

NOW



Graham High

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DREAMING OF WAKING

I awoke to a sense of the mystery
of my own childhood.

A small illumination ignited a memory
of a midnight bonfire
surrounded by many children
of which I am one.

The heat and the light share
a circumference and we are
encircled and centred where
the visible meets the night, caught
in its breath-thin penumbra.

We are buried together
in the cave of its brightness.

A moment of indefinable vividness
is trying to revisit me, though I was
as insensible of it then as now
and I can relive the experience
only as a state that is neither
shade nor light, but something in between.

A transfer of an instant
ineffably real at the interface
of sleeping and waking.

MINE

As I present it to myself I am a miner,
using mind and hands to work and explore -
what else are these things for?

I am so sure that some answers
are buried there, deep down, suspecting
still that the questions are elsewhere.

I try to mine the smallest of seams,
the gap between serenity and terror.
sometimes as I sleep, sometimes as I

awake: it is the difference between
a closing of eyes in the dark and
the opening of eyes to darkness.

I aim to drill the deepest well too deep
to see reflections – I mine the deepest
dream, too dark to ever recall.

FAULT

I am buried, buried already.
I was born buried.

It feels like I was always here, underground.
Can I have forgotten so soon?

There is, must be, a surface,
a surface which cannot be seen,

half heard of, partly believed in
at times, even striven for, reached for,

intuitively, the way that babies
reach beyond their focus.

It is as if I am locked in a womb of rock,
amorphous as magma, seething at

the solipsistic centre of the teeming earth.
Surely I am intelligent?

I think I know how to put two and two
together, digging myself ever deeper

not looking behind for the way out
but worming my way further in

seeking, not the source of light
but what it illuminates.

Yet even a buried seed can right itself
towards the unseen brightness,

Can I have forgotten already?

DRAPES

The fear of unknowing
seeps through
 the comfort of sleep.

The outside dark is growing,
the lighted slope
 inside too steep.

I sleep, but where do I sleep?
Beyond the curtain
 of light;
between the pleated strata of thought;
behind the undulating
 drapes of night?

AGAINST THE LIGHT

Forgive this ramble, reader
but I seem to have to have been born
with a double helix mind, one
much struck with exits and entrances,
and their inconceivability.

Is it not the same with you?

Stuck, at its most free, not as in a dream
but in a reverie. No narrative,
no beginning or end, but then,
dropping back into narrative again
like Icarus from the sun –

Damn! I thought I had it then.

I am the tangible within the transient:
not the diary entry but the moving pen,
writing in the dark that which
cannot be read, and seeing the words
only in one's head, registering,

against all the odds,
registering – something.

WATER RUNNING UNDERGROUND

We hear it only indistinctly
and can sense merely what manifests
through the cracks in the earth's crust.

Stones thrown down the fissure
follow the splash of enquiry,
and are swallowed: the "How"

questions, whose impacts
generate more complex information,
more tangled variations

which proliferate like interlacing
rings of motions and mathematics
spreading outwards and inwards

among the cosmomic ripples
of the fluid universe.

The earth is a falling stone,

and what comes back each time
is the "Why" question,
its echoes unanswered.

That single query hangs in the air
while we sound the depths in still water
by planting a stone there.

HOW TO DRAW A FIGURE

First take some burnt wood, a charred stick,
the black which, together with the paper,
will provide the contrast for our focus:
the conflict which marks us out.

Then introduce darkness to the paper
for this is the archetype of creation.
Make a mark: a dense black hole
of negativity, hungry for energy.

Let the mark evolve along a line of carbon.
Give it motion. Let it explore its own
deep freedom across the white constraint.
Through its journey let the figure appear.

Press the solid complexity of black,
crumbly, organic, set at all angles
against the flat white field, the given,
cherished, laid smoothly out.

Establish the figure, nurture it,
suggest contours, try to get it right.
Now tear the figure up, rip off strips
so its integrity as image is destroyed.

Then laminate again with new, fresh paper.
Redraw the figure across the torn fissures.
Paste and laminate, over and over.
Keep on until the picture is done.

Immerse yourself in this process
of re-appraisal, always beginning again
to re-establish something of the
figure through the strata of paper

so that when it is complete you will
both know it and not know it
for the process has its own logic,
arriving at its own end, unpredicted.

IMAGES ALMOST BEYOND RECALL

They fill my mind more and more these days

these windows so over-painted
they refuse to open. A fruitless debate
concludes they're all the more poignant

for that, but they just accumulate:

a stack of postcards sent adrift
from holidays long forgotten, the franking stamp
of date and place all smudged and faded.

They seem to form an endless path

of flotsam from a tide I now begin
to doubt will ever reach high water mark
again - embrace them, take them in.

THOUGHTLESS

Silence is necessary:
and something beyond silence.
In the stillness you are aware of her
only as that unknown thing which you
desire. Apart in your room
the dark is a forest sleep.
Inside you are entirely beset with trees.
But between the restrictive gloom,
the close filmy webbing of firs,
sometimes, very rarely,
a sudden freedom flares.

Lights come flying from her
like coloured birds, to settle
on your insensible arms
as you drowse, but disappear
with a ripple, if, aroused,
you thoughtlessly stir from darkness
and feel for her there.

12 SILENCES

silent Quakers –
a fly
buzzes its ministry

alone in the clouds
the skylark's song – as one
the silence of two

sultry night
the wind from a fly's wings
the only breeze

dusk in the garden –
on the breeze, police sirens
become more plaintive

sundown at the lake:
in the gloaming a sound jumps
from a rising fish

child and grandmother
silently doze: two clocks tick
out of sync. - together

silent loading dock:
the sickle moon locks blades
with a crane hook

percolator steaming
the sound of the wind
through the roof's filter

the quiet gurgle
of the gas fire, louder
now we dim the light

cracked wind chimes
sharpening the sound
of the spring breeze

open window sounds
the smart phone answering
the crickets

listen
the sound of silence –
still can't hear it

TRACK

I've still retained the old deck and a stack
of classical LPs.

I've had no time to clear them out and even less
to look at them for recollection's sake, and yet
the means of it still fascinates: the needle,
the lowered arm.

I choose one, almost at random, and look down
at the small, black, vinyl planet as if I were far away.
Having set the needle in the groove myself I am
the making of this music.

The slow repeated spin
is itself soundless but from its hypnotic turning
dark unrepeatable harmonies are torn from the tiny
irregularities of the surface.

It throws and lulls me
ever forwards in its undulating spin
the motion quells all consciousness, the music gone
the mind lured away from itself.

With an abrupt
mechanical rip the rigid arm lifts from the track
releasing the grip of its one weighted claw.
Jolted, I'm instantly awake to the long following
silence.

Of this there is no recording.

HAIKU ON A BHAKTI PATH

The Bhakti Path, defined by Robert Bly in his translation of the ecstatic poems of Kabir, as insight and worship through the senses - "heart love, feeling, dancing, intensity, and living in the present tense".

haiku of the senses
where are your castanets
and your ankle rings?

while the senses doze
the sleeping haiku glories
in all five windows

high autumnal wind
finds its own haiku written
in the dance of leaves

rain on the mill pond
say, where does the dance begin
and the dancer end?

lost in its singing
how sad to find me again
in the songbird's name

flick of a goldfish –
the joy of haiku vanished
to nothing but words

WITHDRAWN

The boat surges.

It heaves to another's pulling rhythms.

It breathes.

And you?

Your languid mind is partly in the hand
as it trails across the lake

and partly

in the water: its forms, its touch,
the changing temperature of its caress.

It flows

among the many sensations, hardly
aware of itself...

Now that the boat

is still upon the quiet lake

there is no longer a lake,

only a blue hand

becoming colder and a mind

chilled with a solitary thought.

NOTATIONS OF SPRING

spring thaw –
the twisted splutter
of the outside tap

tangle of tadpoles –
the slime of old spawn
dissolves

neglected garden –
hidden inside the gate latch
a lodged chrysalis

early composting –
inside the wheelbarrow frame
a snail shell rattles

planting the rockery
spring growth linking
geo-centuries

new water feature –
a young thrush the first
to be impressed

on the furthest bank
the new nest of a moorhen
in a sunken punt

dawn in the river bed
reaching the crossing stones
step by step

by the waterfall
a mile of river
passes me by

netting the sunlight
between the drying cobbles
the captured shower

picnic for two
a fallen hawthorn petal
in each drinking cup

at the puddle's edge
a hare's shrunken carcass –
rain drums the scalp

long-abandoned car –
the trough in the windscreen blade
nurtures a new weed

my rumpled duvet –
and under the late spring snow
dead lambs

life flying past –
a blue tit was it, into
the plum tree and out?

SIX EVENING BIRD CALLS

birds softly calling –
that time of evening when it's
hard to turn away

softly, birds calling,
the woods fade to sight and sound –
the town's yellow light

calling birds softly
our neighbour coaxes her hens –
fox-bark in the woods

birds calling softly –
our silent communication
as we share the hush

softly calling birds
lull us through the sun's decent –
the barn owl's grim shriek

calling softly, birds
settle, safe enough to sleep –
we secure the door

A SMALL FOCUS

So much to learn of the unseen bird
If the trees were not so green

So much to be seen in receding shade
If the light were not so strong

So much to hear for the sensitive ear
If silence were not so rare

So much to be done in the morning sun
If time were not so long

BRUSHWORK

I have watched how the loaded brush
of the narcissus rises from the soil,
the plump tip holding its own flush,
its white flame making the sky dull.

And I have seen across dark lakes
the moon slide down the mixing blade
of its reflection to daub in flecks
the foreshore where ambitions fade.

Midnight turns a corner in my mind:
the canvas is blank, the strip-light's on,
the colours and oils are neatly planned
on the palette that's shielding my arm.

And halfway between my artist's hands
and the image on the canvas screen
the shadow of my paintbrush lands and ascends
then lands again, trailing a wing.

NOW

linked poems in tanka form

Even now what joy
To experience our lives
Slide through each other
Freely as magician's rings
Boundaried, yet open

And how marvellous
To live with you in the now
Where involvement and
Detachment exist as one
In perfect relationship

Even now how sweet
To watch you remove again
Your leaf-shaped ear-rings,
The last to leave your body
Before another joining

It's true, even now,
That I know more about you
Than you know yourself—
That the moles around your spine
Are the stars of Gemini

And how, even now,
Like the waters of a weir
Turning and turning
Our love is a bright torrent
Held in its own undertow

And I recall still
The rushing descent of love
Flowing, cascading
Filling the deep pool - and then
the ever spreading stillness

Even now it's true
That the hair you despair of
Still rouses my desire
The dark yielding to auburn—
The reverse of fading light

And still I exult
In the feel of that soft hair
Warm at the fireside
Where I will brush the reflected
Flames to a new burnishing

And I still relive
The hesitancy of love
How the rightness
Could have gone unrecognised
Had the fates not been benign

And I even recall
In your eyes' intensity
The early question
'To hold back or give freely'
The so crucial equation

Even now, sometimes,
The vision of your lips' curve
When you're not with me
Rests unbidden at the rim
Of some present glass of wine

Even now I think
Of our silences, trusting
In our touch, our eyes,
That passion has its own voice
And expended passion mute

Even now the past
Of life and love frustrated
Weighs the same as love
And life fulfilled, but the thrill
Of completion pays for all

The long years apart
And the moment we re-met
Are a bird's eye view
Of a tributary that's now
The only river we know

Even now there is
Nothing more life-enhancing
Than love's fleet water.
Flowing over stones it will
Purify itself in play

And now I recall
Sri Lanka and, next to me,
Your thrilled response in
Seeing fruit bats flying home
Along the perfumed river

And still, even now,
The ship of my life is launched
Day by day by day
On the slipway of my dreams
Into waves of memory

Even now one's life
And the memories of life
Turn diurnally
One lives in the other's light
In reciprocal balance

Even now I store
My past memories into
A richer future.
The battered box-files stacked in
the loft bursting with photos

Even now, that there
Is so much more we could explore
About each other
Is part of love's profligacy
In which there is no excess

Even now the two
Great themes of love and death meet
In the sense of loss:
Its resolution to re-live,
Concupiscence of recall

And surely we would
Never willingly give up
This transient world.
It is transcendent folly
To not enjoy the senses

SECOND IMPERATIVE

Did it wake me or was I already awake
that slaked cry of urban foxes mating?
The sound was sharp and chill but still conveyed
the inner heat of fusion like the burning

of a cold-eyed star. A cry so close to pain
it felt internal, this long-invested scream
engendered by an impulse from the yet-unborn
that leached my dormant urges like a phleme.

It howled defiance to the cold and hunger.
It whined compliance to the drive to render
their life's resources to another's future.

The shriek was severed. Its isolating silence cut
me from you as you slept. It brought us closer.
Was it that which woke me? Was it your heat?

SWELL

On these darkest nights the stars appear,
your recollected smiles – each one a seed
that has settled; each one a germination.

The heart dilates. Like an eye it adjusts
to each responsive constellation. Strange,
that you don't know that you were always here.

In the stellar heart the vagrant moon sends
down it's stolen light on the oblivious
sleeper who trades it for the alarm of dawn.

Your laughing eyes are still-remembered fires
which maintain their gleam, their trajectory
ever expanding, softly and silently.

CROWN OF SELECTION

Even now
I struggle with the thought
that you're an outcome
of random evolution.

Love
turns everyone creationist,
makes them defy reason
while finding,
perhaps for the first time,
some reason in the world.

PEDESTAL

In this restless Railnet carriage
while the world slows down into the station
there's the music of iPods and mobiles on the move:

In relative stasis

my wife sits in the seat opposite,
her face mounted above the back of her laptop
like a portrait bust on a block of polished slate

BLURRED EDGES

Borneo impressions

Oil-surfaced paddy field
the water buffalo wade through
a mystic rainbow

Part of the rice field
and not part of it
the shack on stilts.

From the bent stilt shacks
reflections buckle and twist
into the slurry.

Against the bamboo walls
there's a broken cane ladder
and a sunken raft

Fish are drying out
on a reed-thatched boat.
The streambed breathes gas.

On village boardwalks
ripples of washing lines,
dead plants in old cans

and for a moment,
an Egret on a mooring post –
the flood waters spreading

the edges all blurred
where a herd of buffalo
dissolves in the light.

The log-boat decays:
in and out of its shadow
a half-life ghost crab.

Seen between the slats
of the suspension bridge there's
a dead fish floating.

Both the slack and firm,
all parts of the cable bridge
oscillate at once.

The jungles are cleared:
a starved dog dozes gently
towards death.

NOTATIONS OF SUMMER

lifting summer breeze –
a leaf in the wood ant's jaw
becomes unwieldy

meadow rivulet
a bankside bee gurgles
in a foxglove

sun on his back
the beetle vanishes
in the pansy's shade

after the end
of the thunder the end
of the rainbow

sunrays filtering
through the blades of grass –
your eyelids lowered

august in the park:
the hot dog man puts down
a water bowl

a hum of summer
electric fan shredding the breeze
through the rattan chair

a view of the hills –
small cumuli of midges
over the horse dung

emerging bats –
between two lines of trees
the sun retreats

spots of summer rain –
you throw a few coins for
the chalk Mona Lisa

at the café
through the vase of flowers
our exchange of thoughts

undulating ears –
a rabbit gallops
among the blowing corn

a nod towards
the sun as it passes –
gold chrysanthemum

trees in full leaf –
the cries of crows
softened by foliage

under the garden swing
ants passing in two lines –
a noise of traffic

HOUSE MARTINS

For centuries this Spanish town
has hardly grown. The last ten years
have changed all that. Now is
the building season. Martins are nesting
and before the tourists come in June
workers are investing sweat to finish
the last hot spillage of holiday housing.

Inward migrations of diggers and cranes
earth-movers, dump-trucks, judder the hills
in a mist of sun and dust. Men's backs
slurry and shine like a map of a mudslide.
The woods and cliffs that frame the town
are gouged and torn. The air resounds
with stone-hammers, tile-cutters, drills.

Through it all house martins return
to old homes in any ancient house
which still remains. Each flask fills out
the half-round overhangs of pan tiles
and parodies the pregnant bowels
of concrete mixers. The birds dash in
and out with the flash of workmen's trowels.

Each folds her flight into a slot
that's fitted to the span of clavicle,
the smallest light-pinched aperture like
tight-squeezed necks of Catalan pots.
Inside a week the fledglings will
emerge to fly the clouds of brick dust,
marvellous in their adaptation.

Begur, Costa Brava.

AN OLD COUNTRY

cool of the duskfall:
only now, in retrospect,
I view this loved lane.

small pool of recall
where midges twitch dark waters;
print of unseen rain.

bats repeat their flight
half seen, hugging the tarmac's
last remaining heat,

they turn and then turn
as if traversing a mistake
once made – not forgot.

ribs field the wry wind:
night falls in a slow-splashed hush
and spills the full heart.

APPROACHING MUSIC AT THE CHÂTEAU DE QUEILLE

Gardens en grisaille:

glissando of rain and the quick
beat of our footsteps.

Our movement mediates
the scented intervals of flowers,
the shower's variations.

A fluid path meanders
between the rose wall
and the sheer side's fall

down to the valley where
the plane trees' fretwork is a suite
of shapes, all fitting, all unique.

Their form conducts the rain
down the infinite design;
bird songs peel and flake.

We sense the rarity,
the frequency, vibrations of wind
and stridulation. Then

the river clears its throat,
birds hush until we pass inside
to hear the shuffle of the choir.

On formal blouses
wired blooms sway with the sound
of the sopranos.

The maestro bows again;
a fall of yellow pollen
arpeggiates piano keys.

THE MODEL YACHT

(for Lutia)

Desirable as ice-cream to a two-year old,
its wafer sails stuck in the luscious cup
of the lacquered hull you reach out to hold
and hug in your hands, tightly, lugging it up,
inverted, by its shark-fin keel. I lift
you high so you can launch it all on your own,
release it to the boat-pond like a gift,
and absorb it's wayward journey with a frown.

We watch it, heads together, spinnaker and mainsheet
hung off one mast, and invest it with lucky
courage against the wave and the wind-beat
right to the concrete-harboured end of its plucky
voyage. You open your arms again, gather it,
and hold it to yourself like your wet baby.

AS GRASS

He only took three days to do it, that young man
who cut the green. Council summer worker, student
maybe, very tanned and keen. Each day

I watched him don protective gear and mask – become
a movie monster, fierce, unknown – an alien
just dropped in: *The Terminator*, hybrid of man

and machine. He hung his swivelled hacker
from his chest and pelvis straps and slashed a swathe
with each lithe swing of his hip. And from my house

across the road I viewed the ancient meadow-land
outside the town destroyed to make a car-park overspill
before our 'Crafts and Country' festival.

It will, of course, grow back again and there's no lasting
harm, except that in my mind has lodged just one more
image of destruction, so blithely, so routinely done.

Nearing the end he feels he knows me. He waves as I
pass by again. And now I'm wondering which of us
has just returned the grin of the blithe reaper.

25 RUNES

The Scandinavian runes were a set of pictorial symbols used before the Germanic peoples had any form of script. Employed from around 1300 BC, they are believed to have been consulted for increasing the power of the imagination, for spiritual insights, for divination and for self-knowledge. The number, names and order of the runes I'm using here are from - Ralph Blum *The Book of Runes* 1982, Oracle Books.

Mannaz: The self

an ordinary leaf,
its route down the running stream
extraordinary

Gebo: Partnership

just for an instant
two Small Blues on the same bloom:
which flight to follow?

Ansuz: Messengers and Signals

hearing with surprise
one broom pod spring out its seeds
I wait and listen

Othila: Separations and Retreat

snakeskin on the heath,
I shift it near to the path
to guide my return

Uruz: Losses and Opportunities

woodland clearances,
the key to a past workshop
in my old jacket

Perth: Initiations and a Secret

pruning the plum tree:
revelation of sunlight
on the blue tit's eggs

Nauthiz: Constraints, frustrations

so-called writer's block,
I go and buy a plug-in
pencil sharpener

Inguz: Fertility, sharing, completion

nestlings leave our porch:
now those swallows have gone we
can re-use the door

Eihwaz: Defence, avertive powers

raised tail and pincers:
how to move the scorpion
out of the main road?

Algiz: Protection, warnings

rustle of sedge grass,
the reed bunting hears me
before I do

Fehu: Nourishment, fulfilment

the abandoned chick
at last takes in some dripped milk
two strangers swop smiles

Wunjo: Joy, light

how long was I there
watching the sunset; sea; sky
my wrist watch aflame?

Jera: Harvest, yearly cycles

not done anymore
the burning of stubble fields:
richness of recall

Kano: torches. openings

through the church door
sunlight on the pavement floor
the thought I searched for

Teiwaz: Resolve and conquest

the top of the hill
and still the twenty four steps
of the look-out fort

Berkana: Growth, re-birth

hike in retirement
the oak that I thought was dead
has grown new branches

Ehwaz: Movement, physical energy

stillness on the marsh:
the horse on the horizon
runs for its own sake

Laguz: Fluidity, water

my wavering thoughts
somehow induce a poem:
grass snake in the stream

Hazelaz: Disruptive natural forces

after constant rain
mud-slips bar the coastal path
we take diverse routes

Raido: Communication, re-union

Martins dip and call
breaking the clear horizon
I see you coming

Thurisaz: Gateway, place of non-action

a teeming medley
striking for the right to work
Marble Arch grid-locked

Degaz: Breakthroughs, transformation, daylight

leaving the sold house
just a glimpse of that rogue mole
in my old seed beds

Isa: Standstill; that which impedes; ice

removal van stuck:
the tail-back on the black ice
thwarts our flow of talk

Sowelu: Wholeness; life forces; the sun's energy

feelings full circle:
the beech in that childhood pic.
still there, still growing

Blank: The nameless rune, death and the infinite

in the clear blue sky
the singing of larks unseen:
dead rook in the gorse

ROMAN HORSE

(Skeleton, 2nd century AD, in the Museum of London)

Born to an earthen patch of a Briton's house
I was sold and stolen, lost, then sold again,
and finally became a Roman horse.

My life controlled by man I had no lack
of change, endured my many owners, born
to be a beast of burden; use my back.

Though small at thirteen hands I never refused
the heavy loads laid on, proud to be strong
until my vertebrae were paralysed.

I remember the lash, the wicker packs; the goad
and smothering panniers which I endured
as long as fused spine and ebbing life allowed.

And I endure still. Since being gleaned
from squared and griddled soil, my bones are shown
in a Museum, re-assembled, cleaned.

My back is braced in steel, re-set, unstressed;
My skull is brushed, kept clean and free of dust,
and I am softly harnessed; brightly dressed.

So I am cared for, protected, hermetically
stabled in glass where I stand, patient in death
as I was in life, content no hand can touch me.

Nor am I denied the safe retreat
of silence, for at night when lights go out
I am consigned again to darkness of peat.

THE ICE SHIP

The ice transporter, Ispolen, set out from Kragerø, Norway, in January 1897 and sank off the Norfolk shore at Sheringham in a blizzard

The ship a floating crate containing cargo
held in place by cold, its critical range
stabilised by an insulation of straw.

No ballast to this ship but the freight itself
and weighing in at over two hundred ton
this brig had bulk and heft enough to carry

the amorphous load and eight souls beside.
Yet, just before the dusk, at core of winter
a driving snow-storm called out to its own.

The precious cargo seethed as the sea smashed in,
liquefied and ran: it broke through the holds,
the wooden divides, roared over the gunnels

in answer to its own tongue, immersed and
immersive; its elusive value drained through
the scuppers, unfelt, unseen, totally dissolved.

There was a rescue: rope flung over the void
of the blizzard and finding, at the last, a hand,
but the ship destroyed and the soul of the vessel

drowned. What was shipped was water's isotope.
What was lost was an abstraction. A load maintained,
briefly, by men, but contained or fathomed, never.

THE ECHO

What can a poet do with the world if not engage it?

— gauge it

What can I offer that the powerful will not abridge?

— a bridge

Doesn't that make poetry a kind of arbitrator?

—traitor!

But I've revealed the world's ills in order to improve it.

— prove it

The world and its words are so contrary I confuse them.

— fuse them

But what if my skill is not enough to even attempt it?

— tempt it

What does it take to find a voice that's unconstraining?

— training

Should I use my rhetoric to guide and to direct?

— too direct

How then are those issue-based poets regarded?

— guarded

Then it seems a poet has no power whatever?

— whatever

So what can I possibly add to the world's well-being?

— being

STATIONS OF THE CROSS

1 THE JUDGEMENT

between trial and trial
wounds already healing
wounds which will never

2 THE CROSS

known already
those still unsuffered steps
into unsuffering

3 THE FIRST FALL

no step but this
on which I fall
and then another

4 MOTHER AND SON

no pain to come
as sharp as this which issues
from her eyes

5 SIMON

another fall

face in the dirt – an ant
shouldering his load

6 VERONICA

not my face only

but the print of women's' grief
upon your cloth

7 THE SECOND FALL

the centurion's cane

whipping across the spine
sappy still green

8 THE HOLY WOMEN

faces of grief

the mirror of compassion
and to be loved

9 THE THIRD FALL

bruise upon bruise
one face in the crowd
not cursing

10 THE STRIPPING

damaged and stained
the wives of mercenaries
will wash out the blood

11 THE NAILING

a pause between blows
the soldier
sucking a splinter

12 THE DEATH

imperceptible
the blood still dripping
now cold

13 THE DESCENT

his face, more than
the clamminess of dead skin,
chills the flesh

14 THE ENTOMBMENT

across the dark
a closing crescent of light
white shroud fades to black

WOLFE'S MONUMENT

The vast plinth recalls
the circumstance of death –
Three small musket balls

Life so brief, so young –
his limestone plinth shows traces
of a crinoid stem

The freedom of snails
to slime the limestone: trapped shells,
the rims of fingernails

Inscription and date
damaged by Luftwaffe bombs –
something about fate

Wolfe's bronze spy-glass –
beyond: Millennium Wheel;
the O2 dome; grass

A green laser flies
from the observatory –
Wolfe's blank eyes

HANDS-ON DISPLAY

(National Maritime Museum, Greenwich)

You choose whatever wound
you want: blood back-lit at the move of your wrist;

a button to highlight the flight
of the musket ball; a slider to plot

how the fragment of epaulette
shot to the base of the spine, gold-thread

worming the bone. In this exhibit
every stain contains a story, interactive, gory

as you like. These are the marks
on Nelson's clothing. Trace them one by one.

Your fingers move the flippant mechanism
but somewhere there's an absent word, a ghost

that haunts the weft of the crimson cloth
and the air-sealed cabinet's lost breath.

OF SEVERAL WARS

I REPORTAGE

relentless sun –
the war-reporter wears
his darkest shades

burning buildings –
on the other side
reality TV

blinding flash
of paparazzi camera
just before bomb blast

sunset through the blinds
spreads on the TV screen
blurring the air strike

his country's colours –
the emblem on his right arm
crumples in the salute

II BURST MAINS

bomb damaged:
children collect water
from the burst pipe-line

spider's web crosshairs
shake in a broken down-chute:
distant sniper fire

mercury tilt-switch –
all the dewdrops on the tiles
descend at once

dust in the air—
a vulture drinks water
from the bomb-burst pipe

the peace of curfew –
a feral dog feels safe
to chew a severed arm

down the shattered street
burst mains run between his legs
and his torso

III SNAKE IN THE DESERT

a red king snake
drawing a line in the sand –
the first body-bag

sand ramparts destroyed –
the soldier ant
seems lost

camouflage jacket –
the young marine can't seem
to find himself

a wide-eyed infant
hugs close to its mother –
heat seeking missile

a new-born cur
suckles at the she-dog –
muzzle of a gun

snake in the desert –
the crooked track
of straight intent

IV MOVEMENT ORDERS

smearing
the army barracks wall
a sunset of red

'one last push'
husband at the war effort
as her waters burst

gravity switch –
dead battery
full of soldiers

policy review –
the bullets now entering
his friends from behind

with the border guard
patrolling the razor-wire
a butterfly

movement orders –
a thousand fruit flies
and a rotting fig

REMEMBRANCE

moon over New York –
the space left around
ground zero

on November nine
the children playing *Jenga* –
our talk resumes

that haunting image –
a spider in free-fall
outside our window

a minute's silence –
more dead than there are
minutes in a day

THE MAKING OF A PACIFIST

Lighting matches under my plastic soldiers
I figured I was more literal and more
Imaginative than my childhood friends. In any case
I sometimes liked to play soldiers on my own.
Out in my sand pit I was absorbed for some days
By the sheer variety and complexity of injuries
That I could inflict on my model army:
Soldiers whose shoulders and hips had melted to flat
Puddled extrusions where once had been limbs;
Others whose khaki clad backs had become twisted
And doubled; one whose headless neck was a flap
Of pulled plastic, and another whose face was fused
With sand. All fell eventually to the brutalities
Of battle: the British; the Germans; the cowboys; the
Medieval knights. All of them needed attention.
First though their injuries had to be enhanced.
I liked to make the wounds more real. I loved
The Humbrol model enamel, the crimson so shiny
And thick. Then, if you mixed up some yellow and white,
You could add all the pink bits of muscle and fat,
The glints of sticking out bone. But then,
What could I do with all these injured men?
A lolly-stick hospital – blood and the penknife
Fell together in the sand – I was not an expert
Surgeon. My mother's dress-making pins

Held arms to bodies. A black upholstery tack
Became a prosthetic foot. Strips of my father's
Rizla ciggie papers stuck on as bandages and
Tourniquets. The permanently seated soldiers,
Made for scout cars and jeeps, were fitted with
Crude wheelchairs carved from balsa wood. Even
Those fighters who, through luck or favouritism,
Had so far been spared were withdrawn from
The front line and given other duties.
A Japanese Bazooka-aimer and an English sniper
Had their weapons cut from their shoulders
And were re-trained as stretcher-bearers.
Carefully they gathered an injured Indian scout
Who no longer crawled but lay, face up,
His crooked leg clearly broken.
When my friend Paul came with his army
To do battle in the sand pit I had to tell him
That my men, though brave enough,
Would never take to the field of war again.

IMAGE

(TV coverage)

On a roof an old flag is coming down,
some inexplicit colour that could be
the rag of any nation, any town.

The jagged silhouette of an insurgent
struggles among divergent winds.
Slung on his back he has a gun.
It is awkward. It impedes his hands.

The square accent in different quarters
falters but it's up, buffeting the cloud
held like a tethered raft in flooding waters

HAIL

Standing in the firing line
of an aggrieved sky
I am hit in the face:

suddenly pelted with pellets
cast down like spent shot
far from the gun while I,

of no account, am simply
standing by. But all the same
it makes me doubt how innocent

I am. I'd turn the other cheek
but which way do I turn
when the assailant is unknown?

LONG SHADOW

Is this a real poppy that you're
handing me?' I ask her
or a poppy by association,

as we lie in a field of hypodermic needles
as we run in slo-mo through a meadow
of bayonets.

'You must catch me to know'
she says and she runs on ahead,
bright in the evening sun

and so I give chase, a long shadow
trailing behind me.

I'm closing the gap but I trip on the draped
corpse of an Afghan farmer that the Taliban have shot
and when I get up my path is blocked
by a massive rubble of cenotaphs

and so I call out
'Is it blood that you've given me?'

'Not this time it's not.'

*'Nor is it medal, nor flag
nor model
for cardboard bloom with black plastic nipple,*

nor a vagina in full flood,

but just a real thing, a flower.' she says, as
I finally catch her

*'Look,
the petals have already dropped.'*

ASSASSIN

Midnight moon has me	Trapped.
I walk the wet streets	
like they were shelves	stacked
with the houses	
he hides behind	emerges
from as I turn;	
ducks down as I walk	deceptive,
a dipping balloon	
some child has daubed	a death's head.
I reach a crossing, am scared	
to breach the pavement's	precipice
where the dark swells	
in moonlight and overflows	with wet night
swilling with emptiness.	
I am hugely conspicuous,	although minute
and my cockroach motivations	
flinch and scurry	under flashlight

NOTATIONS OF AUTUMN

falling chestnut leaves –
the lost kite of last summer
is re-discovered

bunged together
in the knapsack – spare socks
that smell of apple

evening hike
above the tarn –
the moon looking up

passing me by
the tumbling crisp bag
expresses the wind

after the fireworks
the sulphurous atmosphere
tarnishes the stars

thick head on my beer –
the harvest moon emerges
through clouds

King's College Chapel
in the rain – the fan vaulting
of blue umbrellas

she picks the last rose –
the hanging exoskeleton
of a wolf spider

harsh wind following
beech leaves chasing –
in front of me

a curled maple leaf
getting out of the wind –
the flap of her scarf

under the overhang
each raindrop transmits
the cold touch of slate

the window pouring
the eye swimming
the oak dissolving

clearing the pond
plunging my dredging net
into cloud

rain on the window
the drawing room lemon tree
bleared with summer's dust

All Saints' dawning –
Jack-o'-Lantern's mouth
dribbling rain

DRIVE THROUGH RAIN

a constant downpour
plum blossom under
the windscreen wipers

through the cleared vee
of my windscreen – rain
and a flight of geese

the sun sets in the
green traffic light –
should I stop or go?

red red red red red
yellow yellow green green green
red red red red red

what was I thinking? –
lost in the squeal
of the wiper blade

slightly drunk
marvelling at the blue moon
through the tinted windscreen

CONTENDER

Those two spaces
opposite my seat
in the tube – I'm aware
of two faces that might be mirrors
if each had not a contrary stare.

One has a look
that plainly says a place
in the history book
is a seat on a train
that's going nowhere.

The other, no different,
would seem to maintain
that a seat on the train,
– any seat – is a share
in the history book.

16 STATIONS OF THE VICTORIA LINE

WALTHAMSTOW CENTRAL

down the stairway
into the deep rising croon
of a saxophone

BLACKHORSE ROAD

on the same carriage
a row of seven sleepers
in different dreams

TOTTENHAM HALE

The journey's rhythm –
turning the journal pages
station by station

SEVEN SISTERS

tube protocol -
only the baby in the pram
makes eye contact

FINSBURY PARK

across the ribbed floor
the empty coke can rattles
into the station

HIGHBURY AND ISLINGTON

Tube goes underground—
the three girls on mobiles
are all breaking up

KINGS CROSS

a heavy clatter
into the crowded platform
derails my dream

EUSTON

unread daily –
up and down the line
until tomorrow

WARREN STREET

eyes closed opposite
this could almost be a place
of meditation

OXFORD CIRCUS

the dozing drunkard
and the abandoned bottle
rolling back and forth

GREEN PARK

missing her station
the old lady fast asleep
smiles through it all

VICTORIA

the pressure of time –
the woman's face squashed beyond
the closing door

PIMLICO

jostled on the train
a man's legs straddle the smell
of spilled coffee

VAUXHALL

eyes fixed on darkness –
the stream of consciousness
of tunnel cables

STOCKWELL

on the last tube home
two sleepers contesting
one arm rest

BRIXTON

a destination –
through scored graffiti windows
the moon is shining

A REGRESSION

I've grown, it's true.

But London has grown too
around me. Sometimes

I take myself along to Docklands

just to be small again

as if led by the hand to thrill

to the marvels of mass; and yet

at the same time

to make my small comparisons

to contain this world,

made according to the references

that I can understand,

simple and sensory.

So here I am, dwarfed

by the serried shelves of Silvertown

lost among cereal-box Banks,

snack-packets of stacked flats,

towers of confection, square sauces,

squat clusters of condiments,

and all lit by the great

swing door of the sun.

UNDER THE BODHI TREE

(Sri Lanka postcards)

I RATTAN BLIND

first page of my journal
already the insect spray
scenting my thumb print

dark teak and white walls
in the silent jungle lodge
one too-blue suitcase

chanting from the mosque –
the bungalow ceiling fan
rocks in its socket

through the rattan blind
the thin cries
of the Myna Bird

II SUNSET RIVER

the drone
from the Buddhist temple –
another insect bite

sunset river
reflecting on the ceiling fan
your cheek against mine

caught in the bottle
green sunlight pours slowly
into the glass

the gloom of dusk
at its most deceptive
a Scops Owl

fireflies in the trees
the starry sky
suddenly closer

III TEMPLE FLOWERS

in the midday heat
the touch of a temple flower
is cool as snow

in the shade
of a banana plant
a green egret

stagnant rainwater
in the ancient pleasure pools –
a temple bloom

dense green jungle path-
the pink shock
of a Monitor's mouth

two temple flowers
on the pool at midnight –
the free-floating stars

IV PLANTATIONS

light from the palm tree –
the toddy-tapper
drops his cup

a washing line
in the banana plantation –
ragged wind-torn leaves

bullock cart journey –
over the hump of his neck
the distant mountain

in the plastic tubs
of the latex-tappers –
struggling insects

paddy field temple –
below the meditation circle
the threshing rings

V FOUR SMALL DRIED FISHES

morning fish market –
the strip lights waking up
flicker the fish scales

exotic species –
the silver flash
of a camera lens

buying dried fish –
the sudden iridescence
of a plastic bag

bare earthed walkways –
a heap of sun-dried fishes
shades a sleeping dog

VI SUN ON MY BALD PATCH

carved from rock
the Buddha's pleated robes
enfold the strata

sagging strings of flags
under the Bodhi tree –
the weight of its leaves

undisturbed Temple –
a feral dog snoozes
on the sunwheel

from the Buddha's head
a flame of enlightenment –
sun on my bald patch

we rest by the feet
of the bronze Buddha
polished by hand

VII RING OF STARS

dust on the stone lap
of the Sri Lankan Buddha
blanching her blue jeans

smaller than his toes –
the many stone steps that lead
to the Buddha's feet

rain spots on my lens
a ring of stars around
the Buddha's stone head

Buddhist chanting –
the cicadas
also on cue

thinking of home
my postcards blow away
into the temple pool

OLD WHEELS AT THE PIT HEAD

Huge decaying insect silhouetted
on the slag heap. Its long
proboscis probed the earth's
consolidated decay.
Steel teeth, tipped with diamond, turned,
carbon to carbon,
and light down the shaft sought the sun's
dark storehouses.
Buried forests crawled the winding gear
to strange surfaces,
old seas remembered at the pithead wash,
old earthquakes.
The sharp dig of geology reads like
a circular book with no
cover, the first and last pages stuck together
back to back.
Down a jumble of chapters we seem to delve
into our own descent
through two hundred million years
to confront our own origin,
the tangle of man and his world
fitted closely
together, like the teeth of two wheels
sunk into each other
each turning in an opposite
direction: enmeshed
in cross purposes, turning
each other round.

The coal mine is silent now.
 Its skeleton erodes,
but the conveyor belt never
 returns empty.
What unknown jaw is set to grind
 our carboniferous remains ?

BOURNE POST MILL

(Cambridgeshire)

This windmill's not rigged to function anymore.
It looks like it should but it's just been tarted up.

On the old much-renovated floor a vinyl
silk-finish replaces the white of flour dust.

The archivists and arbiters have come and exercised
their preference for past and posterity enchained.

They've chained the sails and wedged all working parts
for fear the untamed wind should wear them out.

Preserved in words, in ever-ready impotence
It stands: a silent poet who shades his eyes

with four great sheets of paper making fine pretence
of seeing far off poems disappearing in the skies.

FRET

The turbine is vigorous tonight,
winding in the wind like wool. Somewhere
a storm is waiting for the light to fail.

Thunder-flies laser a puzzle out of air
but can't fret it together. Who can make much
of their frenetic scribble of repair?

Almost night: creature silent in their holes.
But from the lawn there's a persistent creak.
A toy windmill, it's claimed, deters the moles.

NOTATIONS OF WINTER

waking up to snow:
white outside the window
darkens the skylight

bluer than the sky
the birch trees' shadows
on the snow

snowflakes falling –
my thoughts gradually
compact together

snow on Christmas day –
the pet horse in the stable
stands cold and ignored

New Year's Eve alone –
the old chap on the bridge
chain smoking

winter wedding
ice on the bronze bell
shaken free

clicking my knuckles
under the frosted fronds
of the crack willow

a fresh start –
crackle of the Christmas tree
in the New Year fire

New Year's chimes –
a fox crosses my garden
from this year to the next.

the gypsy's horse
drags his rope in the snow –
a perfect circle

night by the bird bath –
I look at the frosty moon
through a disc of ice

she tests the ice –
a trapped bubble
darts away

carved heart in the snow
the busy footprints all round
approaching leaving

ice tightening
around the treetops'
reflections

winter thaw
butter sliding in the pan
ice falling

A WARMING EFFECT

This snow changes everything:
people lie to themselves, to each other,
wilfully confuse geo-physics
with the local weather.

Conditions are blanked into one relief
that's stark and real but missing a dimension;
the structures show how they'd come to grief
if left without some intervention.

It's a black and white world,
seemingly more white than black
for now, but as it thaws we wonder
will the colours ever come back?

ANALOGUE

Total white-out: you want to touch it
and forget your life, your home,
the screen that shows the patter

of your laptop's small horizons.
You've left the house now, excited
to sink into your own footprints.

Your old purposes blizzard to cloud
and you want to hold the stuff in your hand,
but snow is not sand, you can't funnel it

in your fist and get a timer's fix on it.
Instead, its pixels drift or harden to the touch,
before dissolving in whatever heat

it sources from your skin,
You're surrounded, hemmed in
by what lures you out: a destination.

Overnight it settles like a single thought
and now you think you'd like to walk
this white presentiment,

inveigled to pit dark shadows
of yourself , your analogue,
across its digitally clean contours.

CURSOR

This spell of snow drifts us to the edges.
The wind whites out the brunt of bushes,
and makes us small and homebound, insular.

Out there is our same familiar track made
unfamiliar. We look out on the land's borders,
now roughly shored up by makeshift blizzard,

to where a Dunnock's little probe breaks through
the snow to seek a few remaining seeds
the wind has winnowed from dead plantain.

Its focused vitality, like a cursor on a screen,
engages us with its movement: moves us.
Daring everything, it makes us feel ashamed.

INTER-GLACIAL

Snow, continuing snow. A dull glow
of soft coral; a fragile frondescence
that can hook into a whole and grow.

My mind layers over as if by slow
compression into a limbo of time,
and I'm watching beasts pass my window

silent as centuries. The blow
of white laminate covers their successive
tracks and who'll be there to know

what each has left behind to show
they've ever been? These winter fractals,
shaping endless endings, come and go

and time's intention hides in so
many dead fronds: the fingered frost,
a forked tree's fractured shadow.

Drifted over, my mind is free to go
floating in the light that falls
upward again into cloud. Far below

I see a species that I cannot know
easing my corpse, extinct but with flesh
still edible, out of the ice-floe.

CLOUD

To concentrate, to be aware,
to listen while your own heart stops
though the blood still hums in your ear,
and not be deaf to it until
the long unhearing
 fills the void,
The long sightless stare.

To count the time till time is ended
To shout the seconds loudly and gladly
until the last wind drops,
and a cloud that never more
will move becomes
 your epitaph,
everywhere and nowhere.

A FEW AFTERWORD NOTES

A book of poems stands or falls on its own merits and normally does not ask for any commentary or footnotes. However, as this collection includes a considerable proportion of poems which follow the recognisable three line shape and syllabic structure that we have come to recognise as 'haiku' there might be some benefit in adding a few remarks about the relationship of poetry and haiku in the contemporary context.

A great many contemporary poets have used the form of haiku, or indeed that of the five lined tanka, just as they might reference the recognisable formal characteristics of a sonnet or a sestina. Those poets who maintain an interest in some aspects of traditional forms, may well, in arranging their material and discovering what the poem itself wants to be, find that there are certain qualities of haiku that serve their poetic purposes.

Most often the economic and concrete aspects of haiku can seem a very user-friendly stanza-like unit to construct a longer poem. Paradoxically, we've come to enjoy the insight that what makes a haiku a useful reference point in English language poetry is not only its serviceable shape but its tone, atmosphere and intentions. What is transferable from its Japanese beginnings is its spirit and the ways in which it handles its subject matter: visual awareness, sensitivity to the poignant details of the natural world, economy,

concreteness, expressed experience in the here and now, existential suggestiveness, and resonances and echoes extending from the simplest and most touching of images outwards into other lives, other times.

This concentration on the poetical and structural aspects of haiku is, as we know, only a small part of the story. Haiku, through its long and varied pedigree, has drawn on traditions of self-realisation, of spiritual awareness, often Zen-related, and the desire to cultivate a sense of the oneness of man and nature. It has been used as a vehicle for social interactions, for sharing and confirming quotidian experience, and as a basis for a life's journey of perception.

Never-the-less dictionaries seek to fix haiku firmly in the realm of poetry – this one, at random, from Chambers: *'a Japanese poem in three lines of 5, 7 and 5 syllables developed in the 17c. English verse in imitation of this'*. English departments of schools use haiku as an accessible form of poetry to introduce children to creative writing, to self-expression, and to stimulate the imagination and sensitivity to the environment.

Historically, it has often been poets who have seen potentials in haiku for English language literature: Pound; the Imagists; the Beats; William Carlos Williams and many others. But, despite this dominant general assumption that haiku is primarily a kind of poetry, some will take the view that their

understanding of haiku has very little to do with literary concerns and this view too is perfectly valid.

In this collection however it was hoped that all the poems would be seen simply as poems finding their own appropriate forms. The only sections of the book which feature loosely related groups of individual, stand-alone haiku are those pages which feature seasonal haiku, loosely scattered on the page in the way that haiku journals across the world have generally come to present them.

These seasonal sections re-enforce an overall trajectory in the collection which is a journey through the year. There is a second trajectory that might be picked up in the order and progression of the poems: a transition from early life to old age.

This trajectory is an interior, subjective journey starting from the point of remembered childhood where a kind of intuitive metaphysical awareness underlies our early experience of life and its mysteries, to a middle, more worldly section where exposure to city life, to relationships, to travel and to war dominates one's existence, one's thoughts and speculations, and finally to an anticipation of old age: a maturity which develops a growing detachment from earthly concerns and engenders a new consciousness of, on the one hand, a certain existential fragility but also a resilient core of internal awareness. Through all the changes of life our experiences constantly confirm that we are eternally in the 'now'.

It is this desire to pin down the momentary impressions, textures and tones of the present has led to a collection that contains something the haiku sensibility running through it despite the predominance of poems that employ other forms and other strategies of composition. I hope that the collection has a consistency and direction which is distinctive.

Graham High. October 2014

