

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white hoodie and large hoop earrings, is shown from the side, bowing her head back. The background is a solid, warm, orange-brown color. The lighting is soft and even, highlighting the contours of her face and hair.

BECOMING MORTAL

MICHAEL BEDFORD

BECOMING MORTAL

MICHAEL BEDFORD

Copyright © 2022 Michael Bedford.

All rights reserved.

Cover design by Michael Bedford

Book design by Michael Bedford

No part of this book can be reproduced in any form or by written, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information retrieval system without written permission in writing by the author.

Published by Michael Bedford

Printed by Book Printing UK www.bookprintinguk.com

Remus House, Coltsfoot Drive, Peterborough, PE2 9BF

Printed in Great Britain

Although every precaution has been taken in the preparation of this book, the publisher and author assume no responsibility for errors or omissions. Neither is any liability assumed for damages resulting from the use of information contained herein.

Age and experience.

Still no wiser.

Contents

When the Writer Makes the Text Speak to Us	1
Nosebleed	2
Autumn	3
Family Ties Thickening as I Grow Older	4
Mystery	5
Her Chequered Dating History	6
Useless	7
Giants of History, Brought Down	8
Extreme Politician	9
Choice Not Taken	10
Confession	11
Bar Set High and Followed	12
Margin	13
Pretend to Be Someone Else Entirely	14
Obituary	15
Rented Plot	16
Blanks	17
Awful Memory	18
Strange, Unexpected Poem	19
Upgrade	20
Span of Years We Occupy, Haphazardly	21
Verse Envy	22
Interview Overheard in Costa	23
Serbian War Criminal Makes Good in the West	25
Throwing Wood on an Open Fire	26
Dream	27
War Telegram	28
Burial Customs	29
Working in a Crowd, Together	30
Company Foolishly Buys in People With the Answer	31
Binding Actions to One Another	32
Fractal	33
Group Remembering the Traumatic Event	34

Triptych	35
The Fall	37
I Hypnic Jerk	38
II Meanwhile in Florence	39
III Tramp	41
IV Guilt	42
V Opus Dei and Others, Apparently	43
VI Drift	44
VII Pure	45
VIII Copyright	46
IX Dying Flowers	47

When the Writer Makes the Text Speak to Us

Of all things to acquire, the most ethereal.
Empathy: where could you use that other-worldly
gift of mind reading, where the bearer is able
to gain insight into what would otherwise be

the most hidden story – that of the inside line?
But occasionally, the humblest talent, power,
can be the one which makes the all-too fine
adjustment which elevates an ordinary writer

into an exceptional one. It is not about them
but us. We always make ourselves the subject.
If through that most human connection when
work is being written, any element can reflect

a deep emotion of our own, can spark
any measure of recognition, we are suddenly
opened up: the words leave their mark
on us. It is the reason we read so avidly.

Nosebleed

I remember I was in a rush. Usual struggle.
The night before had not been kind, a sleepless
tossing, turning time. I seemed to have the snuffles.
Sucked it up, manfully. A success.

Finished my ablutions.
Looked in a mirror to see my face
painted bizarrely. A clown. Two ribbons
of blood flowing down to lips, traces

daubed over fingers and hands haphazardly.
I had no time for this.
Left the bathroom with a cursory
hand clamped on my nose, any emphasis

still on drinking tea, dressing, getting through the door.
Then came the flood. Drips onto carpet
and down my shirt. Shit. This means late for work. As before,
a casual grip re-applied, one-handed, to stem it

or at least slow the flow. But it would not be denied.
Would have its moment. *You think me insignificant?*
Scarlet dye poured thickly as I tried
to control what had now become a torrent.

Got away from me. True, I had not paid the price
of due attention. But I know this stuff: applied pressure to soft parts.
The trick - to firmly apply a squeeze and keep a vice-
like grip longer than you think, beyond when it first starts

to abate. Let clot form successfully. Then return
to normal. Re-establish order. Dress. A harsh lesson.
Look after your main priority first; the rest must take their turn.
We are all hostage to the body's smallest insurrection.

Autumn

Frost scattered over the garden top.
With that icy blast, summer left behind, forgotten.
Dressed now in thicker, warmer livery. Larger pots
sheathed in bubble wrap – makeshift insulation.

Coats buttoned. Shadows more precise. A light
whose character changes overnight; harsher, less forgiving.
Garden debris. Bag filled to brim and yet slight.
Parchment leaves, once sturdy, lost at first reckoning.

It is the primacy of decay which defines the season.
Memory fails, strength declines, minor injuries linger.
With that change comes a call to reflection,
our senses focussed by the threat of winter.

Family Ties Thickening as I Grow Older

Name handed by my father begins to anchor me.
Roots grown stealthily

into soil of the past,
lives elapsed,

memories
dressed as monochrome photographs, newspapers, church registries.

Something set,
something inviolate

which is mine
yet beyond mine.

A mystery
as to how or why this hunger has measured me.

Mirror
clears as I move closer.

Context added, certainly.
Yet bound and limited by that history.

Shoulders that we stand upon
same shoulders we become.

Mystery

A leaf blown through an open window
settles on my desk. Is this destiny flexing
its muscles? Or simply the tidal flow
of a turbulent wind depositing

this limp, jade trinket upon a table?
I count three prongs. Two pale green
inset with darker veins. Colour stable
against first signs of decay seen

at its ragged edge marching inward.
Third prong completely tan.
Holds no pretence as it hurtles towards
a final, desiccated state. Did it land

here haphazardly? Or did fate
decide to deposit this strange prompt?
Message? How we must not hesitate,
live life while we can? An attempt

to demonstrate decay and mortality?
Or do I too easily ignore random chance?
Aspire to a larger, grander picture? To be
part of a constructed, curated existence

which can make sense from otherwise
strange happenings. Thought cut short
as a door blows shut after which, must revise
my opinion. Clearly, the leaf caught

by an updraft and innocently blown in.
Yet as I look again, its background
changing. So quickly. Fabric visibly declining.
Second prong turned completely brown.

Her Chequered Dating History

Talk to me of love and I will listen
but will not join in. The fault in me.
With you, nothing hidden or unspoken.
I can bathe in your river vicariously.

You are love's first fool. Buffeted and torn down
yet reinvented again as if never injured.
Resilience your miracle. Seed sown
deep in you, rooted, to keep you protected.

A harsh existence: I do not know
how you climb such slopes, breathe in that airless state.
In you, hope in all things. How faith can grow
on the barest ground, replace and reinstate

every shred of innocence you would presume lost.
A lesson in persistence – in the grace of expectation.
Both in awe and appalled. A heavy cost.
Cannot see beyond the pain or casual rejection.

Useless

The list grows fat and ugly. Towers
over me. Larkin's toad with all-too broad arse
squat upon unused yet disappearing hours.
Progress feckless: arrives in fits and starts.

Want a job finished? Go ask a busy man.
Not one entangled in poetry, philosophy,
price of abstract fish. Man to make a plan
and stick to it. Skills learned on a father's knee -

practical stuff and other such crap. Poverty a cure.
No slippage when hunger comes to call.
Keeps you focussed. Try making obscure
points when those gnarled hands cup your balls.

Lay poets end to end, light a fuse, and run.
Explodes like a fart. Noisy. But no damage done.

Giants of History, Brought Down

Our gods vulnerable.

Literary, political. With little effort
and sleight-of-hand we are able
to reduce them to our level. We sort

their strengths and weaknesses
from the perspective of our own days
so as time progresses
they accumulate an array

of fresh imperfections with which to smear
their once-revered bones.

Naming alone serves to clear
any stubborn doubt away. We cast stones

in ever increasing volleys. Look around!
Hundreds line to second-guess
what they really said or meant. Sound
of statues tumbling, relentless.

All our own reflection.

A need for idols; another to dissect
and demolish. They draw attention.
Lightning rods – a screen with which to project

our own beliefs or failings.
As with parents – the same stupidity -
unable to forgive them for not being
who we think they should be.

Extreme Politician

For want, say, of a moment's consideration
which would sway the argument in their favour,
dog with bone, their exclusion
of any other view, with all the fervour

entrenched in a fanatic or freshly converted,
frustrates the more even-minded viewer
who glimpse a frightening certainty imbedded
in them. Any gain lost for a measure

of flexibility. A door to which they have no key.
Instead, they knock louder. If they did gain power
what then? The next dictator? Revealed as visionary?
Star unlikely to escape their obdurate nature.

Choice Not Taken

A sense, portent, when it is time
to move on. Often our will not strong
enough to act upon such signs so we decline,
reasoning our judgement wrong,

how all good things deserve *one last chance*.
It can be a defining moment of a life. We know
the truth of it. Our reluctance
born of inertia, safety of the status quo,

rather than any persuasive argument.
So there we are: common sense, our best advisor,
side-lined in favour of the expedient.
We step forward to deliver

a timeline, discounting, to keep us there. Occasionally,
blind luck may force our hand,
but is far too fitful to be relied upon. We
find ourselves in open land,

not committed to either flank. Task
then, to make the best of it, matter
beyond reprieve. Later, we will ask
if this another excuse but not listen to the answer.

Confession

The huff and puff of certainty
excludes indecision.

Cannot see

a dilemma or debate. Holds its fixed position

against the flow.

While others in a struggle

to include every facet or argument go

to extraordinary lengths to juggle

unresolvable elements

into a coherent whole.

Impediment

to an easy life. Intellectual rabbit hole

in which to fall. And though it would be great to have no doubt,
cannot find anything, literally anything, to be certain about.

Bar Set High and Followed

Kitchen

marbled with desire
seared through,
skewered to the regular customer,
tourist, owner,
aspires
to the finest cuisine.

Newspaper

drowned in printers' ink,
litigation, lawyers,
reduced to hawking its name on street corners
implacably linked
to the truth, constructs story,
headline, faithfully.

Policeman

bound by regulation, damned by contempt
still, fully,
in the face of any onslaught, fury,
attempts
balance, checks.

All three

a similar creed,
run though
by comparable steel,
grounded by circumstance, money, life's unreasonable needs,
but vision,
acuity,
tuned precisely.

Just enough

their common enemy.

Margin

The gulf between
a child's outstretched hand
and a mother's grip;
swimmer too far from land;

unexpected illness
to final breath;
smile
worn for the outside world and depth

a mind can plummet;
from the time that we first notice
to
the later, formal diagnosis.

Often, that's how it is.
Walls we construct to feel safe within
revealed
as pitifully thin.

Pretend to Be Someone Else Entirely

In drifting between sleep and full awakening
embrace a dream. Think of unlikely things
marked only by scant chance of ever happening.
Weigh what your wish might bring

both good and bad. And in that bodiless state
let thought and structure wash away
to reach a place in which you can relate
to all aspects of change, assume any shape, play

any part in that story of your own creation.
Next, move too-and-fro. Flex your adopted cage.
In doing so, understand its joys and limitations.
Measure your real life against that marriage

of longing and avarice; a fresh script.
An exercise for oneself: to look through the eyes
of our desires - wear a coveted life to find it
a false fit – revealed as one of our many lies.

Obituary

The arthritis in her grasp slipped free.
It pared the pale smooth cartilage
from frail joints,
cut the string between wrist and finger,
pulled a bow spine taut.
Her walk splintered into fragments,
each drift of rootless foot a victory.

Yet still unfinished.
As a sculptor, carved remorselessly
and plunged her into earth
having tempered the body,
shaped her as an ivory trophy.

Rented Plot

Allotment people are strange folk.
An unwritten bond between a gardener and land
reaches deep into history. Timeless
procession of a surly, soil-stained, gnarled band

of rogues guarding their own principality.
My family among them. Lose all reason
when potatoes pop their leafy heads up.
Talk of the competition season

when Fred had his marrow squashed
and Ted, king of runner beans, stays
up all night lest a rival digs them up.
Whispers of growth hormone and banned sprays

which Ted dismisses, but his produce
can't be carried - only moved by trailer.
Life is like that. Our obsessions, insecurities, when planted,
tended, watered, they often tend to grow larger.

Blanks

An extravagance of time to fill,
determined to build a body.
Seashell for skull (pretty, spacious),
pearl necklace strung loosely

for spine (lovely, white); bones which in
real life break and crumble
replaced by steel offcuts
(which are far more durable).

A heart of elastic
to bounce back
from an unfulfilled relationship
or other setback.

And so it might prosper
in an ill-tempered world, pasted in
a lemon tongue
sour enough for any conflict or arguing.

Finally, a soul. Many noted
it only comes pre-packed
supplied by them.
Those contracts

declined. I need a fresh one
bespoke and guilt free.
One for a new age. Not
wiped on the arse of history.

Awful Memory

Cigarette coupons once all the rage.
Stored in boxes
as Monopoly money or unpaid taxes.

They would save all year
then post to a secret site.
In time, a toy or present would appear.

Glow worms shed their paper skin,
malicious seed
planted deep within.

All the while
a son, impatient, shrill,
exhorting them to greater efforts, still.

Strange, Unexpected Poem

Who fears the attention and rewards success can bring?
People eager to read your work, or the exquisite moment
when voices rise as one to say, *This is really amazing!*
From nowhere, to a readership hanging on every comment.

The stuff of dreams. But consider if this scene became real.
Volatile gifts of appreciation, sales, acclaim, planting a seed
inside an already pliable mind, bedding in, so when the wheel
turns, lines emerge constrained by literary ambition or need

to protect a reputation. As if writing not already hard enough.
Word for poetry, next for critic who doesn't care what you say.
Shackled by subtle coercion; reduced to half-hearted stuff
with no pleasure in the making or reading. Joy, ebbing away.

A freedom in benign anonymity. No intrusive limitations.
Of course, no such issues currently. Few submissions kept.
No need to face the drive to please or pressure of expectation.
A simple prayer. Lord protect me from the Hawthorn effect.

Upgrade

Stone rolled against a door
a lack of opportunity to walk in
and help the occupant to their feet.
After all, what are we doing

if not exploring every scenario
to its logical conclusion?
Adjust your visor, re-boot the software,
you can be there. Put on

earphones and push your lever
to feel the full effect.
No longer necessary to travel.
The need to analyse and dissect,

rummage for your own path,
made redundant by our team.
Relax. Enjoy where we can take you.
Sail the sea of data we can stream.

We will fulfil all your needs.
And if at any time you should wander
our protocols, tested, reliable, will track
you down, to return you to our centre

where we can discuss with you
the seriousness of your error.
Meanwhile, the resurrection
package, as described, is now on offer.

Span of Years We Occupy, Haphazardly

An accidental string of occurrences and circumstances
linked on a dotted line of time to form a life?

Or is it nothing like that? Starting from crowning
to last vestiges and beyond - joy, fear, love, strife,

in varying measure - perspective shifting and evolving.

What is the overarching pattern? Hidden plan?

More complex still, the lens by which whole is weighed
forever flexing, focus lengthening. Never time to stand

to take the view. Morals, laws, clothes, behaviour,
passing things. Firm as shifting sand. Nothing fixed.
Final reckoning, when we try to find a closing score,
where is it? No two religions which don't contradict.

Verse Envy

To weave a thought so elegantly,
work of a master.

Shapes
role and structure

to receive the words
who then conceive
twists and turns of such dexterity
it is difficult to believe

a hand has strung together
that ribbon intentionally,
that it has not occurred by chance,
the subtlety so rich it could not be

constructed by deliberate plan.
Collision
of script and stage
resolved to create that crafted vision

inside of us.
A lightness, yet complexity.
No fat on bone. No ego.
Lines bound in service of the story.

Interview Overheard in Costa

Beaming smile with sparkling eyes
it begins. She, young, fresh from university;
he, older, early twenties. She buys
time in classic fashion: a prepared summary.

He starts talking while she picks up
on every prompt, each nuance returned
with interest. At one point a round-up
of relevant experience unfurled

to make a telling point. His voice monotone.
No peaks or troughs. If impressed, he gives no sign.
She is bubbly, on high alert. Roams
the skies as a kite waiting for a tug on the line

to descend to earth. As their meeting runs,
he begins to fade badly. She dominates.
Overpowers his weak questions
until she controls the agenda. Left to state

qualifications and experience without any answer.
Evaluation derailed. Lob-sided. Spaces
grow longer. By right, he expected to be the master
but now bereft of role. Drifting. Aimless.

Power: a surprisingly, subtle thing. The dynamics
involved. Professional, positional - who we devolve it to,
who we do not. Confused, they quietly panic,
unable to resolve the impasse they have stumbled into.

Extra-ordinarily, he summarises every word she has said
as if she had not heard them. Back on safer ground
they move forward. Lead agreed and re-instated.
She nods avidly, and more cautiously steps around

anything contentious – sweet spot reached.
He speaks vaguely on opportunities.
Does she practice what she has just preached?
Put theory into action? Difficulties

apparently forgotten. Time expired, he goes.
She lingers. Checks her phone. Walks slowly
as if exhausted. Job on its way? Who knows?
I note he didn't shake her hand and departed quickly.

Bad signs. Worse, revealed his own inexperience.
Looks hopeful but I don't think she will get an offer.
Regardless of her own qualities and performance,
will choose someone he thinks he interviewed better.

Serbian War Criminal Makes Good in the West

Windows in forgotten places
lined with unknown faces

recounting stories, scenes, terrible happenings.
But there will be no legal reckoning.

Archaic, brutal, blood feuds
resolved in locked rooms accuse

in whispers now. Their voices
diminish as time passes

as he knew
they would. What do you do?

Living in the overhang,
constructing a new life knowing

that obscenity
never more than a rogue thought away.

Others may hope
against hope

a half-remembered moment
might trigger some small measure of torment,

that such crimes must be
called, perpetrator not walk free.

That would mean overwriting
this imperfect, fractured world with wishful thinking.

Guilt probably not in his compass.
Sat here. Smiling. Talking. One of us.

Throwing Wood on an Open Fire

It is not in the calling, or in the answering,
or in the inelegant
refusal to take part in,
or the way in which each question
is an invasion
of territory,
it is the shift in energy
by which even a small comment
is magnified intensely
to become the most unbelievable affront
which most concerns me.

There is no dealing
with an argument
eager to happen,
better to batten
any hatches and release my plan
firmly, accurately,
then run for safety
as when lighting fireworks
or as an arsonist does
torching a factory
for insurance money.

Perhaps the building
when lit, will burn quietly.

Dream

There is no hope. The best of us
dressed and undressed in that simple
state. Captured between unconscious
sleep and awakening we have filled with symbol

and an ocean of imagining.
In this fugue, are refused
our will. Instead, rely on what mind might bring
looted from our actions. Reduced

to the ridiculous or elevated. Themes
which entangle us, too senseless
to reconcile themselves. No means
of escape, we are rendered defenceless.

The price to pay
for passage. An actor
stumbling through our own play
speaking lines, we can't remember.

War Telegram

Envelope

exploding onto streets with weeping

it seemed would never stop.

Echoed by other, similar detonations. That devastating

line of friendly yet anonymous fire

would not cease until

due diligence paid, mourning

delivered, all in bodiless state, unable

to beautify, buried incomplete.

Shadow over town and countryside.

Families behind curtains

in terror should a postman slow or stop outside.

Burial Customs

I have not been there since his dust was sown.
It does not seem to me to be of note
where the ashes of a life may be thrown
whether on unknown fields or streets he knew.

Why visit there? What might I hope to see?
Not the substance of stone or sepulchre
you could somehow invest with mystery
and in its mortar place a fragile trust

so you might rest assured *They only dream.*
But scattered over an unyielding ground
assuming no identity or scheme.
Surely, hard to remember there or mourn,

remnant dispersed in anonymity.
A reminder of what I must become,
inheritance of life's one certainty.
Page of my own life unwritten as his.

Working in a Crowd, Together

great for heavy weather: when the cosh thrown hand to hand.
Do you remember when we pulled that all-nighter?
Pressure on. Usual dross. Did we understand
the importance? All pleasantries flushed down the crapper.

False camaraderie upstairs gone at first hint of failure.
When the screws are tightened, up to us to deliver.
Sapling, threadbare, started here, passed on to Australia,
then America and back to Blighty, tree fully grown in under

twenty-four hours. A little pruning, tidying, and hey presto!
Team dancing foot to foot, arms aloft, just like a boxer
after working ten hard rounds towards a knockout blow,
or sweeping move when a ball flies to the top corner.

Debrief follows. What's this? All down to senior leadership?
When we fail, we do so individually; success spreads so much wider.
To garner credit for another's victory a common characteristic
in a leader. We should not grieve. It is human nature.

Company Foolishly Buys in People With the Answer

They brought in the professionals, big hitters, men and women of reputation - immaculate credentials. Think track record heavy with tales of past conquests, profits, beginning to plan already, a winning mentality, assured to move us forward.

Past duly blamed. Of course, the staff need pruning, shaping to a vision. God bless progress. Any questions seen as reoffending, not buying into what we should be selling. Again, short months in, the chasm between expectation

to delivery as wide as it has ever been. All hope of recovery invested in messiahs, who are suddenly fallible. Same old errors. Why did they endow them with superhuman powers, invincibility? They are just like us but dress more cleverly in smoke and mirrors.

Binding Actions to One Another

to make the world move faster when the force of a single event does not matter, not enough substance, weight, to push a lever to set wheels in motion individually because the moment of inertia is too strong, welded in position, but bound together

and suddenly the leviathan, once thought to be immovable, starts to stumble, to slowly move on, then pressure soars to the point where progress cascades over itself, unable to resist the momentum, and from that energy, regime falls,

walls come down, man walks on the moon, segregation abolished. System shifts to new resting state. A triumph of resonance over lone voice, how waves align and combine, how when established amplitude is magnified by virtue of constructive interference.

Fractal

Chaos the seed, base equation, set running, spreading exponentially beyond computer screen - every new fibre, iteration, standing on a previous one, perpetual motion, growing, never, never, randomly to ensure a field is filled, kernel replicating, until we stop upon

an image to draw our sense, to lift a message from it. Once more, edges spread irresistibly on, scales viewfinder and beyond. Eye follows new layers, a reflection of precisely ordered perfection, built before. Through all of this, energy explodes, as if its growing mass knows

the line of least resistance, spreading, searching, towards an ending when it will rest, exhausted by fashioning its own infinity. Then, what will we make of it? Simple or beyond understanding? Our vision too parochial in scale to see it in entirety.

Group Remembering the Traumatic Event

All in it, as one, the period of testing long since come to conclusion,
the circumstance that set them in that battleground,
in such proximity, that forged a link in that awful cauldron,
so strong as to be carried on in freedom. A strict alignment only found

shaped by fear and desperation. When an overseeing hand
so overpowers a congregation, hostage, victim, survivor,
that in unspoken opinion, they, and only they, can ever understand
that situation, what they went through, the awful terror

which underwrites them. Now, protectors of that history,
so when they congregate in remembrance of that occasion,
every person becomes the balm, supporter, reliquary of the story,
but together, grief is cherished, built on, lost to personal reflection.

Triptych

I

Time can be measured in pain,
days between a bandage being changed,
or tablet checked against a confusing regime.
Carefully calculated, but not arranged

to suit anybody.

Whereas a kidney dish is just that. A silver
mould, half-bean, filled with forceps
with saline solution under a half-bean cover.

All placed
in a bedroom filled with sheets.
Piles of sheets. As if an artist had staged the room.
Scene precisely arranged, complete

with *figure reclining* or *at leisure*.

Tiredness too. And sleeping.

Both rest and distraction. Go find a pillow.

An exhausting business sometimes, dying.

II

Room sited next to a nurses' office.

Frail woman, alone in a bed resting.

Cracked lips moistened, catheter draining piss,
skimming consciousness and intermittently fitting.

Clean sheets and linen can only go so far.

Any sense of satisfaction withheld.

A ruthless reminder about what we are.

Fragile. Time limited. All too easily humbled.

How do you outpace a scene so awful?
Life oblivious to reason; can be that savage.
Our implacable host will do what it will
despite fairness, balance, or collateral damage.

III

A turning of eyes, yellow stain,
invokes the law of declining return.
No further land mass can be gained.
No matter what the intake, fat will burn.

Don't search for logic here.
There is no script – a random fall of days.
Any thoughts of justice disappear.
No bargains to be made, no cards to play.

Who would ever take a hand,
place that hand hard upon their heart,
and swear they understand
the clarity of purpose, even in part?

The Fall

I Hypnic Jerk

Drifting into a dream, pulled back to plummet down
upon a bedspread. Made no sound,

no reciprocal bounce to support the lie
I had plunged earthwards. The reason why

as obscure as ever.
Some say never

involving flight but physiology.
Muscle tone too highly

strung for sleep. I prefer my own version.
Set off for heaven

but snoring and dozing
not reliable wings.

Bailed out long before
the point of no return, a mattress floor

soft enough to gather
any accelerating earth-bound matter.

Perhaps in that, the most important part.
How we choose to interpret or take events apart.

Whether we apply a cold, scientific objectivity
or dress them in our own mythology.

Allow a rounding up or down of facts,
to ease our burden, absolve our acts,

or accept any guilt or regret on offer. Aside from slumber,
some falls more catastrophic, life-changing, than others.

II Meanwhile in Florence

The consequence of sin they said
through glorious art, figured and transcribed
under a watchful eye. Sinner led
to the bowels of hell, duly tried

and convicted. How we bow to other's views.
How influence and conviction
can build a landscape so eloquently, permeate through
a mind, an era, into another, so their convention

becomes the accepted. How angels
adorned with halos, people miraculously floating,
can hand down divinity in angles
perfected by Brunelleschi, by masters painting

how they themselves were taught. In those building blocks
a literacy handed over, whole. And no matter
how you struggle, adapt, or rebel, that stock
vision starting point for whatever follows after.

A single thread part of a broader tapestry.
Look. See Medici staring at you painted
into eternity, guiding-bribing the brush directly.
How power can place you with the anointed

part of greatest catalogue ever, yet tainted
by that conceit. Church no less an author
of what to be included.
In the presence of such genius, churlish to offer

caveats or cries of sophistry,
yet how skilfully they packaged what they
wanted us to see. How do you split message from artistry?
From brushes dipped in magnificence, a morality play

smear'd into an observer's malleable eye. Suffice
to say that nothing is what it appears to be.
Lessons sewn in canvas, doctrine mixed in pigment. Dice
we roll loaded by our forebears with deftness and subtlety.

III Tramp

On the cusp
between final descent
to irreparable damage
while still decent

enough to sit in company.
Stares through a window.
Buys no drink.
Staff know,

yet glide past
in denial.
All young women
not willing to indulge in the trial

of strength which might ensue
should they bother
or admonish
their most unprofitable customer.

There is a language
those about to die speak.
In wordless speech
he reeks

of it.
Staring intently
though there is nothing obvious
outside to see.

IV Guilt

Who would assume that yoke willingly?
Yet we do, in all circumstances, in every way.
Why accumulate and regurgitate what
we say or even dare to think into that melee

between exemplar we hope to become
and who we really are? An empty vessel
echoes when hit: we are so full of self-pity
and shit we ring with a dull thud, unable

to leave any failure behind. I accuse parents.
I know people who can barely breath
from the binding applied. From infancy, told
they are not worthy. Now, all they believe.

V Opus Dei and Others, Apparently

Self-flagellation not all it is cracked up to be.
Mortification of flesh comes well down a list
of sensible acts. What about, say, change prospectively,
make yourself better? An important point missed

quite theatrically. Here we are, thrashing ourselves
just in case. A painful, strange business. In this smug
state, what? Absolution? As if that battering resolves
anything. Theory, in part, through pain we shrug

off sin, or at least put a down-payment in. A direct debit!
The medieval mind insane at times. Obsessed
we are corrupted and unworthy. If so, what's the point of it?
Do your best. Intent. What else can be demanded or assessed?

VI Drift

Not the precipitous event they say it is.
Who has not seen statues and paintings
dedicated to that tribal act: repentant
sinner offering prayer whilst prostrating

themselves? Far from true.
An artistic trick, mere dramatization
to engage a gaze or gather interest.
Insidious at best. A conclusion

which builds itself accruing over years.
When you look back to the start,
compared to where you currently are,
to see the incline where paths part.

An inevitability then?
Duplicitous road, seductive path no map
can follow? How you must become bound
to a route, push through, with no way back?

Is that the way of it? All action engenders
that absurdity? Without mud, sod, and clay
there is no travel – a parochial life – but cannot
finish unstained when the journey underway?

VII Pure

Absolved of all crime, clock turned back,
stands the innocent, barely two sins
to rub together. Dressed in a sack
like spuds, no cultured cloth to touch skin

lest the stain of a sweatshop pollutes
that porcelain. Again, as potatoes
do, feet rest on ground. Two pink roots
for want of a shoe. Leather no

good you see, and plastic, well, infamy.
Wind blows, rain falls, dare not move
at all. Dies. Pneumonia the cause. Still free
of sin but not breathing. What does that prove

if anything? Later, an unmarked grave
so crowds can't pilgrim around, sift through
bones, worship anything found. No-one saved
or any merit in it. Something to aspire to?

VIII Copyright

Where did this blood-stained cloth first appear?
When I was young no doubt, bootless, figuring
nothing out, history whispered in an ear
the narrative, complete with villain and intriguing

rags to riches story with gruesome ending.
First act shot and in the can, got ahead
of the competition by people ascending:
from there, networked, publicised, word spread.

Script since amended and re-written.
Remakes undertaken by all sorts of directors
so in at least one offshoot, crucifixion
scene omitted completely in favour

of a far more family-orientated version.
Straight to syndication. Every new series
royalties roll in, producers denounce revisions
not licensed by them. One of their great worries

to lose control of a franchise. Then what?
Risk people watching the original run, see
bootleg tapes, even an altered plot?
All sure they own the one true story.

IX Dying Flowers

The vase has been left too long. Petals dipped
falling away from sun. Bloom transformed
into a paler, more dour display. Vigour stripped
so the rod-like shoots which formed

that skyward bountiful first thrust of growing
now bend silently as if in prayer, heads bowed.
Leaves no longer firm. Last vestige of life ebbing
they cloak the body in a drained, green shroud.

Yet there is beauty here. A shabby elegance
in that inevitable decline. Battle lines drawn
on careworn frame, each furrow presents
its own history. And much as we might mourn,

purpose discharged. Stems clumped together
to be discarded, tipped from glass captivity.
Although faded, blossom perished forever,
we strive to remember their younger glory.

Time can be measured in pain,
days between a bandage being changed,
or tablet checked against a confusing regime.
Carefully calculated, but not arranged

to suit anybody.

Whereas a kidney dish is just that. A silver
mould, half-bean, filled with forceps
with saline solution under a half-bean cover.

All placed
in a bedroom filled with sheets.
Piles of sheets. As if an artist had staged the room.
Scene precisely arranged, complete

with *figure reclining* or *at leisure*.
Tiredness too. And sleeping.
Both rest and distraction. Go find a pillow.
An exhausting business sometimes, dying.

from 'Triptych'