

## Aquarius

One of those sovereign days that might seem never intended for the dark: the sea's breath deepens from oyster-shell to inky, blue upon blue, heaped water, crowded sky. This is the day, we tell ourselves, that will not end, and stroll enchanted through its moods as if we shared its gift and were immortal, till something in us snaps, a spring, a nerve. There is more to darkness than nightfall. Caught reversed in a mirror's lens, we're struck by the prospect of a counterworld to so much stir, such colour; loved animal forms, shy otherlings our bodies turn to when we turn towards sleep; like us the backward children of a green original anti-Eden from which we've never been expelled.

## Radiance

Not all come to it  
but some do, and serenely.

No saying  
what party they are of

or what totem  
animal walks with them.

Tobias the street-smart  
teen has his screwball dog.

For some it is stillness,  
or within the orders

of humdrum  
the nudge, not so gentle,

of circumstance. For some  
the fall across their path

at noon of a shadow  
where none should be,

for some their own  
shadow seen as not.

For some a wound, some  
a gift; and for some

the wound is the gift.  
When they

too become one  
of the Grateful Dead, it is

the silence they leave,  
in a bowl, in a book,

that speaks and may join us;  
its presence,

waist high at our side,  
a commotion, a companionable

cloud with the shape and smell of  
an unknown familiar, call it

an angel. At his nod,  
the weather we move in

shifts, the wind changes.  
Catching

the mutinous struck infant  
in us on the off-chance

smiling.

## Retrospect

A day at the end of winter. Two young men,  
hooded against the silvery thin rain

that lights the forest boughs, are making towards  
a town that at this distance never gets closer.

One of them, not me, as he turns, impatient  
for the other to catch up, wears even now when I meet his  
face

in dreams, the look of one already gone, already gone  
too far into the forest; as when, last night

in sleep, I looked behind me out of the queue for an old  
movie and you  
were there, hood thrown back, your stack

of dirty-blond hair misted with sky-wrack, and when  
my heart leapt to greet you, No, your glance

in the old conspiratorial way insisted,  
Don't speak, don't recognise me. So I did not

turn again but followed down the track,  
to where, all those years back, you turned

and waited; and we went on  
together at the bare end of winter, breath from our mouths

still clouding the damp air, our footsteps loud  
on the rainlit cobbled street, down into Sèvres.

## Toccata

Out of such and such and so much bric-a-brac.

Cut-glass atomisers, An Evening in Paris  
stain, circa '53, on taffeta.

Four napkin-rings, initialled. Playing cards, one pack  
with views of Venice, the other the Greek key pattern  
that unlocked the attic door our house  
in strict truth did not run to. A wrist  
arched above early Chopin: bridge across water  
to a lawn where finch and cricket take what's given  
as gospel, and even the domino I lost  
in the long grass by the passion-vine  
fits white to white, four voices in close canon.

Where in all this are the small, hot, free  
-associating selves, a constellation  
of shoes, sweat, teacups, charms, magnetic debris?

In the ghost of a fingerprint all  
that touched us, all that we touched, still glowing actual.

## Dot Poem, the Connections

Before I had words  
at hand to call the world up  
in happenings on a page, there were the dots, a buckshot scatter  
of stars, black in a white sky. Behind them, teasingly hidden,  
the company of creatures.

What I'd set  
my heart on, spellbound, snowbound  
in a wood, was a unicorn, shyly invisible but yearning, even  
at the risk of being taken,  
to be seen and recognised.

What I got  
was the dwarfs, Grumpy and Doc;  
Spitfires, tanks, a drunken jalopy. I'm still waiting, as star-dots click  
and connect, to look up and find myself, with nothing I need say  
or do, in its magic presence,

as from the far  
far off of our separate realms, two rare  
imaginary beasts approach and meet. On the breath that streams  
from  
our mouths, a wordless out-of-the-body singing. On the same  
note. From the same sheet.

## Footloose, a Senior Moment

*for Chris Wallace-Crabbe approaching eighty*

An after-dinner sleep  
Not  
a bad place to arrive at  
The big enticements may be  
a matter of memory but isn't  
memory the dearest  
and cheapest of luxuries  
and of its kind one of our rarest  
gifts  
The footloose present  
Not to be going  
anywhere soon  
The being still  
from toe  
and fingertip to wherever  
at home in our own  
skin  
makes the afternoon  
as it tempers  
its flame and the salt sea-air  
its touch to diminuendo  
as the man says  
dreamlike  
As of a body for the first  
time as I recall it





## Entreaty

After the Age of Innocence, golden brawlers  
in the arms of demigods,  
we arrive at the Age of Reason, credulous poor  
monsters led by a dream-team  
in a mad dance down loud streets into quicksand.

After that it's the Age  
of the Seven Pills daily. Small mercies  
restore us. Bayside air  
salt-sweet in our mouths again, we set out for  
the corner shop, and by some happy chance

it is still there, the same old woman keeps it.  
When the doorbell shakes her  
from sleep, through wisps of grey  
smoke from her asthma-papers, 'What's it to be, what's your poison  
this time, love?' she wheezes.

Is it a riddle? If it is  
I'm lost. The ancient  
grins, abides the answer. I clench my fist on the hot penny  
I've brought; only now, a lifetime  
later, find my tongue:

If luck is with me  
today, on my long walk home, may no  
black cat cross my path, no sweet-talking stranger,  
no thief, no mischief-maker,  
no trafficker in last words waylay me.

## Whistling in the Dark

Seeking a mind in the machine, and in constellations, however  
distant, a waft of breath. Re-reading space

shrapnel as chromosome bee-swarms, hauling infinity  
in so that its silence, a stately contre-dance to numbers,

hums, and flashy glow-stones bare of wild-flower  
or shrub, scent, bird-song, hoof-print, heartbeat,

or bones (ah, bones!) are no longer alien or lonely  
out there in the airless cold as we prepare

to lie out beneath them. Even as children we know  
what cold is, and aloneness, absence of touch. We seed

the night sky with stories like our own: snub-breasted  
blond topless Lolas laying out samples

of their charms beside dimpled ponds, barefoot un-bearded  
striplings ready with bow and badinage, pursued

and lost and grieved over by inconsolable immortals  
and set eternally adrift, a slow cascade

of luminary dust above the earth, with the companionable  
creatures, bear, lion, swan, who share with us the upland

fells and meadow-flats of a rogue planet tossed  
into space and by wild haphazard or amazing

grace sent spinning. Old consolations, only half  
believed in, though like children we hold them dear, as if  
their names

on our tongue could bring them close and make,  
like theirs, the bitter sweet-stuff of our story

to someone, somewhere out there,  
remembered, and fondly, when we are gone.

## Ladybird

Childhood visitors,  
the surprise of  
their presence a kind of grace.

Kindest of all the ladybird,  
neither lady  
(unless like so much else

in those days disguised  
in a witch's spell) nor  
bird but an amber-beadlike

jewel that pinned itself  
to our breast; a reward for  
some good deed we did not

know we'd done, or earnest  
of a good world's good will  
towards us. Ladybird, ladybird,

fly away home, we sang,  
our full hearts lifted  
by all that was best

in us, pity for what  
like us was small (but why  
was her house on fire?), and sped her

on her way with the same breath  
we used to snuff out birthdays  
on a cake, the break and flare

of her wings the flame that leapt  
from the match, snug  
in its box, snug in our fist under the house

that out of hand went sprinting  
up stairwells, and stamped and roared  
about us. Ladybird,

mother, quick, fly  
home! The house, our hair, everything close  
and dear, even the air,

is burning! In our hands  
(we had no warning  
of this) the world is alive and dangerous.

## Garden Poems

### *Touching the Earth*

The season when all is scrabble,  
and surge and disintegration: worms  
in their black café a pinchgut Versailles rabble

remaking the earth, processing tea-bags, vegetable scraps, and hot  
from the press news of the underworld, the fast lane,  
to slow food for the planet.

Plum-blossom, briar rose,  
commingling. Overhead pure flow, a commodious blue fine-brushed  
with cirrus.

In our part of the world we call this

Spring. Elsewhere it happens other  
-wise and in other words, or with no words  
at all under fin-shaped palm-frond and fern in greenhouse weather.

But here we call it Spring, when a young man's fancy turns,  
fitfully, lightly, to idling in the sun,  
to touching in the dark. And the old man's?

To worms in their garden box; stepping aside  
a moment in a poem that will remember,  
fitfully, who made it and the discord



and stammer, and change of heart and catch of breath  
it sprang from. A bending down  
lightly to touch the earth.

### *The Spell*

Needlepoints of light  
rain pick out a web and I am caught. The garden,  
its double iron-barred gate

and the prunus pushing out  
on its own path under paving-stones, floats free  
and trembles. It might be gravity suspended,

or an odd angle  
of time that a slight glance sideways  
catches so that the whole

enterprise unsteadies, no longer instant  
underfoot. What centres it,  
when all has been riddled through

and questioned, is the spider, dark  
death's head paramour and spell  
-binder. Ablaze

in solar isolation,  
it dwindles at the end of its span, its spittle-thread  
of inner fire unravelled

in a riot of marigolds, and the spell so light  
on the senses yet so strong,  
and still unbroken.

*After*

I bend to it willingly, this patch  
of earth and its green things, in their own world  
(though I hold the title to it) hungry for life

and tenure. Here they are weeds to be uprooted:  
a limited easy task, the damp and crumble  
I've lived with since my first

mouthful of it, the peck  
of dirt I'm still working through. All round, a suntrap,  
the garden-glitter of webs. Tree

-spiders that like the weeds, our late-spring sunlight  
colluding, would choke  
the lot to keep their hold. Live and let live? Not yet, not

here. Inside, the phone  
intrudes. Another world calls and I scurry  
in, struck by the coolness of a place that is all surface

polish and appliance. Too late! The message,  
if there is one, hangs  
in the silence, in the air

of abeyance that attends  
on hasty departure: the breathless hush, lightly expectant,  
of After.

## Inner City

A picture-book street with pop-up gardens, asphalt  
bleached to take us down a degree or two

when summer strips and swelters. All things green,  
wood sorrel, dandelion, in this urban village

salad not weeds, and food for everyone, including  
rats and the phantom night-thieves who with barrow

and spade tip-toe in under the windchimes to cart off virtual  
orchards of kaffir limes. Good citizens all

of Chippendale and a planet sore of body  
and soul that needs saving, and by more

than faith-healing or grace — good works and elbow  
grease, a back set to it, compost bins,

the soy of human kindness. In the late splendour  
of early daylight saving, stars regroup

for breakthrough, mynah and honey-eater tuck  
their head under a wing, ants at shiftwork

in their gulag conurbations soldier on; and hunters, clean  
of hand and clear of conscience, down

tools, troop home to pork-chop plastic packs, and gatherers  
gather for hugs and mugs of steaming chai.

The planet, saved for another day, stokes up  
its slow-burning gases and toxic dust, gold rift and scarlet

gash that take our breath away; a world at its interminable  
show of holy dying. And we go with it, the old

gatherer and hunter. To its gaudy-day, though the contribution  
is small, adding our handsel of warm clay.

## An Aside on the Sublime

A Ground Thrush,  
the latest of many such  
occasional companions,

is scribbling the dusk  
with its signature  
tune, a high five

sol-fa-sol-fa-doh, at each  
da capo plainly astonished  
by its own sufficiency.

I stand and listen,  
happy to yield  
the day, the scene, the privilege of being

the one here who will embellish  
the hour with all it needs, beyond  
silence, of manifesto. Which

the land, as it breathes out warm night  
odours and settles,  
takes as an usher's

aside on the sublime.  
A footnote, Eine Kleine Background Music,  
to its blindfold, trancelike

descent into the dark  
to bring back  
tomorrow.

## Sky News

A listening post  
in an open field,  
a green message tower,

each filament and pad precision  
-designed to pick up  
what the four

winds and their attendant  
weathers pour in,  
on the senses, on the skin.

We catch  
at a remove what passes  
between packed leaves and Heaven's

breath as the big sky  
story blows through  
the gaps in conversations,

caught without  
shelter like Poor Tom  
under the wet lick and whiplash



of the metaphysical dark.  
Hunkered down  
in the raw, a-shiver between

on the one side a mad  
king who weeps and blusters,  
on the other his Fool

who wisecracks and mocks,  
he grits his teeth,  
hugs himself

to keep warm, and privy to all,  
illustrious nosebleeds, the heigh-ho  
Dobbin and full cry

of the great world's  
hiccups and fuck-ups, says  
nowt, sits out the storm.