the doorlock test
of a dull inebriating thought.*

*a friend came round and said he'd changed
the constituents of his mind:
when I called on him
he said he was out
and I knew at once he was right.*

*they found the lost child in the derelict
canal where trouser traces had escaped
the rats, and identity was nothing
more than threads and blue cotton dye, leaving
faceless remorse to gnaw his mother's sleep.*

*a year later
insomniac faces the same,
heads a little balder,
old friends with new definitives,
old friendships ambered in
their chronicles of situations.*

*and so the skipping rope recurrences
turned faster year to year:
I thought I saw a floodlit crowd
in awe when the news came through,*

*breaths baited with curled charred flesh
and everyone agape to see
the hopping, springing marathon, and me,
dancing with a bare
unearthed mains cable .*

*In the interests of liberating
anything that I could find,
I loved two girls at once and lost my mind.*

*There was a time I almost knew there'd be
another providence, another we,
the endless senseless falling of sparrows,
sliding with today beneath tomorrow.*

browns subsume half the forest: white bedstraw
persists with moorland sedge and sparse gorse shrubs,
a lone foxglove prevails
in thinnest pink,
and beech tree borders, which in summered greens
could flatter firs, are knock-kneed, bare and frail;
the floor changes to a clattering pool
of flapping wind-pulled leaves, a slither of needles
and the softgrass-bracken leafless carpet -
a curious recurrent private pattern.

here the world is wet and gliding blindly
down the pine floor slippery as streamstone,
sliding, piling, powered as by storms down
the frost-smoothed moss-soothed reclining strata;
withdrawn and drawn in one final liquid
vertiginous fall to the mountain core.
everything disappears in the fissures,
gaps, holes, orifices of time and thought.

mist, like smoke piling upward in still air,
stands erect in a lost mountain valley;
then smeared by sunlight, it melts in orange haze.

5. COMPLEXES

If life was just a face-out, us or it,
I'd count on binary arithmetic;
or should its vacillating purpose fool us
I'd plot with differential calculus.
No chance. The wider challenge is, one hears,
to formulate the Music of the Spheres:

either or

dayblunted dreams shunted in my head.
the station awaited its moment
when platforms and stairs slid back from the train
spinning me out alone in string, thin as that,
just a cord drawn on the world;
a chain thread of freight, overhauled,
fell away foreshortened in recession and time;
out there dockyard cranes squatting
in a dwarfish distance of coastal mists,
fields flee for their lives, steel rails
flying out of the ground - even lines
written down contribute to delusion.
I travel further nowadays it seems,
and I never thought I would forget the night,
whichever night it was, I first arrived.
 love, I cry, has vanished from the world:
 strange that she is the one I should tell.

down at the edge of my journey alone
the platform was an island of light,
the blind and stationary train
was an arrow drawn back on the night;
a cellulose stillness wrapped me
transparent and cold like a deepfreeze joint.
the first jerk of relative motion
was only the next arriving train,
so how could I believe that narrow
corridor of space and time
that hurled me back from a destination
to another shore of illuminated
certainty clamped in the dark?
my carriage door slammed like a sniper,
I surrendered my ticket at the barrier,
ready for anything but this pendular return.
 truth, I whispered, has vanished from the world;
 how strange we should feel so close in lies.

points of contact

dropped below in the derelict lock
locked in with deadnettle, figwort, dock
are the ring and the nail, set in wood, set in rock.
there rusting to metalflakes, uncrushed by neglect,
lasting the unbraked ruin-run plunge
is the wood that has pinned the ring to the wall,
that has clung so long like the water's fall.
canal boats reached out once with hooks and lines,
grabbed themselves coal-low to the sinking lock;
horses paused to graze as the bargees hung,
trusting their load to their hold
and the open iron eye.
stonemasons came before
to maul the rocks into the wall;
they carved the crevice, hammered home
the wedge of oak and brought down
the new-wrought ring-headed nail to their work:
but no noise was like the creak of timber
or the builder's hiss of breath
in the first thrust when the metal rang
fibre to spike at its entry point.
later as they poured their day away in talk
the workworn masons hewed no more thought
of the ring or its nail in the wood in the rock
than of the cockroach or
the cricket on the sawdust alehouse floor.

the cockroach on the field of Troy
finds food in every fallen husk,
scuttles across a meal of the world;
the cricket in the fires of Hell
scratches a song from the warmth
of the hearth, moves with invisible purpose.

the skittle ball
curves like a planet
on the sawdust floor,
rolling and taking
the gentle grade of the boards;
its surface skims in contact
and pushes into motion
grain upon grain:
particles topple,
fall into line with the sphere.

children pick slate fragments

from a shapeless ruin by the old canal
send them spinning, dancing
down the timeless water,
touching, but glancing off their past.

the Music of the Firs

The town comes and goes in far off thunder,
churning like sea sucked out of a distance.

An audience of forest firs is hushed
with expectancy: in their darkness nothing
stirs, though front-row silvered birch tops rattle
excited by the rising wind.
On the moor the air shrills like skylark song,
whining with the pylons, whistling in pipes
lined out for winter guides; the molten sky
heaves and breathes through the flutes of everything.

Autumn has dumbbed the insects' summer hum,
but other voices join - a rasping rook,
a barber shop of bleating sheep that stars
a barbed-wire bard and sounds a far alarm
from ram to lamb to ewe. Bleak beseeching
moor birds creak like hinges, and rabbits are
a stricken cracking drumbreak back in bracken.

Inside the plateau every forest tune
together soars and drowns, as the air's
low horn on the edge of audible sound
intones its mourning for the wood's decay.
Unseen nameless birds are chanting; branches
flap like frantic doves; map sheets slap and crash;
and water orchestrates the ground, ringing
down streams in endless peeling harmony.
Still high above all this the tree tips twist
and weave, moved by earth's impenetrable
force, and persistent with the hiss of life.

stewed sonnet

*when I paused to consider the cause that moved
me first and then, there was just nothing new
except a kind of philosophic stew
which only possibility improved.
"what message?" was all the vegetables said -
those diced routine fragments of experience,
the sludge of lentil, mushroom transience,
confusion in the cauliflower heads;*

*but the point was the point where lumps might meet,
not the tomatoes in opaque despair,
no easy peas nor the carrot's hopeful share,
but collision of a grain of wheat
with the world enclosed in a pasta hoop:
all Life in a latterday primeval soup.*

resolution and independence

*In the interests of philosophy
I crawled back home, and half insane,
I let these crazy complex complications
roll right over me:
meaning was or is unmeaning
solution is insoluble,
resolution anything
or everything that cannot be resolved.
Therefore, if contradiction is alone
beyond all contradiction,
there is no other certainty
no other mark of truth:
human values are all dead at birth
if there's no challenge to their worth.*

6. THE REAL WORLD

deception

So this is love today:
rain on the window is one more
act of deception -
it cracks what we do in the storm
the first few seconds;
it tracks down the windscreen over
a flash of creation -
an amoeboid supernova's
mad replication.

Here's our most feared contagion,
our cells' saddest plague
as "you" becomes "she", that stage when
"we" fade into "they".

Outside the car, the street sweeps up and bends
in the liquid wind; a polished coat of rain
is scoured by airborne flotsam that extends
its shadow inward on the road; the train
of painted road lines warps under the strain
of light on air, and a sudden cloud drowns
the moon yet slithers off without a stain.
nothing stays but the arching lights that crown
the edge of the sky and merge into the town.

we do not talk:
the wilful words are there for talking's sake
but silence is an absolute
that finds subsistence in among
les objets of home
(the wardrobe and the storage jars,
the forks, the saucepans and the earthenware).
In our world there's a place for everything
and their world is a place like ours,
like the one we think we're looking for
till we find, without speaking,
that we're already there.
Black shapeless roadway pools explode
with pinprick stars of rain, burn constantly
to nothing in concentric waves -
the way we always seem to do ourselves.

You and I, she and I, all and none
lost together because our joining
is the surest way to separation,

hopelessly groping to do it right;
hiding ourselves inside the night;
a new friend's promised world
swirls round me in faceless inanity.
The deception is unresolved
and so utterly without meaning

cinema verity

Today I played the hunger back on video,
kicked pain down the street in a coke can,
and wore the screamprint T-shirt of torture.
I know for sure what's going on.
My walls are all a TV screen, I breath

the polluted air of an entire planet
in my living room; when I turn on the set
cruise missiles fly by my hotel too,
and body parts disfigure my doorstep.
So now I understand the world in full.

A car costing more than I need to know
rolls across an advert's arid landscape,
wrapped around with a documentary film
about a civil war, a drought, a famine
a village tap and a fleeing woman.

But this desert means I see everything,
except who pays to keep me so informed,
except who owns the copyright on truth,
and who's sponsoring this war, whose famine,
just who is renting me this bloodstained lens.

I slice a dusty album from its case
decisively, implacably involved.
I nail it to the player; a sand storm
of sound pummels at my comprehension.
No one can tell me that I'm unaware.

at the end of the road

At the end of this road is the wood
whose furthest edge fingers an arching field
and reaches up to a stream scudding down
from a white-walled house wasting among trees:
this is the point, this overlap of worlds
at the confluence of madness and mountain,
of mat grass and mystery, man and machine,
this is the bridgehead and the last retreat

where we gather for one living moment
to be part of the balance and the stalemate.

Later, after dawn, the dew boils off
in the searching sun; the hill steams like
a healing poultice on an aching sore.

MOUNTAIN

Part 5

Winter Borders

WINTER BORDERS

1. LOOSE CHANGE

*The year you came,
it was only the mountain which stayed the same;
at the end of autumn, even in mist,
it was there distinct and pinched for winter,
as air squeezed out its moisture:
and after rain, the water seeping from it
came to the earth at your door;
you read its moods like occasional letters from an old friend,
not questioned, not fully understood.*

*The year you came
it was only
mutability
that stayed the same.*

*The year you came few things remained - the neighbours' vast
pack of children, one TV show after the last,
the thighs of a girl in a pub, summer's heave and fall;
others grew, like shirtcollar stains, or the beercan wall,
or damp on ceilings, trees on the hill, hopes and lies,
the unmentioned mountainshape stapled to your eyes.*

*While your mountain roared
as metaphor for stasis;
you'd rant against chaos
in all other cases.
Later, when your tense and
present sense rearranged
your mood, you mused it was
change itself that had changed.*

*The year you came you had so much to lose -
the more you looked, the less it could become;
onwards like decimals, never to close,
between the grains, inside atomic sums,
they slipped beneath the table with the crumbs.
The repetition clamped around your mind;
as months escaped, activity succumbed:
life was balanced and carefully aligned,
and constant interference sent you blind.*

*The year you came
you'd nothing to give
but infective anger,
pain and grief.*

yours and mine

the town squats on the rump of a carbon age,
the coal-stoking, pick-poking, town-choking days
when men became machines and lived their hopes
in warrens squalid with primeval pride.
now on the hill the streams fill with mine swill,
and dwarf holes open in the private earth
where once the spitted workers pitted wits
against the tinder darkness of their maze;
today the spoils are gone and soil forms on the spoil,
and down in the town stone factories abound
stuffed like mine-dung up bleak back passages,
and shunning the schemes that will ease them out
soon in suppository replanning.
yet anarchy withstands the clean ideas:
new roads splay out, consumables haul in
freewheeling, speed-dealing, space-stealing ways -
our high rise grand prize family-size daze.
and streets hold their guts through a car-borne age.

the order of the walls

Familiar news of government change
pours over you like a cooling summer storm.
This is what you've waited for.

Before returning to privacy
men with anglepoised shadows
and husked voices clear their throats
and belongings from their desks
in rooms off pale echoing corridors;
obediently our leaders,
who take their scotch with soda
but leave the office neat,
follow down the order of the walls;
outside in passageways
they wait for the last rasping lift
as noises tinkle from a painful distance:
no one comes, but thoughts
are tortured into corners
by a circuit of naked lights;
arriving and unmoved, the secretariat

looks down at the files,
cataloguing fingernails.

Frost slides from windows
and water recovers itself for the day;
a horse in the traffic jam below
breathes the vapour of morning,
its dung steams, the stench rising.
Effortlessly the night-damp pavements dry,
and the stiff revolving doors turn again
to emit the men whose brittle dreams
clatter like teacups in the new day's
unrelenting streets.
Their power was an edifice,
empty, grey and stone,
their mandate was a flight of steps
worn down by a million passing feet.

All-night celebrations sprinkle from a nearby hotel.
Tomorrow maybe the men of the new administration
will feel their way down sober halls,
stand family photos on their desks
fill drawers with felt tip promises,
ready at last to change the order of the walls

perhaps to look at far off things.

secret I

the white people came with cameras
looking for the most beautiful woman in the village
and I couldn't stop my father saying it was me;
they made a film of me standing in my best dress
by the tap the aid workers brought -
the tap which ran dry last month so that
we have to walk another mile to collect water now;
it has not rained for months, and the big man
takes the little water we have for his tobacco crop;
my baby is hungry now; and I don't know
what we will do if the harvest fails again;
I haven't heard from my husband in nearly a year;
he went to work in the mines and sometimes
brought me money in the early days;
now there is nothing to buy in the village
and I do not know if he is alive;
but my mother says he may have taken
another woman: why would he do that
if he cannot even support his own wife?
maybe we will go to the town and try

to get the kind of work they pay you for.
maybe I could work for a rich family in the city,
like the ones we saw on the television
at the big man's house;
but who would want a pregnant woman with a baby?
and they say that the rich people ran away
to the country to escape the war.
we know so much more since the television came:
the government is trying to help us, they say;
the women should stay in the country,
our men should go to the war, our children can learn,
we can avoid sickness in a hundred ways,
but there is so much more to understand.
why do they mix up what is real with what is play?
the white people are strangest of all
they behave like the gods in the stories
my grandmother told my sisters and me,
so rich and strong that they control the world,
but only destroying themselves;
the people in *Dallas* are so beautiful
my friends believe they only pretend
to be unhappy - I feel their sadness
but not how they can be dissatisfied.

the white people with the cameras said
my pictures would come on televisions
all over the world, and that white people
will learn what it is like to live in my village.
that is more televisions than anyone
can count, and my father says their weakness
is not telling the truth, even to themselves,
and they will suffer for such foolish lies.

2. STORAGE JARS

*The years they came:
like a spider up a drainpipe
or silverfish to the hearth
the months and years slipped in.*

*The quiet storage jars no longer rant,
their bland containment has replaced dissent.
Do they hold experience or passion?
continuity or faded fashion?
or are they crammed with paraphernalia,
scraps and patches of success and failure?*

The years have tamed

*two people making points,
left to pass round blame,
peaceably, like joints*

They seldom go there nowadays
why should they?
they know what it is, what it does,
its gravitational pull
like the black mass of matter in space.
And yes, they know the shared out cared-out
piddle-glass middle class guilt of their lives
which play Trivial Pursuit
with the astonishing beauty of the mountain
it's a kind of passive smoking which poisons
everyone and everything they are near
a consumption which slowly exhausts
the lungs of the planet, and which
in time will turn its incredible
intricacy to a barren sandstone slab.
How dare they even set foot on its slopes
when they've dustbins full of black matter
and their radiators run on the heat death
of the universe.

*Besides, it stopped its pestering
in time; so they skipped the sequel,
refused to yield to questioning,
claimed their real world was more equal,
withheld its rocky history,
its craters, cracks, its depths, its core -
thus they dismissed the chemistry
and enzymes in the mountain's maw.*

*While life is like
a well-publicised hike
across an icecap
played out as ordeal,
you're well advised,
if you want to survive,
to try to treat
the adventure as real:
there's nothing to win
but the space between
the last hole you're in
and your might-have-been.*

Do not burn or place near excessive heat

alone, with every sound his own,

he shrinks away from the shout of the night,
grows still, grows threatened, grows small and contained,
just pressurised matter for aerosol cans;
evening fingers the clock, dead hands
numb and fumbling turn outwards,
tear silent screams from the air.

when the world ends, when he enters
the silence, when he is so amazed
to speak no more of brightness and burning,
of ashes and angels, then God and ape
will creep upon him unawares,
then, as he chokes to a hideous end
in guttering illiterate Latin,
he will wish to god he had never prayed.

he waits inside the deafening can
for these blunt receding edges to crush
him to vapour; the shrinking universe
grows overweight, and fearful poets
with words which once released the springs
of wonder, celebrate mass among
the dancing hands; so no one will hear
this thin pneumatic hiss as he jets
through the night in particles of spray.

spurge

The spurge is a plant between
spurn and purge,
and not even either of these.
It sneaks its frequency into our lives
like fruit flies, moss and myth,
seemingly sexless, flowers
like some other plant's leaves,
weak green till it wrinkles
and shrinks to winter's nil.
Its strength is insignificance:
next year its seeds will
heave aside the earth and shoot these
fragile fleshy surfaces from
every unfilled vegetative space.
and when we least expect, this weed
of disturbance, ubiquitous, defiant,
will come again and then again,
all spur and surge.

3. BATTLEZONES

*in the analytic time they came
they would ask how and why could they permit
politicians to manage the state?
to get where they are they must have the brains
to see the job is beyond all their claims;
it must be our fault if we can't admit
that too; so why would we choose to submit
to tyranny, except to pass the buck,
or because we dream we'd have more luck?*

*in the democratic time they came
post-modern critics give awards for fame,
philosophers unanimously think
they must retain their fellowships; solicitors
win cases at left luggage sales; soldiers
go blind and politicians do not blink.*

*in the nihilistic time they came
history resisted what the world called blame;
they heard it confirmed on the evening news
they saw it everywhere on pub rock posters;
truth took a ride on the roller coasters,
and promises returned as crossword clues.*

*in the altruistic time they came,
technology provokes everyone
to be witnesses to the smash and grab
on the premises it calls Planet Earth;
the evidence as usual is flawed
so press and state must tell us what we saw:
they know how evil drives a child to kill
they know why a woman tortures for thrills
(but please can we give them a few decades more
to discover what makes good people poor?)
Who needs to think, when crimes are so black
and beyond the imagination they lack?*

*in the time they came
like the last, like the next
the battlezones are drawn
and the world hangs on the edge:
history resists and the news excludes,
and Newsnight leads with all the young dudes.*

the vanquished

After we have vanquished the Communists,

Coke and Big Mac seize key street corners;
new states want aid - we airlift consultants,
the best our generosity can buy;
they need customers - we tame the means of their
production, factory by factory;
we want them to cherish independence -
which they do, five ethnic wars at a time.
And after the economic holocaust
drives the hard men from power, drugs trundle
up the Afghanistan road, and gangsters
give up government to take over the streets
with suits, Mercedes and liberated arms.
After we obliged the heirs of Stalin
to play their last grim hand of misere,
old men die of hunger in Moscow parks;
thousands disappear in Yugoslavia;
Albanian peasants start to feel poor.
So no one can doubt who has won the war.

After we have vanquished Communism,
Marxists slink from our universities,
abandon criticism and history.
Politicians ennoble ignorance
as righteousness, and unfold origami
policies on judges who use their own
judgement and priests who condemn the wrong sins.
Now equality is a calculation
which results from teaching children to add,
subtracting cash, and dividing the workforce.
Independent trade unions are suppressed
by their own free press; dissenters are barred
from political parties, and debate
breaks down in an empty hammering of shoes.
After the West breaks free at last from fear
of barbarous tyranny, it becomes
necessary to starve black refugees
or lock them up for years without trial;
Our state rediscovers the need to hold
dying prisoners in chains, and to wrench
babies from principled women using
insanity orders and surgeons' blades.
Secret service agents switch assignments
from spying in East Berlin to lying
in West Belfast, as eager as ever
to discredit the peacemakers' cause:
no one could doubt who's winning their wars.

war machines

In the war of someone else's independence

they chose computerscans of army HQ
and pressed the key marked "find";
in the war to safeguard oil
they shot a beam on a bunker vent
and told the smart bomb "fetch";
in the war to beat the solitary egomaniac
they hunted down two hundred thousand
with the finesse of a desert storm.

Your softspoken sister wrote the software code
which designed the guidance chips;
your brother-in-law helped the army load
the cargo planes with saline drips;
your neighbour threw a studio switch which showed
the world the bloodless newsreel clips;
and friends despatched supply trucks down the road
with biscuits, bombs and comic strips -
all for our cars to burn the oil that flowed
back home on peaceful merchant ships.

We all have sons, but *they* stayed in bed,
or they played guitar in a shopping arcade;
they spewed up their guts on Saturday night,
smoked dope with friends, shot up in a squat.
They're the Disappeared; they're gone.
They run the streets; they carry a gun.
The blame's all theirs, it's nothing we've done.

children on the edge of town

Children in a landscape danced in space
around a lone oak, improvising games
of cruelty and pre-pubescent lust,
boys-girls rolled together lost in magic.
Memories of that July jab into the bark
of their readable lives: the dying sun
ignites a single sense which is the scent
and warmth of bodies on chill earth and hay;
sometimes the bold ones enflamed by darkness
in nearby woods shared the secrets of each
other's almost innocent naked parts.

Then a man who was thirty years older
strode the grass, high on stilts of ownership,
preparing to build a housing estate.
They tore down his notice, and he bulldozed the field.
They ripped up the pegs which marked out his place
and he torched the jungle of their senses,
tarmaced over their imagination.
They smashed the windows too high to see through,

and he bricked up the dreams of childhood
in homes where they would live and a shopping mall.

Today, garden fences nudge the solitary oak.
There is no dancing here now.
TV chains the children like neglected dogs
in a sad back yards;
no one feels safe in these woods but junkies
and brave kids who fell trees to make dens
and light smoky fires in oakwood boughs,
while closed behind a thousand lonely doors
in rooms empty of anything but things
sit the displaced children of that older landscape.

We're drugged with yearning for or earning more
than we can ever need, diminutives
whose kindergarten destinies are worn
around our necks as long as each one lives.
it takes us half a lifetime, if we're strong,
to fit together what the fuck is wrong;
and when we do, each anguished, frightened, uptight
generation has stomach left for one more fight –
to keep it from the kids, how our wondrous species
has learned how not to learn, what a boon deceit is
for piling up the crap in which they'll have to stand:
family by family through the reptile land,
we abandon our young in shoreline sand, as sure
as we barricade doors to make ourselves secure.

It's the town which moves, not us.
Down the road two miles is another field,
and, after thirty years, another oak with children dancing,
learning the endless possibilities of their bodies.
Construction work is starting nearby,
and we look for something lost as the kids retaliate.

the trees in the park

First, when the crime figures rose in our town,
they dropped ropes from trees -
warnings mostly, more symbolic than real -
till one was caught in the act, some reprobate deed,
and strung up by the arms for two or three hours
"to teach him a lesson he won't forget".
The idea caught on, estate by estate;
it did no harm, our neighbours said, in fact
it spread community togetherness.
Then a joy rider who'd escaped the carnage
of his stolen car, died in tragic circumstance,

with his hands tied tight and wide and high,
splayed out in a tree against the sky, dead,
asphyxiated, like one crucified, they said.

Thus the public mood and appetite slued round:
when the next suspected rapist was guyed
on a parkland oak overlooking a children's
football pitch, the rope was taut and round his neck.
Police kept the crowds at bay, fearing
public order offences (though there were none).
Journalists jostled for camera spots
and parking shots, though it was deemed unseemly
that they should intervene. Councillors
in live and televised debate implied
the issues could be seen from two sides,
but nine out of ten townswomen and men
who held a view assumed their duty was
to execute.

Early concern that public vengeance might
get out of hand dissolved in time, and Action
Groups were formed to regulate the task,
to seek, by fair and democratic means,
nominations for the gallows, and fix
stringent limits on numbers dropped each day.
The Deputy Chief Constable relaxed
his formal reservations with offers
to contribute offenders' names and crimes
(the courts and gaols thus freed from doubt and stress
could concentrate on honest prosecution).
Council park men welcomed well paid sunrise
work with trees, cutting bodies down at dawn,
but down among the Civic Centre weeds
piranha potentates snapped and seethed
at wages bills and crematoria fees,
and stripped the issue to its barest bones:
"It's not our responsibility alone,"
they whined. "We need the Church to quantify
the worth of souls, the sanctity of life.
No matter how small or large the offence
we can't provide justice at public expense."

unrecognised bird in the dark

He went out Saturday night,
shoved a broken glass in his face,
his head into a wall,
and banged his hand in the door;
He forced himself to drink a urine-coloured

liquid till he passed out,
demanding to know, "who's hard now?"
Next morning in the chilling rain
he dragged his body into town,
to a tall building, with a long corridor,
and doors off every few yards
which he slammed in his face.
There were lifts, but he forced himself
to take the stairs, saying it would
"do you good, if you get our drift".
At the top was a dark room,
where he locked himself away
with loud pulsing music to beat him up
until he was prepared to confess.
Yes, but he still had his pride.
The walls were filled with giant
TV screens; every frame displayed
came from a different channel,
though somehow they were all the same.
He told himself repeatedly
he had to think fast to get out of this;
but that was all he could think about.
When hope started to fade
he asked himself what he needed to live,
since, whatever it was he wanted,
he couldn't have it; but in the end
he made himself forget who he was,
and that alone got him through.

changing trains

The place was so full of nothing like space
itself, like Crewe Station at 3 am,
and some late night spotters from western lands
were exchanging sagas of the far north.
The ordinary grew rarefied here
with news of strange locomotive movements;
but unlike times when traveller poets
silenced drinking cups to make myths in such
great halls whose roofs were lost in the smoke night,
these men lay out negligible details
on neon-lit refreshment bar tables.
No one listened as they guessed destinations.

But another guy scribbled among
empty coffee cups, emptied ashtrays,
the only one here truly alive;

he smiled, but earnestly, as if honesty
was about to be withdrawn from service,
and we might never have copped it at all.
"I'm writing," he'd say, if you'd only asked.
"It's a book - about what passes, what we see,
about the empty eyes of those who
stay awake all night by act of will.
It's a book about being, and being alone,
about a mountain, and living on the edge.
It's taken thirty years so far," he'd say.
"It's really a book on anything you like,
and everything which, if you like, you don't."
You'd have cursed beneath your breath if he'd spoken,
you, the undead, staying awake all night
by act of will, passing through and on the edge,
returning to live beneath the mountain.

A goods train stumbled by
bound for South Wales from the North;
the trainspotters ritually wrote a number -
it could have been any number,
it could be nothing.

4. CONVERSATIONS ABOUT LOVE

*The age they came came dark and slow and late;
the world, the bastard world, was full of hate:
what else was there to do but deprecate
its wrongs, and so confirm this dismal fate?
there was no consequence to saying no
to the brute jackboot of the status quo;
subjective good and bad still ebbs and flows,
so why not be right, and make the world know?*

*Certainty closes in with age, like death,
but understanding travels far, like love.*

melting in her arms

Atlantic gales crashed inland wiping the birds
aside, sucking the air up growling chimneys
as garden conifers swirled about and cursed
like flapping curtains, and dustbins rolled and drummed;
rains first smeared the distant hunchback forest,
then scratched out detail from the window view:
there is only one way to feel what is warm,

and that is to embrace the chilling storm.

The journey out is a fine grey line like foam
behind a sailing ship: the track splutters
with glistening pools on wet bare ground
which tacks from side to side on its ascent;
then wind barges in behind with the shove
of a slob in a crowd, half flounder, half
blunder – and anything not part of the earth
or fixed by roots or gravity is gone.

Higher in the sizzling forest, the fired
and orgiastic air finds shelter where
the ground and downpour churn and gorge themselves
and pound and plunder rills for rivers, streams
for molten torrents, where paths and grasses
sprawl and spurt and blurt in squalling courses,
and every inch of mountain pours and swims
in clumsy tumbling swelling overspill.

Everything is motion - roofs and rootballs shift,
lift, levitate to brave the boiling air,
pushed upward by the horizontal rain,
pulled downward by the saturated earth;
tangled, rolled, the tangible world crosses
out of matter into antimatter,
and slackens, vacillates, then passes back:
the whole mad mountain raves, runs out of meaning.

Then like some wild allnight group excesses
the senses coalesce: touching nothing,
every sharp nerve leaps and dulls to one
vague and instantaneous sensation,
as indifferent, undifferentiated
as this crazed gale, and as soon insensible;
the wind has no taste or smell, it leaves one blind,
all we hear is physical, air only.

Love is some such humbling reckless force
which subsumes the landscape and compels acts
that defy gravity: love unlatches doors,
abstracts us with its barewire excitement,
threatens danger, tempts with possibilities
propels us to heights, defies entreaties,
squeezes out the capacity for thought,
leads us back beaten, leaves us for dead.

Love too is earth and air, fire and water
the balance of impossibles that look
for footholds on the slope of Earth's rotation;

it's the edge of things that tends to create
sense - though not necessarily to make it;
it's the function and conjunction of two
wanting people, who hold on to be sure
they're burned or drowned or blown away together.

And what of those we'll never love because
we'll never meet them? Our morality's
another such riot of consent and wrong:
we declare our belief not in power but
power beyond us - till nothing is left,
and nothing's as deep as sex except death -
like poets who make their meanings obscure
only because they're afraid to be sure.

How strange that when we're old or cold enough
to know, our conversations about love
are so spare, so bared by the storm, forced below
ground by pounding water; instead we stand
at windows, watch rain and speak of death,
and ignore what it is to be human,
observing when someone we love is dead
only how much we left our love unsaid.

edge

It's the edge of things in time which begins
to make sense, like people in love or sin -
not the tyrannosaurus rex of words
that roars anachronistic fallacies
as if they were meanings, and not the words
misunderstood because they mean too much -
but the edge which she and he might sometimes touch.

It's the edge of things that tends to madness:
sharing and preparing food is a strange
stir fry of eroticism and parental care -
love is as much the washing up as not;
and then it's management for excitement,
finding space for what is unexpected
without either threat or expectation;
he pleads for the application of logic,
she for intuition: irrationally
they beat each other till both feel nothing.

It's the edge of things which makes you what you are
and it's the edge of things which tends to war:
ultimate identical twins, equal
and opposite, define the rest as fear;

perhaps a scent of bluebells that explodes
sudden remembrance of someone you loved.
or the fish which smoothes its fused flesh through lost
grey depths hearing with the ears of its body.

It's the edge of things that leaves you where you are:
fields fidget with a small twist of bird calls
at this thin end of the year, just a gasp
of rooks, and a stittering of sparrows
sift through the dark December afternoon,
remembering a wift of mayflower blooms
when the air clicked with birdsong;
like sunbathers by a burnt hotel pool,
the pace of dying slows to a faint heartbeat.
Is the mountainside such a dreadful place
that no living creature dares show its face?

It's the edge of things which makes them grow:
when they were young they stood up coins on edge
believing they possessed special powers,
they made tea-time dangerous as a window ledge
building salt-pepper-and-sauce-bottle towers;
they fearlessly laid halfpennies on the rails
for trains to enlarge to a half-crown scale.
now they see how funeral attendances
swell with youth and slim right down with age,
an indication not of what a corpse
is worth, but the worst fears of survivors.

It's the edge of things which ties you down:
morality's not a long game of Triv
or hopscotch on flagstones of evil and good,
but how we dance with the stumbling motives,
of everyone else who jumps or gets screwed.

It's the edge of things which set you free:
Shakespeare of course was just a mixed up
crazy guy or girl, living on the edge
of action and hooked on drama therapy.

if you want to live with Shakespeare
spilling love and blood on stage
you'll need Hitler and Atilla;
if you think respect is due to Newton
you'll need his cradle and old age,
you'll need Einstein and Charles Pooter.
*("I'll change the motion of the universe -
and I'll do it my way."*

*the obsessed scientist would say;
so thought stood still three hundred years and, worse,
when Einstein came along*

he proved the bastard Isaac wrong.)

It's the end of things which sets you free:
you count the cost of winter kicking leaves;
friends, relatives and lovers come and go:
the severity of all your partings
depends at last on how you comb your hair.

*The age they came everyone took living
to be forever. In the next, giving
will be compulsory, and "rich" is then
wholly synonymous with "citizen.*

*and in
the end
the evil that you perpetrate
is equal to the good you hate.*

It's the edge of things that tends to score.

5. THE FINAL ASSENT

*When the time came
before they went
they gave it a name -
the final assent.*

The light came in long and low from the east
like a space shuttle landing
filling the cold town with smiles,
leaving for the mountain.

relief

morning's opaque brilliance hangs
at windows shuttering the view,
and the sun steels the south out of sight:
he slips through the sunlight somewhere, watches
the dead weight of a bridge slung
across a canal clinging tensely
like a web between blades of grass;
factories and trees are pinned
against crisp skies; an anchored
high-rise slab sharpens in fragile
translucence above the town;

tar-bright street crosshatchings
wheel steeply out of the shade,
grabbing cars and swinging them off
down the free distance of their beams;
tall loose clouds scud over rooftops
in December's wind, and the day
shudders light and dark.

the year
has turned on itself, wire and taut,
and snapped the soft sun thread that held
the summer: today the sun remakes the world.

the bridge to another kingdom

down in the town
everyone has signed a pledge
to cultivate a nice square hedge.
but after the amber of autumn
a pool of brown leafslush
freezes beneath every tree;
then the track is shod with mud
and sludge run off from streams;
the factory is a throbbing drone below
like a far off goods train that passes forever
overlaid by a pulse of whines and screeches
and clutter and mouthings of heavy things dropped.

... osmosis, capillarity and flow ...
after rain, sometimes before,
water seeps endlessly to the heart of things.

Stumbling high in the woods an hour or so
they found a bridge to another kingdom:
above the boulder-bramble scrambling floor
two fallen trees sprawl - one a hulk of oak
clean wrenched root first, like an oafish tooth torn
from the forest's gum, one a brittle beech
snapped in the clicking fingers of a storm;
trunk on trunk span the cavity of green
-yellow clay, crash across a dry stone wall
hauled here before the mantle grew, and fixed
firm all the years by interlocking rocks
like field borders or boundaries of worlds.
Thorns and holly tangle the underwood
and bar all routes, even back; so the tall
and precarious slithering tree bridge
leads them away to freedom against the grade.

Over the border of science and order
they become the archaeologists of stars
who navigate by buried walls and paths;
dead vegetation rots back into life
molecule mashed and newly assembled
like the half-life of silence they have heaved
against the grain up this desolate hill:
it means nil, it means all, that they cross
as they cross, and cross back and then cross -
till those left behind record them as lost.

fort

A slant afternoon light flushes the summit
then fades again in sudden flailing snow;
cars like attendants of Beatrice were drawn
by the sun, their steel wings stealing its glory,
seven are parked among sheep, clamped by cold.
the world here at the top loses its point,
the breast of the hill flattens as she splays
back on the skyline, even her nipple,
erect at a distance, levels in profile
to unaroused undulating desert,
an horizon of featureless gravel.
the boundary of earth and air recedes,
it sinks, lifts, then cracks into a crater,
the desecrated grave of an ancient fort
in stones pecked clean by ice and rain;
rings of ditches ring out with the wind
and gather round a crumbling footworn mound,
a place where summer prints have stamped
a symmetry on a faint embattled shape,
where cameras came to print its dust on film,
and people came to film their feet in dust.
a plaque says it was wood, post holes were found,
the time Fourth Century BC; and that
is all the archaeologists can know.
but this is no castle, manor, tomb or church,
just one determined island of retreat,
no last and least defence when all was lost,
a summit, not a consummation,
charges in the ebb and flow of kingdoms,
a margin or a measured cost which might fall
or rise with no risk to the capital.
here's a trace, not a place of history,
a punctuation mark, but not a stop.
this brief eroded tale is incomplete -
who came? who stayed, who slayed? what name, what day?

no one remembers, no one imagines,
and no one has authority to speak;
so no one now commands this gaunt flat peak,
the sun dies, settling snow takes the landscape's
shape quietly; chilled cars weave back down the lanes;
the table top remains without remains.

exposure

Winter has slapped its hand on the shoulder
of the hill, above the warmth of hunched up homes.
Pylons stamp across the ridge stiff with cold
and promised power for another valley;
they turn, bent back against the numbing air
and vanish with intent. Dark and snow fall
faster, and exposed horses muzzle in
the rain-grazed grass, monumental, as if
sculpted from the coal of long abandoned spoil,
while sheep and sedge and trees and moss scrape
scant life from the frozen soil. Higher still
a cottage, ancient, indistinct, snugs
to the bowl of a shallow quarry; a wood
finds shelter on its niggardly patch, neglected
since planting, and green even at its lowest ebb.
The sheep there shrivel in their fleece against
the scouring wind, and shift at an approach;
a half-horned ram hangs back then lunges off.
Above, a crowfoot stream claws drifting snow
with frozen fingers at a sheer beginning.
The summit slides backwards in immensity
to limits of knowing and endurance.

the woodgatherer

the woods have filled with solid things;
the leaf mould is rock, the air is powder,
late afternoon is a grey frost glaze on every stick and stem.
inhaling is tangible in this cold-
clamped wilderness, where
any breath of life would be detected.

thus a man at work, bent and ancient,
becomes evident, collecting wood.
like an outcrop which emerged from the earth
before the beech and oak, he shifts along
the rocks and black bog ponds, stiff among stumps
and long abandoned sawyers pits.
he snaps the brittle branches with fingers
like exposed bones; the bark skin of his hands

cracks and wrinkles; his knuckles are raw
and red as carrion, his cheeks hoar
and frozen, and weathered to pain and ice.

leafless is also lifeless here.
if anything survives it is the pines
rising and resolved in skyward spires.
vast trunks below split open, the bark curls round
leaving merely the shells of trees.
a sheep's carcass, white teeth, white fleece, white bone
bleaches slowly to the texture of stone;
footfalls resound on the board forest floor;
dead matter lies intact; iced needles like
a needless snow delay decay, while whole
branches live on recognisably, hollow
memories of the years of falling.
the tall summer stalks - foxgloves, champions,
and willowherbs - grow crisp, brittle, black;
ragged broken trunks collapse underfoot,
and shrink in the presence of death,
empty except for dust.
this soil could still be food for living trees
if woodlands only died for next year's leaves.

the woodgatherer, all hessian and hunch,
half hauls, half drags his log-filled sack away
to his spluttering, dancing cottage grate
salvaging more debris than a tree
shrugs off in a lifetime - "you've got to be warm
in winter," he smiles, "when you're old and free."

the distant town spews vapour, fire and fume;
here all is earth, a crypt of ice and gloom.

the last tree on the hill

the last tree on the hill
is a still slant spill;

the last tree, still,
until ...?
it will last
if they will.

*Two people stand on a promontory
of affluence and hope,
overlooking the valleys below,
a white house fading behind them.
The evening light dulls colours,*

*and sharpens shapes:
trains come and go in the darkness
with unseen blunt purposes that shift
foreign goods across the nation;
the bushes harden to monoliths;
on the skyline, against the dusk,
stands the outline of a perfect tree.*

*The sky's not black but a hundred shades of blue
in the white open wilderness of the mountain plateau,
and a people stand on a promontory
taking the view from the end of the millennium:
a woman in a far off village
is coping with change and preparing to move home.*

secret II - leaving for the mountain

This is the time when even the air cries out
for rain; we have little else on our minds
day and night, except the rains, wondering
whether they will fall or fail like last year -
any week, any day now we will know.
though, if they come they will still be too late
for my little girl: she grew stick thin and died;
I have a new son, he is two months old
and he cries with hunger because my breasts
are dry and hard like the air and like the soil.
My dear mother is dying here with me;
my brother who left us last year is dead -
the news came that government soldiers
found a rebel hideout in the mountains -
he was shot with guns like ones on TV.
and now the soldiers are coming this way
we hear stories from distant villages
as people come and go looking for food;
the end of the war's far off, they say.
so we don't know what to do for the best:
we could stay here and hide till the danger passes
or go to the Food Camp which is seven days' walk,
but the radio tells us to stay away from the camps
because people there are dying of disease
as well as hunger; we could run to the hills
to be safe but the rebels have no food.

My mother says she will come with us,
wherever we go; but she is only
thinking of helping me to leave,
she will die by the road if we take her
or waste away here if she stays.

The aid workers have gone to the camps,
with the generator and the TV; I'm glad
I won't see the pictures they made of me.
the Big Man went with them,
and no one has stayed to advise us:
so the choice is entirely our own.
I don't know whether my husband is alive
and he can't know that he has a son -
some say he has joined the rebels and lives
in a house high in the mountains
nowhere is safe, but my job's to support
my family and find them food and water;
the dry heat weighs us down more than my pack,
or my son, or my hunger; the last sight
I have of home is earl y morning light
pouring on the deserted village tap
and splashing off the white walls of my house.
