

PALORES PUBLICATIONS' 21st CENTURY WRITERS



Chiaroscuro

Jo Pacsoo

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In Memory Of Frank Who Shared Much Of This

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cold winter rain
out of the oven
a perfect loaf of bread

beneath high cliffs
a feather
opens on the tide

Time and Tide

Low tide. A school party crosses the causeway to St Michael's Mount. My way is across the exposed beach. I scramble over slippery rocks, rounding the corner squelch into rotting seaweed deeper than my boots. Once, seaweed was used as fertiliser; we collected bagsfull. Now we use grass mowings. Farmers use chemicals.

I'm glad to climb the steps onto the coast path and stride out. An inviting granite bench above the path, dedicated to Lady Susan St Levan, 1934 - 2003. A good view of the back of St Michael's Mount and the round towered, fairy-tale castle. The Cornish name for the Mount means 'white rock in the wood'. It is said that at very low tides the remains of trees can be seen beneath the sea. As sea levels rise, how long before the island is submerged? Behind the Mount, the low skyline of the Penwith moors; to the left morning sun glints off the windows of Mousehole.

Silence. This south-coast sea is calm and flat, shading from Mediterranean blue to tropical turquoise. Not a wave sound. A helicopter passes over Penzance on the way to the Isles of Scilly. A trio of walkers talking loudly of time-shares in the Black Forest. Silence again.

celandines open
in the sun
the tide seeps out

The path turns inland past fields covered in plastic to force an earlier crop. Back on the cliff, the way is bordered with green flowering alexanders, tamarisk hedges. Another seat, donated by the Perranuthno Xmas Tree Fund. On a stretch of empty sand below the village a few dogs enjoy the last days before they are banned from the beach for the summer season.

empty sea glitters
in myriad points
the wide horizon

Hot chocolate in the beach tea-garden; the sound of lapping as the tide turns. The change also brings clouds. On the way back, shadows pass over the Mount and the sands of Mount's Bay. Lady Susan's seat now in a carpet of celandines. I count petals - they range from seven to thirteen. Sea creeps over the causeway. A chaffinch calls for a mate. Sloe buds are bursting, very late this year. I avoid the beach section and turn inland; plastic fields like pools cover potato plants, ripple in the wind. Up a walled lane beside a graveyard and back into Marazion in time for lunch. A short walk but enough to break in my new boots and shake off the winter sloth.

A sudden urge to have my hair cut. But among the galleries, antique shops, cafes and fudge sellers, no sign of a hairdresser. Instead, I climb The Beacon. At the top, beside a cauliflower field, an iron grate on a pole is the site of a midsummer fire, once transmitted from hill to hill throughout Cornwall. Below, the last person wades along the causeway from St Michael's Mount before the sea closes it until another tide.

Fish Day

I'm 6 years old and home from school for lunch. It's the day the fish man comes. My father doesn't eat fish so we have it for lunch. He is a vegetarian. We are sort of vegetarian but we sometimes eat ham. When we get food parcels from Switzerland we eat salami. My father eats it too.

My mother puts the fish on the table and there's a knock at the door. I go with her to open it and there, at the bottom of the steps, is an old lady. It's little Miss Lumley from the bungalow at the bottom of the hill. She looks up at my mother.

'Gandhi's dead. He's been shot.' She's a bit breathless.

'You've come all this way up the hill', says my mother.

'There's no-one else I can tell.'

footprints
among bird tracks
snowflakes drifting

My mother closes the door and I watch through the window as little Miss Lumley goes carefully down the path. All the mothers wear headscarves, except for best but little Miss Lumley has a hat.

Forty years later I stand before the Gandhi Memorial at Raj Ghat in Delhi. Loud music. Notices in an unfamiliar script. Across brown lawns a queue of pilgrims. A white fence surrounds the spot where Gandhi was cremated. Following the others I stoop to collect marigolds from a pile and strew them on the black marble shrine. An eternal flame burns in a copper basin.

smell of heat
and withered flowers a tear
drops in the dust

cool taste of water
from a five-piped spring
the smell of figs

the soft bump
of moths on the window
distant traffic

Fish Day

I'm 5 years old and home from school for lunch. It's the day the fish
windblown hair
scattered with rainbows
the suck of the sea

My mother puts the fish on the table and there's a knock at the door.
I go with her to open it and there, at the bottom of the steps, is an old
lady, the little Miss Lumley from the bungalow at the bottom of the
hill. She looks up at my mother.
Gandhi's dead. He's been shot. She's a bit breathless.
You've come all the way up the hill, says my mother.
There's no-one else I can tell.

footprints
among bird tracks
above the morning mist
windmills turn
in a blue sky

Forty years later I stand before the Gandhi Memorial at Raj Ghat in
Delhi. Loud music. No faces are an unfamiliar sight. Across brown lawns
a queue of pilgrims. A white fence surrounds the spot where Gandhi
was cremated. Following the others I stoop to collect marigolds from
a pile and throw them on the black marble slabs. An eternal flame
burns in a copper basin.

small of heart
and withered flowers a tear
drops in the dust

The Mind's Eye

Marazion beach stretches away into the mist. St. Michael's Mount is invisible, but we walk out on the stones of the causeway across the sands. It's the lowest tide for ten years and we've come to look for the drowned wood. The Cornish name for St. Michael's Mount, Carrek Los y'n Cos, means grey rock in the wood; it is said that the remains of the trees can be seen at very low tides. The area was inundated in the eleventh century when the Scilly Isles were flooded into separate islands. We want to go on a boat around the island but the sea is so low that the harbour is dry. Several locals agree that, perhaps, the petrified forest might be visible. We sit on the harbour wall and peer out over the shrouded water.

Spindrift. Sea fret. The tide creeps out. My companion feels cold and goes to the shop.

shifting fog quiet sea
a forest of green
in the mind's eye

In the distance vague outlines slowly emerge; rocks or tree stumps?
A dark shape moves towards shore; a swimmer, seal or human?

My friend returns. A sudden swirl of seaweed marks the turn of the tide. Water flows in more quickly. Revealed shapes are soon submerged.

We eat our sandwiches overlooking the causeway

the far shore veiled
walkers cross the stones
into emptiness

Returned From Travels

I find it in the bottom of the cupboard; a bright golden yellow T-shirt. Across the front is printed a large Tibetan flag: red and blue segments radiate from a central sun above two snow lions. Underneath is Tibetan writing. My son gave it to me when I was going to India.

'What does it say?' I asked him.

'I don't know. Probably "Tibet". Wear it in Ladakh, they'll like it.

They did, indeed like it! Monks and passers by pointed it out to each other and smiled at me. A woman in the fields said 'Buddhist, very beautiful'. Our landlady at the Kailash Guest House in Leh told me that the writing said "rinzai" but she didn't know the English.

bent old woman
under bundles of sticks
tourists point cameras

At Spituk monastery, perched on a cliff above the river Indus, an aged lama motioned me to sit down in front of him while he studied my T-shirt with pleased interest. On the way down the hill two monks from the monastery prodded my chest saying "Tibet" and "rinzai". Finally, at the Tibetan Children's Village at Choglamsar, I learned the meaning of the writing. "Rinzai" they said, means "free". So it means "Free Tibet". I should have guessed!

slow walk in rhythm
weighed down with loads
harvesters sing

dzos* tread grain
in a threshing circle
more snow on the peaks

In McCloud Ganj, Dharamsala, we stayed in a Community House, the top floor of which was reserved for visiting monks. They, too, appreciated my T-shirt. Going upstairs after a disturbing film about events in Tibet, there was a sharp 'hai, hai' behind me. I turned round to shake the hand of a large monk.

nuns dig the earth
to build their dwelling place
yellow butterflies

One day we joined the crowds along the roadside to welcome the arrival of the Dalai Lama. We waited wreathed in juniper smoke from burning incense piles. At last a quick glimpse of the familiar face in a passing car. The old man beside me wasn't sure if he had seen His Holiness and bowed to the next few cars.

Our hotel had a tea shop where the monks came to eat cakes in the afternoons. A young monk befriended us. He told us of his life as a monk and the conditions in Tibet. We mentioned that the Dalai Lama had passed so quickly we had hardly seen him. Our friend said that he was working in the palace and would try to arrange an audience for us.

I washed my T-shirt and tried to think of all the questions I had ever had about Buddhism. Would it just be an in and out audience? Would it be enough just to be in his presence? I was awake all night trying to ensure I wouldn't waste this opportunity. We met our friend the next day, he was very sorry but His Holiness had just returned from travels and was not giving audiences for a few weeks.

I try on the T-shirt. Now too tight, it goes on the reject pile.

*dzo: a yak/cattle crossbreed

Fashion Feet

I have hurt my toe and can't fit on a shoe. I put my feet up and turn on the radio. It's an item on Woman's Hour from Beijing. They are interviewing a woman in her eighties who had her feet bound.

'It was something that was done to me,' she says, 'I had no choice. With big feet you would never find a husband. When I was five my grandmother broke and bound my feet. I was not allowed to cry.'

The Communists banned footbinding and many feet were unbound. This was just as painful as the initial binding. The woman's daughter was not sympathetic. She remembers only the smelliness of the bandages of her mother and grandmother. The interviewer describes the old woman's feet. They are about 12 centimetres long, the toes broken and folded underneath. The woman does not resent her crippling.

'It was just what everyone did. I think my feet are beautiful.'

on the turquoise teapot
green dragons lift clawed feet
rain batters the window

A man is interviewed.

'It was to control women. To stop their movement. Women were the playthings of men. Bound feet were considered erotic. There is a treatise on forty-one ways to caress bound feet.'

Is this my daughter's heritage through her Chinese father? I 'phone her.

'Oh, no,' she says, 'the Hakka didn't bind their women's feet'.

Why didn't I know this?

I remember, as a teenager, squeezing my feet into pointed toed stillettos, taking them off to walk home barefoot after a dance. I look at women in high heels, see how their bottoms wiggle when they walk. I notice how younger and younger girls are wearing fashionable shoes.

I go to buy shoes. In every shoe shop in Penzance I try on a dozen pairs; end up with trainers as usual.

bare feet on smooth stones
with my daughter across
the sea-wet causeway

June Morning

I wake early, take my blow-up cushion down into our small patch of woodland, settle into a spot of sunshine beneath a pine tree. I can hear the stream at the bottom of the next field. I watch the dancing hoverflies. What makes them circle in the sun? Above, a buzzard screeches, unfolds its great wings and takes flight. Nestlings cheep amid may blossom. A chaffinch is calling for a mate. The smell of gorse. What is the world without the filter of the self and the senses? At my feet, fading bluebells. The shadow of a thick tree-trunk passes slowly across my face. The barks of neighbours' dogs echo across the valley. Traffic noise drowns out the sound of the stream. The sun is hot. Trees, flies, birds, dogs, human, what is it to be alive?

For once I walk back through our small plot of land without looking for things that need doing.

nettle tea
my partner paints the back door
paradise blue

midsummer night
long after sunset
warmth in the stone seat

ebb tide
we dance patterns
into clean sand

alone

in the night wood

small of a fox

Chiaroscuro

The new house is an old miners' cottage and rather dark but outside is the big Cornish sky. Inspired by a *Permaculture* weekend and a visit to Robert Hart's *forest garden* we work to transform our almost-an-acre field, empty apart from a stand of tall monterey pines and a few apple trees. And a leylandii hedge which we dig up and sell to a garden centre.

We dig ponds, plant hedges; around the pines native deciduous trees and some less common ones: wild service, guelder rose, sea buckthorn, wayfaring tree; wild cherry, bird cherry, cherry plum; medlar, quince, apricot, fig; evergreen myrtle, box and yew.

We go on a tree-grafting day and extend the orchard with local varieties of apple. We plant four layers of forest garden: fruit trees, soft fruit bushes, herbs and root crops. Greenhouses with grapes and nectarines.

The ponds heave with frogs and toads. The sound of thrushes breaking snails. Blackbirds multiply. Robins hop round our feet. A wrens' nest in the redcurrants, chaffinch in the hedges, blue, great, coal and long-tailed tits; greenfinch, goldfinch, goldcrest, jay. Buzzards nest in the pines. We watch the young take flight with mewling cries. For years we give away boxes of apples, pots of jam, honey.

alone
in the night wood
smell of a fox

Ill health, ageing, bad backs. The neglected vegetation grows and grows. Blackbirds devour the soft fruit. The bees die. Flocks of pigeons roost in the pines, eat the green vegetables. The ponds silt up. The forest garden over-run with nettles and brambles. Apple trees stretch up to the light and bear no fruit.

A big winter clearance; pruning, lopping, coppicing; we slice hedges and fell trees, even climb into the farmer's field to cut two sycamores which shade the figs. Sawing and splitting logs.

damp winter days
the fragrance of
an applewood fire

The pines still stand, too big for us to tackle. We clear the forest garden, mow round the trees. The end of a vision but we hope it will be less work.

Around the house, the sky becomes smaller as neighbours' pine and cypress encroach upon it. Even the conservatory is losing the morning sun. We dream of retiring to the sea.

above the cliff
two ravens dwindle
in a big sky

colours rayed
on the skin of a grape
the smell of sunshine

dusk in the garden
the new houses
have stolen our darkness

space of a quiet sea
dawn sun touches
the distant lighthouse

hospital visit
even in mist
the luminous sea

Last Words

'I'm not too proud to die. I'm nothing special' A tear runs down his cheek.

The consultant has told him that he has the options of open heart surgery to replace a valve, with a 25% risk of death and no guarantee that it will make any difference, or a slow decline over one or two years.

'I won't have the operation. We'll just go on at a lower level'

A few days later, a different consultant.

'I don't want the operation'

'If you don't have it you will just die slowly, in and out of hospital. Drugs can't stop this.'

'Alright, I'll have it.'

The surgeon comes, visiting from another county. He stands at the foot of the bed with his troupe.

'Is he fit for this operation?'

'I think he has a chance.'

A round of tests: ecg, eeg, echocardiogram, angiogram, x-rays, blood tests, urine tests, lung tests. His arms are a mass of bruises. Drinks are restricted to reduce the fluid in his lungs and tissues. The ward is constantly busy; even at night the clanking of laundry trolleys across the courtyard.

A train of visitors, his family and mine. He is in good humour, settles his affairs; talks of dying under the knife.

trees green into leaf
apple blossom - hospital ward
looks out on bare walls

He continues to decline. Some days sleepy and confused; other days he rallies. More tests. He doesn't eat. They talk of putting tubes up his nose but he has signed a Living Will that he should not be forced. A young nurse treats him like a child. He has a quirky sense of

humour, is not so confused as they think. Can he be moved to a side room? He's better where other patients can see if he falls out of bed and call for help.

The fourth consultant, and team. I follow them out.

'Is he fit for this operation?'

'I haven't seen him before so I don't know how he has changed. He certainly needs to eat more. The surgeon accepted him. It could be that he goes off to the other hospital and they say he's not fit and send him back.'

'I think he's dying'

'You may well be right.'

'I want to take him home.'

'Wait a few days. We need some more tests.'

A few days later I try to make an appointment with the consultant. He says he will be on the ward round. I see the ward doctor. She sits down with me in a room.

'I don't think he's fit for this operation.'

'I've been ill and haven't seen him for a few days. It's a risky operation but it can work wonders for octogenarians.'

'He's desperate to come home'

'Wait a few days. He might have an infection; we need to do some tests.'

She's very caring and explains to me all the support if he comes home, palliative care and how he could be readmitted to a quieter ward if necessary.

'Can he, at least, be moved to a quiet room now?'

'They are all full but I'll see what can be done.'

Back on the ward he is being interrogated.

'Here's Jo. Come and sit beside me.' His body is frail in my arm. '1921 was a good year. That's when I was born. I don't care what year it is.' But he remembers Tony Blair. They say he's probably had a series of strokes but his sense of fun is lurking underneath. He's depressed but they won't give him drugs.

A nurse comes to take his blood pressure. More nurses come to move his bed into a side room. The consultant comes with his attendants.

'He's declined so rapidly in the last few days. It's not feasible to take him home. No more tests or interference. He can drink as much as he likes. No resuscitation. He will die in the side room.'

He's asleep after all the activity. I go home, try to eat lunch. Half an hour later, a 'phone call,

'You'd better come back. He's taken a turn for the worse.'

7.30 the next morning. Outside the hospital, heavy rain..

purple shadows
dull the sea - home
to an empty house

Two months later, still eating the lettuces he planted.

In Memory Of

skylarks, ravens, swifts
even the butterflies
all in pairs;
your body dissected
by medical students

In Memory Of

Your quiet presence in the house.
Your wry sense of humour
that I didn't always understand.
Your patient working out of a problem.
Today I rearranged the furniture.

Your welcome-home smile at the railway station.
Your pleasure in small jobs
around the house and garden.
Today I learned to cut glass
for the greenhouse windows.

The warmth of your hug.
The grim silence
of your anger.
Today I was stung
five times by a wasp.

A card falls out of a book:
All my love
in your careful calligraphy.
Today I gave away your desk.

The taste of your home made bread.
Your companionship
and support in times of trouble.
Today I painted the kitchen
and was bitten by a dog.

Already so much has changed:
the path to our favourite cove
has fallen away,
the beach café burned down ...
Today I saw a basket of fresh flowers
on the edge of a cliff
and a helicopter rescue from the sea.

In the vegetable patch
a Japanese maple and two rocks
mark the burial place
of your walking britches.
Today I wrote a new will.

In Memory Of

sleepless night
the thud
of falling apples

The warmth of your hug
The grim silence
of your anger
Today I was stung
five times by a wasp.

A card falls out of a book
All my love
in your careful calligraphy
Today I gave away you

beneath the buzzard's tree
two small bones
hold a magpie's feather

The taste of your home made bread
Your companionship
and support in times of trouble
Today I painted the kitchen
and was bitten by a dog.

In Our Times

A day out by train. At St Austell station four policemen get on with a big black dog. The men are laden with pouches and pockets. They walk up and down the train, the dog sniffing. The dog, they call him Oscar, startles a woman and spills her packet of snacks.

'He's only doing his job madam.'

What are they looking for? Do I have a knife in my daypack? I usually keep my Swiss Army Knife there This was my late partner's bag. Perhaps it contains his clasp-knife too. 'Grandmother, 66, found with offensive weapons.' After three trips up and down the train, two policemen and the dog get off at Liskeard.

streams wind across

low-tide mudflats -

new-born lambs

As we approach the Tamar Bridge the remaining policemen, plus a plain-clothes man, converge on two men - a sleepy looking youth and one not so young, with scruffy hair. They sit one in front of the other.

'You both got on at Liskeard. Are you together?'

'No'.

The young one is taken away for questioning. A policemen chats to the other. Safely over the bridge, the young man returns to his seat and the police depart.

Across the aisle two teenage girls sew glittery things; in front a woman feeds a baby.

Remembering

slowed by
heat on the rails - Somerset
flooded again

What's the name of that place - the one in the poem: 'I remember ...' three syllables. The train stops there 'unwontedly'; no one comes and no one goes. A blackbird sings and 'all the birds of Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire' You don't hear that on a train these days. It's all sealed up. Only mobile 'phones and the beat of personal stereos. 'Yes, I remember ...' It's by Thomas, Edward Thomas, written not long before he died. Perhaps it was his last leave. Did he remember that quiet station when he was away in the trenches getting killed?

'I remember ...' It was an express train. Actually I'd never heard of it until my late partner went there a few years ago. He asked the old lady in the Post Office if the trains still stopped there. Yes, she said, looking at the clock, the midday to London is expected any minute. He went to find the station but it wasn't there. The big old station sign is set up in the village. He took a 'photo but that's gone too. He brought back a tea towel with the poem on it - blue lettering on white; it got stained and thrown away. 'Yes, I remember ...' three syllables. Nearly got it!

in the train window
reflections of trees
on trees

midwinter dawn
a scattering of birds
across the silvered clouds

branches against the sky
lichen glows white
in starlight

Family Numbering

An English church. In front of the altar an African children's choir sing and dance with vibrant energy. The choir is from Uganda and ages range from a tiny child of about six to adolescent girls and boys. The church is packed, the audience overflowing into the night. All sit still, apart from one toddler who bounces up and down, waving his arms with the dancers. The songs are in Swahili and English. Boys drum and call; girls dance with pots on their heads, yellow cloaks flying. One girl balances three pots, one on top of another.

a moment's silence
before the applause
draught through the open door

These children are all orphans; their parents died of AIDS or malaria. Some of the children also have AIDS. In the interval the organiser says he found the choir praying for us before the performance. A man tells of children who walk many miles to school without food. Another talks of setting up a horticultural project to feed the orphans, and how they now have two cows and each of the ten orphanages has one bucket of milk a week.

The choir returns with red, gold and green headbands and hats. The programme builds up energy climaxing with a Zulu dance. Drumming and whooping echo from the church roof. The dancers leap and squat, arms flowing. The vicar wants to repeat one of the gentler songs, 'Welcome to our family' written by a girl in the choir. He wants us all to join in the arm movements. A few voices sing along: 'Welcome to our family, we're glad that you have come... We all need a family in this painful world.' But we are English, we don't wave our arms about. The vicar hides behind a pillar.

out in the cold
between the clouds
glimmers of stars

cold morning
the glint of
the dentist's instruments

flower stem
in a glass vase
trapped air bubbles

A Bomb in the Living Room

Idly tuning in to Radio 3, *bend Your force to break, blow, burn and make me new*. An opera. Dr. Atomic by John Adams. Oppenheimer sings the final aria of Act 1, John Donne's sonnet, Batter my Heart, three-personed God.

Act 2. Storm. Lightening. Rain and thunder. I'm not used to hearing the words in opera but these are in English. *Testing this bomb tonight is a blunder of the first magnitude ... I'm really scared... . There's a danger of spontaneous firing in a storm*. There are wagers as to whether the bomb *will ignite the atmosphere, destroy just New Mexico or the entire world*. This is *loose talk* sings Oppenheimer. But still he wonders if they might have miscalculated and will *set off a chain reaction and encircle the globe in a sea of fire*. *But there is no reason to think the advanced calculations are not entirely correct*. There is a delay to allow the Japanese to consider the ultimatum. *A bottle of suntan lotion. Pass it around*.

The music builds up tension. The choir sings *war, war, war, war*. All my hairs stand on end. *Radio connection with the control tower is out of order. No-one knows when the bomb will go off*. The scientists munch candy bars.

Time has disappeared. It is eternity.

A siren sounds. The music becomes hectic. My heart thumps. Another siren. Silence.

Zero minus two minutes.

The two minutes extend to ten. My hands are sweaty. I want to turn it off. I want them to get on with it. A rumble. Silence. A clock strikes.

Thumps, bangs, squeals, wind, engine sounds, buzzing, a repeated scream. A shudder runs through me.

Silence.

A quiet woman's voice repeats Japanese phrases. She is asking for water for her children and the whereabouts of her husband.

I switch off before the applause.

after the storm
the red lights of the 'phone mast
twinkle in the trees

A Bomb in the Living Room

Silence

a hammer blow -
the slow creak
of splitting wood

Act 2. Storm, Lightning, Rain and Thunder. I'm not used to hearing the words in opera but I'm used to the music. This is a disaster of the first magnitude. It's really scary. There's a danger of spontaneous fire in a storm. There are wagers as to whether the bomb will ignite the atmosphere, destroy just New Mexico or the entire world. This is loose talk since Cape Canaveral. But still he wonders if they might have miscalculated and will set off a chain reaction and explode the globe in a sea of fire. But there is no reason to think the advanced calculations are not entirely correct. There is a delay to allow the Japanese to consider the ultimatum. A bottle of sulfur later. Part 2 around.

The music builds up. golden dawn fades to grey
schlieren lines
in the jasmine tea
The music builds up. war, war, war, war. All my hairs stand on end. I see the control tower is out of order. No-one knows what will go off. The scientists munch candy bars.

Time has disappeared. It is eternity.

A siren sounds. The music becomes hectic. My heart thumps. Another siren. Silence.

Zero minus two minutes.

The two minutes extend to ten. My hands are sweaty. I want to turn it off. I want them to get on with it. A ripple. Silence. A clock strikes.

Thumps, bangs, squeals, wind, engine sounds, buzzing, a repeated scream. A shudder runs through me.

Last Wish

Lying in the wood; leaves dark against the starlit sky. A bumblebee hums sleepily, falls quiet. Foxes bark. Hoo-who, kee-week, a tawny owl pair duets. All night the distant drone of traffic.

trees still
in the darkness
a falling leaf

I'd like to die in the woods. Alone, beneath the trees. Last breath into air; body decaying into earth. Not in the stuffy heat of hospital with endless prodding, testing, questioning, pressed to keep eating. Let me die in the woods, cooling with the night air, breath taken by the wind, heartbeat fading into silence.

dawn chill
red spindle berries
wet with dew

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In Memory Of. Poetry Cornwall, 22
In Our Times. Presence 36
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