

MICHAEL BEDFORD

Long Poems and Series

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Published by Michael Bedford

Printed by Book Printing UK [www.bookprintinguk.com](http://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.

Acknowledgements and thanks are due to the editors of the following in which some of these poems have appeared:

*Artful, Envoi,* and *The Black Mountain Review.*

Sometimes experience is too hard won.

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# London

## Bloomsbury

Today I will walk down Marchmont Street

not from any particular want or need

but because it is there, and at dawn the roads

are mine alone, and sometimes I cannot sleep.

Silence before the storm. While at King's Cross

the bustling crowds will have long since slipped away

leaving only tramps at rest in shop doorframes.

In my wandering, perhaps I will stray

into Russell Square. Dream of Woolf and Bell

lost in some bookish fantasy or such,

as the underground starts to throb and pulse

and work with its foul breath taps its watch.

Dawn Raid

Suddenly gulls. They are flying blindly.

They are mad lost gulls adrift from shore.

Maps abandoned, aloft in darkness singing

an unseemly melody. Their cry disturbs me,

I awake thinking it is Whitby. They have fooled me.

Tell it to a friend - gulls here in Bloomsbury.

Will not believe me. Makes a liar of me.

Throats spiked they soar silently, stealthily,

unerring gull bullets shot ceaselessly.

I am still in Whitby. No-one to believe me.

I have heard gulls in Bloomsbury.

In Bloomsbury. Inland. Far from sea.

## Breakfast at Euston

A cold day on Woburn Walk. Staff begin

to serve the hardy customers sitting

outside the cafes. Tables aligned in

snug rows, barely noticed by the jostling

commuters who filter through the tight street.

Then a tramp arrives. Clad in congealed clothes

begging for change or scraps of food to eat.

He moves towards a lone diner who knows

the beggar will not leave without a fee.

The diner pretends to be unaware

of his presence but when the beggar sees

his indifference he leans over, stares

at him and screams that he is starving. Yet

the diner does not pay. The man bellows

as loudly as he can. To no effect.

The noise alerts people. Passers-by slow

as the aimless chatter of the other

diners, lost in their daily ritual

of fresh croissants, subsides. Morning papers

lower as they are caught in the battle

of wills now raging between the two men.

It is silent. All discourse replaced

by mute glances. The tramp shouts his case - then

the implacable response. In the face

of this relentless onslaught, the diner

starts to curl up until hunched horribly

across his table. At last, a waiter,

alerted by the noise, comes out to see

what is happening and moves the tramp on.

The commuters who had been stood watching

turn and edge forward again as along

the lane, people discuss their strange morning.

The diner, visibly shocked by events,

pretends to be unconcerned. When finished

rises slowly to maintain his pretence,

then goes. Soon winter will come in earnest

and snow will fall making a mockery

of the white dust sprayed over the shop fronts

as in some Dickensian fantasy.

Damp, windswept days will force the restaurants

to keep the metal tables and chairs stacked

in lines along the wall. To abandon

their pavement service until spring is back

and the harsh weather begins to lighten.

## Working Girls

A cheap hotel in Belgrove Street.

Not stylish. A place to unload

life's debris. Toothbrush, clothes. To sleep.

At the lower end of the road

stood the underground. Its gullet

fit to burst each weekday morning

I walked to work. Narrow inlet

stuffed with crumpled bodies spilling

in a convulsive overflow.

Once cast aside an unguarded

glance. A smile at a stranger, no

more. Brief courtesy extended

continued through the dense crowd. Tried

again, to be on time. Instead,

an unseen hand grasped mine. Surprised,

I turned. *Do you want sex?* she said.

From then walked as the natives do.

Gaze stooped to avoid a loose eye.

Smiled knowingly at tourists who

might stop to talk if asked the time.

Late evening, the flood diminished

to fitful stream. Lone travellers

hauling bags, sightseers exhausted

from their wandering, labourers

tracking home. The traffic steady,

subdued. Small groups congregated

by the side road or library

windows. The under-hang sheltered.

The girls small, mostly slightly built

wore creased sweatshirts with trainers or

pumps. If cold, thick wool coats or quilt

jackets. No pretence of glamour.

The tide surveyed for single men.

Their attention flitting, faithful

only to those stood half-hidden

from view, presence invisible

until an argument arose.

The approach: cigarette needing

a light perhaps. When distance closed,

*I do Spanish, oral, rimming.*

A scrag end trade. That patch surely

its meanest edge. Faces ashen,

young. None mature. Absence maybe

testament to its attrition.

Sometimes the police arrived. By van

or in pairs on foot from Gray's Inn.

Blue gilets surrounding a man

as I walked by. A stern warning

or even an arrest. Duty

discharged, they would return to base.

The void around so stealthily

formed, edge lined by watchful faces,

would re-fill as the crowd drifted

back. Soon it would be as before.

When they returned - scene repeated.

Incoming waves repealed once more.

I passed one couple bartering

a price. He, short, well built. Figure

defined by a stained ill-fitting

shirt stretched uneasily over

his large build. She wore a yellow

anorak and had visibly

dirty hands and face. So much so,

that you noticed she was filthy.

You wondered why she looked like that.

Didn't clean herself. Points shouted

so those near could clearly hear what

the terms, details were. Undaunted,

they argued. There were no happy

endings there. No respite. The cold

pricing of a commodity,

no more than that. Goods to be sold.

By autumn I had changed hotels.

A much better room in Cartwright

Gardens. Swapped sirens for the yells

of students shouting late at night.

Good natured stuff. Harmless banter.

My route to work and the Friday

train home also new. Much nicer

than before. Good shops, takeaway,

tennis courts. You could stop to talk

or give directions. No need for

lowering your gaze as you walked,

to muse on what had gone before -

what events had led to that place,

the possible explanations.

Nor to deal with my own distaste

or uneasy fascination.

Yet though there was no reason why,

I would occasionally contrive

to pass there. Still astonished by

the brutality of their lives.

# On Permanence

# and Passing

## Deep Clean

Who remembers the dead?

Turbulence in the air, pictures,

a child grown in their own volley

of rant and passion?

Are they tied to walls

some mad photograph

captured in brick dust print?

Reaching from behind tarnished

silver and etched glass?

Entwined in branches of trees

sown as wood headstone?

Not this house, not now.

Not birds: crow, finch, rook, or magpie,

no-name birds plunderers of any palm.

Not plants: Alchemilla, juniper, mint or thyme.

I saw what they had grown

and dug it up.

Stripped walls to blank plaster;

painted battered doors;

culled grey seal cupboards and pup shelves.

Who remembers the dead?

Not this house, not now.

All must pass. New brooms sweep hard and true.

Swept as a blocked chimney,

pulled that ruthless brush through myself.

Wiped fingerprints off every banister.

## Roots

I often worry

about their dark purpose,

collusion with the land.

Submerged under bush and tree

knitting soft clay, loam,

with needle tuber and wood thread.

Breaking boulder and rubble

with insidious charm and slow ease.

I dig.

Cut with a sharp steel blade: precision tool.

Stretch and pull nimble fingers

from muck and mire,

break twisted limbs from a bare dirt bed.

Dank warriors of the splintered search.

Mariners of grave and mud sea

burrowing in soil night; sinewy leeches

unbowed by estate or season.

In that deep communion what do they say?

Whisper to the blind dumb worm,

pray to a deaf god of breeze and cloud,

muse on pounding shoe or drum of rain?

Assault troops of the innocent leaf.

## Blustery Night

Rain splattered windows painted black

kept our home warm. Walls raised from lorry

and palette stood, planted foursquare and true

by rough hands long since forgotten.

Too dark to see the cruel swell.

Shadows swayed, branches danced,

cloud billowed and fell. Mostly sound.

A plastic chair falling, bin in flight.

This house had seen more than us.

Lovers kiss and tell. Death and tales

of death. Life and death again.

It was experienced.

No stranger to a driving squall.

Wind wolf blew but piggy house stood.

Bright curtain eyes lighting this fleeting rage

as we sheltered asleep.

Starting gun crack, flash gun rumble,

nature brewed the beast but the beast moved on.

Flooded drowning wood gutters. Leapt off ski-slope

suicidal roof tiles onto pavement below.

Battered a square pane

until the clatter awoke

but when sun came, and drenched birds sang,

the building still there; we were still there.

Tools which laid that concrete base

sighed: block and girder sturdy yet.

Us too, constant in this passing downpour.

Secure inside our brick nest.

## Garden Murder

Fingers full of idle desire

I scalped a railway track

bringing an electricity of scythe and decimation:

reeling the green tide in.

Small fabulously wealthy frogs,

bug-eyed limpets of dark wet places I had

not yet reached, shook their pyramid heads.

A flesh bully to them. Another day

spent in naked perfection and mud-bound grace.

Yet senseless cloth-bound tower laboured on.

Now in wood: sculpt, shape, trim.

Dishes of leaf and sap fell,

legs I could not see scurried, eyes darted, wings flew.

I wiped salt tears from a river of face.

Stood in soil I found a magic tree.

Bark flowing, branch in perfect

canopy - though not by my or any conscious hand.

Yellow fruit perfume in the brisk, clean air.

I, assassin, dug that perfect form

with dinner fork blade and spectre of vision.

Tipped deep timber and worm into a May sun.

Triangular heads fell. Even polite birds

murmured discontent. Heaven sighed.

Tower went inside a white walled hut

to preen his feathers,

animals wept.

I would like to say that magic tree sprang

from fertile earth again but it never did.

Progress is everything and sweeps everything from its path.

## A Funeral of Sorts

I found rook's bones under an ordinary tree.

How quant to see its carbon frame decaying,

This king of black feather squawk.

Steel tipped beak and orb eye soldier

to rattle bag white dice

and dusted quill for other claws to find.

I swept the crowded plot,

laid those fallen sky-bound limbs to rest.

Marked them to remember

this broken, blustering pilot.

Looked up and saw, fixing me with pierced stare,

rooks: aged, thick set, and sure

who, seeing that offhand display,

turned their disdainful heads and flew.

# Nature

## Owl

On blunt and arcane eye

an evening dies.

Across green copse, skylines

of dancing feather spies

- *no not I*

*to take a dormouse’s dour life* -

over picket tower, branch tenement,

blows a fitful breeze

whose substance,

bled dry by bush and tree,

still patrols intent.

A hunt begins.

No more the open grove,

no more

the resting wing.

In motion, an unequal duel

poured as fury from shadow’s black coils,

moon cast in a chasm of pupil.

## Hare

The feather-snap stride

of spring mayhem

cluttered by passing fancy

and fable of moon,

tie love’s gold charm around youth’s jet feet,

speak dream and myth as consequence of blood.

In pantomime

dance deer and harvest,

tournament of snare and hound.

As an ocean lunar tide

calls canvas to master, curse softly into night

*never below ground*

*never below ground.*

## April Shower

A stone’s throw journey, no more

walking the arc of that flight

steps cascading from my bag of strides.

I stopped: the sound of nothing approaching,

dull pressure,

a space to fill with scene and plot.

Upon me then that bold commotion.

Took a wind and wrung it dry.

A clatter of pans in heaven perhaps,

shock of anger, plates crashing.

For wind read hurricane; for rain read flood.

Suddenly gone,

gathering strife as skirts behind it.

## Whiteley Woods

Fallen timber splinters

spills teeming flesh onto calm ground

to strive and grasp and shed blood

and in shadows and open slopes

taste scent and the breath of it.

Without anger, kill and be killed;

without thought, drift along ribbons of runs

and track – ditch and burrow

where skilled underpaid thieves

ply their trade in an eye’s spasm.

Darkness, terror, and glory lost

in the commonness of it all.

## Storm at Ringinglow

Morning dressed in threatening colours

framed by a sharp wind skimming field borders.

Trees pirouette under a leaden horizon,

air calms before the coming convulsion.

Thunder clamours and rain and froth fall.

Fields bludgeoned, compressed in the squall.

Steel voltage and wire spark puncture shadow.

Each immensity held harmless by a meadow.

## Clearance

A flower’s bud sings

of the death of cold.

Grass, covered in

winter coat explodes.

A bleak awakening.

Last year’s growth

cast aside, forgotten,

as that assault both

promises and forgets

in the rush of spring.

The fallen lay buried

marked in the ring

of trees who record

their bitter struggle.

The ruthless seed,

life’s savage renewal.

## Nature Reclaims a Derelict Factory on Brunswick Street

It is a colossus and the tiniest of things.

It is wearing glasses

made from the frames of broken windows

and licking tar off the road.

It has forgotten all propriety

and is wearing brick

cracking its own clay fibre.

It has drilled down

to the nub

and eat the nub and concrete

playing music and painting grass

across the dance floor.

It is all of these things and nothing.

Flexing walls with its breath

wearing a roof on its head

grinding all enemies to sand

under star and sun

which illuminate its playfulness.

It is splitting and spitting floorboards whole

with weight of bud

and taking long holidays

and coming back refreshed.

It is wearing snow as hands and feet

and hailstones for eyes.

It is taking back all things taken from it

which were never taken at all.

Not logical or sensible

but the very model of deranged industry

knitting together root and glass

with fibre of construction

and wearing the jumper

posing sluttishly in petroleum skinned mirrors.

It is messy

but entirely tidy in its own opinion.

Never satisfied: a huge belly

picking up scraps which fall from the table

and then eating the table

forever amazed by its own artistry.

# Truth

## Totalitarian Commission

The poem will be constructed

by deliberate plan. Narrative provided

by ordinary, not literary, hand.

Individual emotion abolished

for that of the crowd. Exhortations

to be polished, then left to stand.

The framework will be ruthlessly

applied. Scanned for veracity

by many eyes. Verse will celebrate

the common man or woman.

Rhymes, a reminder of when

promises were broken - times

before the poem was spoken.

All slogans combined within

the limits of predetermined lines.

Any deviance from rhythm or style

will not be tolerated. Words

used from a list already edited.

## Truth

Never what you first see

cloaked in obfuscation.

Peel beautiful skin aside to reveal the onion.

The reassuring safety of self-deception

a mill pond teeming with sharks underneath.

Corrupted in many guises

split by the prism of different eyes.

A landscape shaped to fit our view.

We pick and choose our dishonesty: a canon of lies

all of which are no less true.

What must children be told?

Those who feed us also mislead us.

Job passed on to corporate brands. Those dangerous

angels of expediency, so self-righteous

they see virtue in deceit.

Bleached in platitudes and gratitude’s and *thank you please*,

in twee greeting cards that wipe its face.

Scrubs off the war paint. Adds cloying sentiment and dull line.

We laugh at its doggerel charm. Commonplace

suddenly profound dressed in homilies and *dum de dum* rhymes.

All the while it is the rarest, most brutal animal

which scrapes the lens clear of self-serving debris.

Incises that boil, plucks our cataract free.

Never a friend. Not even enemy.

Unwelcome guest we never want or need.

## Four Walls Deconstructed

Sometimes an empty room is just that.

A package of space. We become trigonometry,

line and profile, block and measure. Sketch volume

on graph and plan, drunk on opportunity.

The innocent joy of expanding and being.

Sometimes an empty room is a child flown.

A picture framed in distorted feelings.

We are diminished and made old as we sift

through the wreckage of pride and grieving.

Recast as visits and irregular messages.

Sometimes an empty room is a palace of death.

Nail through a palm which pins our fate.

We are drained to black and invent smiles.

Become bearer of ash and certificate

shocked by permanence and our lack of emotion.

Sometimes an empty room is a dissected heart.

Sharp blade slicing through an embittered self.

Blood spilled a river of regret, a poison

which seeps everywhere. We place jars on a shelf

labelled *unfulfilled*, *never tried*, and *wrong decision*.

Sometimes an empty room is not empty at all.

It is exploding with Caesar’s last breath - a billion

other similar exhortations. Memories of events

we cannot scrub clean or bleach. A Brownian

motion of significance plucked from absolutely nothing.

Sometimes an empty room is not even a room.

A universal rabbit hole stretching to infinity.

We stare into the boundless mirror with no hope.

It is pure truth. We learn to fear the decaying body

and often become lost simply in the looking.

## Nighthawks by Edward Hopper

Four people framed in a symmetry of being.

They do not talk. They are not interacting

with each other. Darkness idly draped across a street.

Story captured yet, palpably, incomplete.

We search through daubs of yellow and tan.

Unexpectedly, colours drawn from predetermined plan.

So step back behind the image, smeared

chalk and charcoal of preliminary sketches. How the picture prepared,

constructed, entirely apart from the bone and blood

of a sitting. Not from drab, ordinary life. How should

we feel? What should we see?

Is this conflated drama in any form, reality?

Substance solid enough to grasp and hold? A stray thought

bound to pigment, then brought

struggling into birth? Perhaps it must always be this way.

How we can only ever overlay

scenes with our own fractures and preconceptions.

How a canvas must become an artist’s own reflection.

## Ghosts

We try the door which will not let us in

and strive to force the lock a final time.

A search for pace and style as we begin

to shape the fledgling thought and orphan line.

The visions that we glimpse outpace our grasp.

We stoop to find lost tracks, re-draft again.

Use words too insubstantial for the task

which seldom live beyond the page they stain.

What is the price to pay to fix their form,

those shards of life we barter for a deal?

The looking glass from which the scene is drawn

is far too blurred to capture what is real.

The summit seems so close and yet we know

mere sweat alone can never scale that cliff.

We stumble in the scree and waste below,

our willingness to fail both curse and gift.

## Lost

The book

is no longer here.

Life on hold.

First flush of fear

sweeps balance aside.

A stranger on a train

may know too much of me.

Pages ingrained

with blunt ink betray

– naked verse

not meant

for another’s eye. I curse

my careless nature.

Walls fall silently.

Somewhere, a knife trails across

a soft underbelly.

# Long Poems

## The Cutting Room

The building itself looked nothing special.

Certainly, no hint of what lay inside.

As all old medical schools do, it had

a faded grandeur. The Victorians

artists in red brick and sculptured sandstone.

The room sited on an upper level.

A twisting mahogany framed staircase

led to the door. At last we stood outside.

A nervous laughter. The shuffling of feet.

Who knew what to expect? *Doctor in the*

*House* ran through my thoughts in an endless loop.

The door opened. Would someone faint? Please God

don't let it be me. We filtered inside.

I think someone did faint. Or leave. Returned

later smiling sheepishly, first test failed.

The bodies were laid on metal tables.

Silver, heavy, each top dipped down to a

central sulcus running its length. A hole

at the end drained excess fluid away.

Carefully arranged, they spread across the

room in neat parallel lines. Four to a

dissection, there were over a hundred

students in the class. A sea of corpses.

Then we began. Our blades cut the chest wall.

Each stroke shallow, precise. In time we would

not be so careful or show such respect

but now it was different. Serious.

Death: how it felt, looked, and even tasted.

And through this strange rite we too had become

different. Special in ways only we

could know. Jokes soon followed. Mock bravado.

When you look at something so awful you

must laugh. That too would always stay with us.

Cadavers: odd beasts. Not human at all.

A disturbed refection - hollow vessel.

Doppelganger shaped from a modeller's clay

which was somehow incomplete, unfinished.

Motionless, drained of fluids, they rested.

Faces expressionless, mouth dropped open,

you could pull tissue up between a thumb

and forefinger. See it hold. Then watch the

mound diffuse back to the body below.

A smell of formaldehyde clung to them.

Clung to us. Seeped into our clothes and skin.

After a while we didn’t notice it

though years later, I would share a lift with

students returning from dissection and

be appalled at the stench. We must have stunk.

Loose leaf books outlined the scope of the work.

Our bibles. The covers laminated

so you could wipe them clean, though the pages

inside, being paper, would stain and mark.

*Leg, Arm, Foot, Thorax.* They listed the tasks

to be finished before a final test.

Pretty soon we were old lags. Knew the score.

Whispered mnemonics as mantra. We heard

a rumour that someone took a hand home

to work on it. An urban myth? Who knows?

Forever worried about fingernails.

So difficult to clean. Stopped biting them.

What was normal, routine, somehow shifted.

Once we arrived to find our head (*our head*)

removed. Sawn off for someone else to use.

Within the year we would do similar

ourselves. Amazing how ordinary

the extraordinary can become.

Perhaps you can get used to anything.

When the school moved, I helped. A summer job.

They'd asked for volunteers, but few replied.

We worked alongside the porters taking

specimens to the new site. Some carried.

A strange procession walking with parcels

covered in dark cloth - underneath, organs

swimming like surreal fish in a glass case.

The porters were good sports: spilled their secrets.

Told of bodies kept in purpose-built tanks;

the relentless progress of embalming;

how at a designated date they had

to collect all the pieces together

for burial. Had to find all the bits.

All of them. Everyone. How did they know?

The bodies left to medical science.

Were we medical science? Really? How

grand! I wondered if they knew the scope of

that selfless bequest: what happened after.

I still humbled by the scale of their gift.

Twenty years on in a forgotten case

of books, I knew at once what lay inside.

The smell unmistakable, unsettling,

A ghost returned: *The Thorax*. I began

to read it. Did we really do that? Why?

Dead anatomy. What use would it be?

To learn a few surface landmarks, even

some small skill with a knife - but the detail?

Those endless hours hunting tiny vessels.

Branches, divisions, carefully displayed.

To what end – etch it in us forever?

No. It had never been about that. Not

about gain at all - but loss. We had been

dissected there. Blooded in that harsh room.

Magic and reverence replaced by mere

gristle - machinery to be mended.

The wonder in us stripped out as surely

as we had stripped out each nerve and vessel.

Conditioned and desensitised. And I,

only realising two decades later.

Still with the stink of the book lingering

I started to wash my hands. Couldn't get

rid of the smell just as I couldn't then.

I see films of extremists. Terrorists.

View pictures of their crimes. The innocent

lives lost, the injuries, the traumatised.

Yet despite this, I find my thoughts drawn to

the guilty. How did they move so far from

where they started? The normal - average?

How did I? Was it the same sleight of hand,

just a different destination, scale?

No longer unsullied myself, can taste

the delicate opium of their path.

Its slope and solace. That heady journey

a shorter distance than we might admit.

*Then we began. Our blades cut the chest wall.*

*Each stroke shallow, precise. In time we would*

*not be so careful or show such respect.*

Perhaps there are cutting rooms everywhere.

Some more subtle or extreme than others.

All plausible, rational, bathed in the

warm glow of tradition - even duty

but taking away that part of us we

owe to everyone and everything else.

What if you could lose your humanity

standing in full view, lights blazing, with the

very best of intentions. Your one crime

being not to ask *Why?* Imagine that.

## Dissection

I Anatomy

Catch fish in the human tank,

hook bleached skin,

touch the lifeless thing,

prod and poke and laugh.

Some shape likeness

from wax and string,

Not us. We hang them up

and drain them dry.

II But I never found it there

I presented the branches of the vagus,

displayed the anomalous palmaris longus,

but he said I must do one more thing.

Find this man’s soul.

I carefully placed a knife above his sixth rib.

Opened the thoracic cavity,

grasped sodden lungs, ripped a rubber heart

from its cage, but it was not there.

Removed eyes, ears, tongue,

sawed the baseball cap right off.

Plucked the pink ball from its nest.

Nowhere to be seen.

Peeled crust from carcass

as bark stripped from a tree.

Cut withered, pitted, tangled limbs;

shaped, trimmed, pruned to no avail.

Someone said he knew.

He had seen it and it had whispered to him.

Someone in the next room spoke

of those with none to find.

I ignored them.

A lot of competition to find a soul.

It is I who would hold it aloft saying,

*Here it is. I've got it!*

But I never found it there

so it does not exist,

or it is too well hidden for my knife to find,

or it is too insignificant to be of consequence,

unlike palmaris longus

or the branches of the vagus.

III It must be nice to be dissected

It must be nice to be dissected:

explained in myelin sheath and muscle fibre;

osteoclast and renal parenchyma.

Tissue neatly presented for examination.

*Ah yes, I see that's why he did that!*

I could rest in glass bottles

packaged with labels.

Passers-by could be tested.

*What is wrong here?* and

*Do you think it caused him problems?*

Skeleton

hung in the corner

a pale white necklace.

Sliced and pinned

captured on glass slides

where microscopes could record each cell

which deviated from the norm.

I could be a learning experience.

IV Animation

It is the empty cask,

husk of human seed.

A flesh full stop; a pale reminder.

Animate him now!

See, you cannot.

Stiff limbs resist your pull;

deaf ears resist your pleas.

Chop him up for firewood.

Forget this spit and sawdust,

cold, grey plasticine man.

V Animism

How far shall we go?

Soul is such a fleeting thing, that spark

attached to voluntary movement,

the animating principle.

Do we attribute life, sensation,

seed corn of the desolate self

tied by the finest, spun thread

in descent from harmony to bone

to the beating, calling heart alone?

Is it profligate or profound?

Perfused as perfume, actuating spirit

written on a skin of sky and wind,

cacophony of life

beneath our feet?

VI Creation

See how my garden grows: exhumed from

inanimate grain I consecrate and beautify;

dig earth; move spent Hawthorne and

barren bush; sow, feed, plough and water.

See how my garden grows: I consume,

eat soft fruit from labour; grow bark;

scatter plants; spin a living thread; transmute,

transform forgotten words, neglected fields.

See how my garden grows: as fresh

saplings, my roots grasp between

body and bread - blood and wine. I am

a geographer mapping a land.

I catch a breeze and make it flesh.

VII Perhaps it is art not science

I have tried to pin you down.

Sketch parameters,

define boundaries, edges.

Spread your parchment wings upon this board

to tease thought,

nature,

from this marriage of convenience,

sorority of mass and self.

Past a desolate gravity of doubt

with its stench of sulphur

and leaden feet,

tied to walls we have built ourselves,

epistles of sin and suffering.

But my tracks decay in circles

as you smile.

I have never found your elegance

or erotic inspiration.

Sand drifting through an open fist

you are gone,

tide and away,

no remnant of the flame remains.

## Alternatives to Reason

I The void

Darkness burst through

a broken bulb.

As a child I could see no holy place

in its lightning tongue

devouring walls, carpets, stairs.

Innocence was no protection.

I hid, pierced by blades

sharpened on the whetstone of my pulse

until the air buzzed again with safety

covering that fracture with a mantra

*We'll leave the landing light on*

*We'll leave the landing light on.*

II Supplication

I struggle with prayer. That barren gulf

between question and answer,

trying to wring water from a dry towel.

As a fly, pace about the web,

throw stones, smash windows

all to no effect.

Yet a prayer fits easily inside a travelling bag.

Covers a car or child,

even spans a continent.

I am a new man too.

I scrape moon and star into my battalion.

Enlist the foot soldiers of karma and Tao.

But I have never played with graveyards, skulls,

creation's dark names.

Those who might shake your hand

only to steal fingers.

III Common prayer

I will be punished for speaking up.

I will be punished for keeping quiet.

I wait for people to find my mistakes.

I wait for it all to go badly wrong.

I fear I am not good enough.

I fear everyone will know.

I know the ring is closing.

I know someday I will kill myself.

I should have done it long ago but I am too lazy.

I should have done it long ago but it is too late.

*Goodnight. Amen.*

IV Statistics

Cancer reads our base language.

It takes many deaths to feed its stone belly.

Quick, muscular, overtakes the fastest constitution.

Bestows gifts of weeping as flowers

draped across ordinary, undeserving limbs.

Understands survival in a changing, hostile world.

*Here take a card. No, keep it. Remember to call.*

To speak its name to have first finger

on the dial. Risk a voice replying

before last digit rung*. Hello?*

V Obsession

A minor ordeal. You should not worry.

Post a letter, drive from here to there.

Rituals begin,

linger as the stink of garlic.

Reason says nothing - silence which costs dearly.

Nothing is happening over and over

until emptied rests, drinks, sleeps.

To stop is to invite retribution;

to continue, have the creature as guest.

Humour in the choice, bitter as its breath.

VI Extinction

Unpicks the knots we speak:

*She's looking better*, or *He's put on weight*.

We interpret silence as indifference

when all the while

thumbs close our eyes,

kisses tarnish our silver tongue.

Ask Achilles how it all went wrong.

*Bad luck*, he cries limping

as a billion bumpy graves whisper, *Me too*.

VII Reprise

Always the darkness.

That state of ignorance in whose cup

we pour our sovereignty, offering all

for hope of sanctuary.

But our tyrant still calls for more.

We fashion demons

from the void

and moths to flame, stagger.

Reduce ourselves.

Make the target ever smaller.

## Aspects of Mortality

I

I awoke in terror: a first appearance.

The nightmare spoke of no longer being.

Obliteration of self: sheet wiped clean.

Abject fear of dispersal to nothing.

Mother applied a soothing balm,

how this a passing, imagined apparition.

With that halted my childish rant.

World repaired by misplaced fiction.

II

Antibiotics and oxygen two days in.

Behind gown and mask saw

laboured, restricted breathing.

A vulnerability not revealed before.

Line on a dock

traced his deteriorating state.

Plunge deeper into shock,

chemical debts which accumulate.

Ventilator, monitors, dialysis brought

as we ignored the truth we knew.

Held in a web of machine support,

bags of saline pumping through.

They removed the spent technology,

venous lines and banks of tubing,

brushed his hair, washed face and body

before our final viewing.

III

Séance: what conceit to ply those questions,

no narrowing of any divide.

Who could wrest epiphany or illumination

when every scrap denied?

Then, not described the half of it,

countless fists battering doors that will not open.

No password or key to fit.

Step crossed - unknowable in that motion.

IV

Platitudes

speak only of the living.

Under cloak of ground

we are beyond caring

what sops they tell.

We sleep alone

secrets gone,

nothing to atone

or disturb

our tranquillity.

Motives rest

converted to failure or victory

by those who lag behind.

We do not care,

all lies

end there.

V

To re-animate that limp, moribund coating,

an impossible thing. I know that prison, cavity,

from outside-in. Flesh hook and pully operating

by bone lever and tendon string. In healthy,

breathing state, pulpit for self within.

It is a jacket, worn, to be discarded!

What interest could it be? A snake’s skin

slumped, when all inside departed.

VI

In the end, will make no preparation.

Shocked by events will plead my case.

As if exempt from its crude attentions,

always unexpected yet so commonplace.

## Three Stories with No Good Conclusion

Stopped at the nurse’s station. A cup of tea

on offer. The old wards were so much better.

Desk placed bang in the middle, centrally.

You could watch all the beds. Didn’t matter

where the action was, chances are you saw

things as they just kicked off. Great design.

I watched a young girl roll about the floor

playing with her visitors. She looked fine.

Laughing. A rare sight in the hospital.

It caught the eye. Mum and relatives

sitting by her bed. Perhaps a couple

of siblings too. A poster for happy families.

A nurse saw me looking. *A crying*

*shame* she said, gesturing in the girl’s direction.

I asked what she meant. Everything

going well, surely? The girl’s condition

deteriorating? No. It was the family.

When the girl first brought in, minor

signs of neglect but most worryingly

the lack of any real affection. Mother

and father barely acknowledged her.

Here, a different version. Pointing

covertly towards the cheerful picture,

*It’s because they know we are watching.*

She said the parents had quickly

realised our concerns not solely clinical.

Nothing to hang a legal hat on, marks to see,

or enough that as a professional

you might want to step in. More

an absence of what you might expect.

Following that, appearances changed. I saw

none of this. Delightful child. In retrospect

a little too clingy, but really nothing much.

When the nursing staff had gone

I stood out of view. Began to watch.

A light went off. Girl vying for attention

but ignored or casually brushed aside.

Left alone to play until, again, staff seen

at the desk or walking by which would coincide

with a return to the previous happy scene.

The most heart-breaking aspect? During

those periods the girl would realise and go on

to make the most of them. Smiling, talking,

running around. Basking in the appreciation.

She had deduced what was happening.

Impressive in a sad way. Intelligent

for her age. Later the same evening

I returned to find the nurse intent

on getting the full story. Abashed

at my ignorance. Was there any detail

I had overlooked? *Detail?* She laughed,

pausing for effect. *It’s because she is female.*

An answer I didn’t expect to hear.

Not even on my radar before.

An unwelcome lesson. Even so, clear

any child had a right to expect more

than that. The bare minimum.

An age on, talking with an Irish friend

about the reasons he had come

from a post in Ireland to spend

his training here. The usual culprits.

Property, girlfriends, lack of opportunity.

Suddenly headed completely off script.

Started talking about the cruelty

he had endured there in his youth.

Words flooding the room. I, finger

in dyke trying to stem the flow. In truth,

embarrassed by his raw emotion and anger.

I hadn’t realised he was an orphan.

The institution he had spent his teen years

run by a religious denomination.

Outlined how he and many of his peers

blighted by the time they had boarded there.

Not the obvious excesses of other

such places. Say, physical or sexual abuse, where

decades later a state prosecutor

might collect evidence for a prosecution.

More refined, indirect. An abrogation of duty

towards the children. From their position

of authority, the staff had systematically

undermined them. Discontented, unhappy

people, but passing that internal rage on.

Their charge’s days a desperate journey,

a master class in subtle oppression,

coldness, lack of humanity. Veneer

which kept his wounds hidden, paper thin.

And I, startled recipient of the story, no idea

of the scars he had been carrying.

We did visits after morning surgery.

The call had a familiar name.

I took it. Something about a baby

with a cough. When I arrived and came

through the hall, immediately knew the score.

The whole place smelled. Carpet sticky

underfoot so when you walked, the floor

would pull at your soles. Quite audibly.

I had seen it all before. The sort of place

you don’t accept tea. Or linger too long.

*Baby with snuffles*. In the space

behind the cot, where his sister had gone,

(incidentally, a happy bundle of energy)

I saw dog crap in the corner. It looked old.

There was some in the hall. The proximity

to the child annoyed me. Not pleased and I told

the mother so. She hadn’t time for cleaning.

We moved on. Had a health visitor and social worker

and received all the grants and support going.

Basic hygiene never a priority for her.

Otherwise, a caring mother. Doted on her three

children. Loved them, and they loved her too.

Focus of her world. As always, the worry -

when they grew older, what they, in turn, would do.

Rise above this or recycle more of the same?

Heart looks to the former; head the latter.

Here, at least, not about a lack of love, but again,

far from optimal. How much does that matter?

Three exemplars. What started as a chance recollection

and grew. Don’t look here for platitudes. I have none.

So many villains. Cultural attitudes, beliefs, institutions,

dogma, individual behaviour. The list goes on.

