

Bud on a Pearl

Nick Goulder, Spring 2021

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Fantasias I

The Great Metaphysician

Between shadow and space
in the deserted red dust piazza
featureless head protruding
from geometric hypercomplexity
clothing hyperelaborate plinthwork
immune from grief at her lost life
the Great Metaphysician has her back to me.

Evening heat blazes down stifling air
silhouette oblique to natural lightlines
she despises us mortals
thieves dissemblers simpletons
flowersellers knifegrinders
repairers of broken mirrors
drinkers gamblers abusers
bruised bold crippled cold
clothes scattered on the floor
she despises us.

What moondrawn wind is this tugging at my chest?
The unlimited void of night
invades my bedroom
morning rumours ablaze with chaotic
conspiracies prophecies lurching.
Volcanic tephra showers down
I find my metal broad-brimmed hat
and head out to face the day.

Chasing a Hoop

She is only a silhouette
but casts a firm shadow
hair shot horizontal
running toward a cavernous trailer.

Poppies worn this morning wilted fast
the portico behind her fades to infinity
a monk peeps from the ninth small window close below the eaves
she chases the hoop into the stark yellow piazza.

There the luminous statue of Pericles
mistakenly cast by its sculptor
in the image of Garibaldi
will confront her with a wisdom she will not grasp.

Far on the skyline the youth with no memory
salutes her, the moist cloud of his being
belying the dry midday heat
pale eyes fluttering his confusion.

I who watch recall my early years of thirst
your slim waist shrouded
in the penumbra of your caution
as you hushed vast sequoias of yearning.

She chases on, the hoop rolls with intelligence,
poor Pericles looks hurt,
the sallow youth now has something to remember:
that he had nothing to offer.

* * * *

She wanders meanders cadges rides
a skiff drops her on Ogygia
rugged barren skinny-goated
three stubborn olive trees boast gnarled antiquity.

The hoop doubles as front doorway
artful driftwood furnishing
her visionary cave spacious
its fire blazing in her breast.

Her callow youth calls by
noting lavish scarlet carpeting
eager plain white skin
both wilting under piercing Aegean rays.

* * * *

He wraps himself mummy-like
head to toe in a dour blue-grey shawl
turns his back to her, eyes glazed
at the infinite curve of Aegean horizon.

The days pass, she sings, he will not hear
Pericles would not have helped
her hoop lies immobilised
her carpet stained with tears.

I who watch for truth have not aged - I
bring fresh logs for her fire
uncork an *Haut Brion* '82
and fill my plastic picnic beaker.

* * * *

His raft is ready, she designed it well
olives and fresh bread she baked
join on deck with the dour blue-grey shawl
standing far apart their eyes meet.

Zu neuen Taten! he exclaims
her eyes shine in hope for him
their grating destinies are
mutual solitude.

Two Leucothean white-tailed lapwings flutter down
settle uneasily between them
each turns to face a human
in one-eyed profile posing an avian question.

He pushes the raft into the water
the current will sweep it
caressing breezes beckon.
The cloudless sky promises

dancing maidens manuscript paper
renown and hazard.
Waistdeep in rich blue water
wracked in indecision

he lullabies the raft a moment
toys with its vermilion allure finally
lets it go, gestures to the hoop
and turns to take her hand.

White Inmate

Finally my head clears
I do not recognise this sage green room
soft focussed warm evening light sweeps low
I rise and sit by my window
a courtyard, a colonnade
made like an old Roman viaduct four men high
grim greystone walls block any exit
reach above behind beyond the colonnade
yet the evening sun pours past
lighting a yellow dust triangle
where an inmate stands
head to toe in white
even a white cap
motionless, seemingly stress-free
suddenly it comes to me
I am watched
a dark-shrouded nun
loiters in the colonnade
half bent double aching in her groin
a railway clock Daliesque
above the central arch long
ceased to mark the time moons gone
one last waterlily in the forecourt pond
two leaves remaining
a dwarf patrols the crenellated walltop
supervising the outer world
my past
spinning
suddenly reverts
is confused
sage green
past
my

Stories

Maternity by Arkwasiye

Addis Gonder Debarak
and up into the dust of the Simien
eternal blue sky stark under
inescapable blazing sun
vast plunging escarpments
patrolled by Gelada baboons
quixotic mythical Walia ibex
giant lobelias grow five men high
wait twenty years, flower
then die
bearded vultures watch ruthless precise
dizzying above floats a rare tawny eagle
far below the minute ribbon of Mesheba River
but here at eye level it is dust
goats dust *tukul* straw huts dust
cliffs children minding goats
always always relentless vertical sun

we pause in Arkwasiye
Ethiopian coffee roasted before us
improvised pan over open flames
straw all about the very *tukul* walls of straw
impossible hygiene goats behind a screen
all women too many chattering Amharic

then on the trail again
passing two shattered grimy women
rag-clothed and desperate
even in such remoteness shocking
pathetic weak wailing from behind one
I pause and gesture gently to see
sad stricken little face
wrapped in shreds of cotton
nose gummed flies

despising guidance I find a weary ten Birr note
a dollar
nothing to me
but, too humbling to describe
a miracle to her
blushing speechless
she collapses at my feet
emits an incoherent noise
then clasping wildly up at my sleeve
finally kisses its hem

Cooking with Soap

Light ebbing after a long day
taking in *Ras Dashen*
great peak of Ethiopia
in all senses high point of our trek
guides busy for celebration
Sarah Jane and I find a local stream
they discreetly ten metres off
suddenly three local *sētochi* women
arrive surprised gabble at me
quite unlike these calm
gentle dignified peoples
indignantly
izīhi mini iyaderegishi newi
yihi nits'uhi wiha newi
confused I contemplate
bare feet shorts shirtless bald
hiking shirt clasped as flannel
forty six and ninety kilos
not an edifying sight
two of the *sētochi* now
yet more agitated seeing
Sarah and Jane
samuna yit'ek'emalu
yihinini wiha init'et'aleni
inya bezīhi wiha iniseraleni
all conveying no meaning yet
something clearly quite wrong.

We make to withdraw
the *sēti* near me spots my towel
makes a motion clearly asking for it
our crime I do not follow
guidance is no gifts
six days' hiking to come
no other towel I pause
she gestures her own tired thin cotton dress
anger at our wrong presence metamorphoses
into life-weary dismay at the iniquity
our mythical Croesoic wealth brazen
confronting the *sētochi* poverty
here by Ambikwe high in the sunbeaten dry dusty Simien.

Shamed, I have no words for her
even had I spoken Amharic.

Back at camp I find guide Berihun
tell him the tale

he asks where it was
I point
Ah you washed in the village stream
not good
their running water supply
they drink what you added
they cook with it

the worst was the girls
toothpaste and soap.

Note:

*izīhi mini iyaderegishi newi
yihī nits'uhi wiha newi
samuna yit'ek'emalu
yihinini wiha init'et'aleni
inya bezīhi wiha iniseraleni*

what are you doing here
this is fresh water
you use soap
we drink this water
we cook with this water

Sickle Trained

Where bollards are large stones
where soup is warm water with spice
where a goatherd is a seven year old child
the high mountain paths have no signs
after Duwang at four thousand metres
trailing slowly downhill Ian and I
absorbed in conversation
gradually noticed our path fading
slipping off and down
reducing to a thin flimsy pole over a short ravine
we had mistaken the way
lost in such remoteness
aiee a concern.

We stumbled on
found a local goatherdess
sixteen trained in self-defence she
confusedly brandished a sickle
shawled scowled tense as steel
we bearded white-skinned giants
vast back-packs and unknown intent
stopped still at ten metres
no language to convey peace
but a guide book
a handful of phrases.

हामी हरायौं

hāmī harāyaum̐

vital noises *we are lost*

at once she relaxed
readily showed us the way
bestowing upon us the broadest of smiles
such sudden grace
such exquisite unimaginable
unforgettable beauty.

Trail of Dust

A week flies by
our family safari holiday blooms
flora fauna amaze and delight
but it seems to me
we should support local life
donate to the village school
my sons need to see

Africa

not protected game parks
but life on the street
Rashid our guide uneasy
but with encouragement
he sets it up
the drive surprisingly short
cliff edges not so different
to Rio's favelas
we find Mloka village.

Headmaster describes their problems
sixty children per teacher
graciously accepts
cash donation goes into an unlocked drawer
I am glad his deputy is watching.

We emerge into unremitting sun
it is break time
tall white men meet small African kids
in seconds a swarm
inexperienced Rashid brings out sweets
thinking to show generosity
disorganisedly distributes a few
disastrously in no time trouble explodes
a handful have sweets
the rest can see no prospect
hopes dashed this group are in tears
teachers come running
remonstrate with Rashid
we have to leave at once
village fathers may return
already bewildered at enforced relocation
to clear space for the game park
thoughts of their seeing this scene
colonialists causing more trouble
headmaster takes Rashid's bag
kwa wakati sahihi for the right time.

Order is restored.

As we hurriedly move off
the last the kids see
is tall white family
climbing high into their opentop tank
driving away
in a trail of dust.

Gjirokastër Internet Café

You can't imagine. Under Communism
this place was perfect just perfect
perfect health education jobs for all
today it falls apart
outsiders try
backhanders paralyse
just twenty years back it was wonderful
stories of pathetic little boats drowning
we did not need those people
they stay now
no jobs in Italia
cheap tourists here now
three to a table share one coke
you ask why I not charge more
a dollar an hour is good for me
don't give me five
living on one is good for me
now this old quarter
my friend repairs shoes
roof leaks
paralysis no permission
misery of Unesco we have
authorities control all building work
nothing without paying *people who know*
ordinary people have to watch
their own houses fall down
no keep your three dollars
seventy cents will be fine
fifty for your friend
twenty for you.

Charm itself
close trimmed grey curls
could have been my uncle
but another world.

Nic – o –

No no prospect free movement
not in my lifetime.

We were split
fifteen years before I was born
forty years on they still
flash their flag at us each night
I just returned
seven years in Tours
teach to survive
my parents need me
only daughter only child
papa lost his job
such pain so young
can't face being useless.

I never visited the North
you confuse when you tell me
its beauty and desecration
spectacular view Kantara Castle you say
exquisite ruins Salamis you say
no I could not cross the frontier
Ammokhostos everyone fled
lived in tents
we have a Museum of Struggle
yes I studied every exhibit
my head echoes endlessly
Turkish laughter Turkish Tur Tur
our No Man's Land
such a waste
I block it out
so few metres away
we live as though over there
nothing exists

Los Potreros

To Buenos Aires to learn and teach
jaw-dropping experience
seven years after Galtieri
fifty domestic insurers
fifty geriatric owners
heard me speak
family businesses hopeless
ill-equipped to operate
in any way in any case
at the whim of court corruption.

By Thursday Robin and I could escape
we flew to Córdoba
drove an hour up into the Sierras
peace on an old Estancia
potreros open grasslands
enclosures used back in mule-breeding days
plenitude of stones to build walls
three colonising centuries
mules driven all the way to Bolivia
dying in silver mines then
land bought built loved
by an English family
heaven among the hilltops
scenes of lavish hospitality
fifty years earlier

but today dark damp empty
Maria and Pedro climb the hill
greet us like Mediaeval serfs
devotedly exercising the horses
against the day the owners return
a cold but fine supper left
Robin family grandson
welcomes me formally
shows me the large glass window
precariously carried great distances
curse of his childhood
at peril to replace it

we rise Friday horses saddled
walking pace ride some hours
up down ravines around the estate
honest freshness in the air
seemingly limitless rolling beauty
horses interested renewing
acquaintance with valleys unfrequented

down to the *Rio Tercero*
the *Ctalamochita* back
memories of English thighs
horsewatering pause I hear
history tales of Britain
chipping in to early infrastructure
knowing more recent chip-ins
at the *Belgrano*

back at the homestead
on foot to inspect
antique gravity fed water pump
fading lace curtains
lamps from the fifties

Maria is cooking
she and tacit Pedro join the dinner
talk Spanish only
shining eyes her daughter
won a place at university
lonely all those months
rare chance the family returns
chickens goats horses
all kept as though their own

simplest of worlds

most honest of people.

Čovečanstvo Lesson

A side track above Risan
petered out I left the car
sun blazing
on foot stumbled into
the subsistence yard
of Yoann's remote location's
stunning panorama above Kotor Bay.

Three companions
a mule an amiable dog a cat
wispy uncut hair
mariner's grey beard
no chance to resist I was seated
thank you no
 simply sign language
to homemade *rakija* yes to juice
total ignorance of Montenegrin
no obstacle my guide had
 povrće vegetables
of course I must see
proudly he taught me showing
 krompir potatoes
 grašak peas
 krastavats cucumber
 paradaiz tomatoes
all growing superbly
in tidy rows
at sixty gently content
his rickety Bulgarian minicar his
quirky ragged clothes
bright animal company.

Daylight fading
humbled at his hospitality
 čovečanstvo humanity a word I could not ask
I excused myself
drooping shoulders down the track
past the cleanly simplicity
wondering even today
at his cheery Paradais.

Dolcino Ulcinj

You good man, please coll me Hári
Now you like my fish, no?
I catcha myself ave leetle boat
take touristi fish too best fresh-fresh
you like Ulcinj too?
I tell you this one hundred percent
Albanian town yes we Montenegro
mistake drawing border
now bring in others by bus for census
they claim seventy I tell you
one hundred percent Albanian
good chance for me
life much better here we know
my relatives have terrible time
over Shkodër so many years
my brothers sister
I not seen
since a boy
tomorrow you take care
yes we Muslim people here
heavy preacher trouble tomorrow.

It was so. We forgot his warning
played on Ulcinj sands
crowds gathered angry
invective from the pulpit broadcast vast
speaker-bollards blocking the waterfront
politics masquerading as religion
increasing numbers pouring down
we uneasily conspicuous
wrong side of the Mosque
white skins trying to walk against their flow
attracting disturbing glances
slipped into a side alley to wait
still the human stream flooded
caught in the wrong place
like Hári

but today the kindness of a stranger
intervened our problem divined
with no common language
by gesture he guided us back
a gentle man
by grace I had word to thank
Хвала вам hvala vam
and a humble English bow.

Hripsimé, Gayané

Tufa

so many vast blocks
grey tufa brown tufa dark grey
centuries pass
tufa still
architecture unaltered
Voskepan Sanahin Haghpat
Amberd Hnevank Goshavank
Makaravank Noravank
Akhtala
others so many.

Today I visit Saint Gayané Ejmiatsin
abbess mother to forty nuns
among them *bella* Hripsimé
fled Diocletian
four thousand kilometres
word of their purity pursued
pagan Trdat tortured
martyred all
woke to their truth
converted
bequeathed millennia of trouble.

Humbled I stand before this their memorial
three fine sunbeaten round arches
octagonal pointed dome
tufa vaulted ceiling
tall narrow windowing
typical light paucity
exquisite khachkars left and right

purity to the core

truth durable

tufa

Գայանե

Gayané

Հրիփսիմե

Hripsimé

Wearing the Trousers

Back in Yerevan delightful Jakob
had put through the call for us
just ask for Amalia when you get there
everyone knows Amalia
so off we toured *Noravank*
the *caravanserai* of Orbelian
still standing basalt roof
near seven hundred years old
astonishing *khachkars* at Noratus
finally to Dilijan where
far from easily
we located Amalia.

My parents in St Petersburg
no I born here I handle
rooms make jam cook
with pride she showed
old house high ceilings
fittings hundreds of years
dusty deep character
garden extension five
more bedrooms
yes can handle ten room
visitors I two sons big one
in St Petersburg here
my small son ten does
homework very shy he
tries hide his workbook
not ask to see it please
maybe you see my husband
he down no job three years
he helps

Indeed we saw him later
head hunched turbulence
within self shredding brewing between
gratitude to his flat out
hardworking capable wife
jealousy she too good with clients
jam too tasty English too fluent
humiliation his peers
frustration self-inaction finally
anger she had become
his master paralysed
bank debt for five new rooms
she his only solution
but unpalatable worse

perhaps eventually unacceptable
in his world wife never master

my head spun
where might this lead recalling
horror tale Renata
married my old friend
sent to Addis Ababa
six years flourished
handsome house I visited
four servants
resented Renata holding
court Renata deciding
Renata giving instructions
eventually Renata having
to dismiss Alimayu for constant
failure no doubt cultural
revulsion at the woman
wearing trousers

አሊ ሞያዩ

Ālī mēyu in honour of God.

Catastrophe followed
he returned some days
later brutally murdered
her to us incredible sense of
honour Europeanism
does not grasp

pray for Amalia
grace that Armenia
is ultimately European.

Mr Twitching Fish

January Seventh, Hirohito died
our papers reminded us
atrocities scarcely describable
twelve weeks pass
I am in Tokyo
meetings meetings come Thursday
I dine with long-standing Japanese friends.

Ah – so – first time Tok-yoh?
local taverna style
five of them just me from Europe
we have downed preliminaries
warm sake served
typical seafood nibbles
I use chopsticks as from childhood
they are impressed
order more sake
a joy suffuses in me
such civilisation
we understand one another so well

Ah – so – we find speshaw deesh
an indefinable twang in the air unnerves me
waiter hailed takes the order
another beer
another sake

Ah – so – for a moment words fail Tagami-San
as I focus on the deesh
bed of shredded lettuce
supporting flesh of fish
around the far side of the plate
the spine head tail

they are all watching me intently
I wonder why
martialling my chopsticks
when – ah – the spine twitches
my glass is not empty I can
focus on it well enough
did I imagine it
no for sure it twitches again twice more
agonised eye blinks at me

aiee what to do?

Nagao-San, he wants to be sure

leans across
speaks to the hapless death-throic fish
hey you there, little fishy
are you having a good time?

Incandescent I am on my feet
no longer a care
for any courtesy to my hosts
indeed any economic consequence
wild in indignation
words out before thought could test

This was what we remember from the War
In my country we do not do this

Tables nearby suddenly hush
all eyes upon this incredible

外人

gaijin gai outside *jin* person

who he what his problem

long pause

All credit Junji Tagami
grace diplomacy personified
my friend for many years after
the deesh removed recooked
returned without skeleton
Nagao quiet they gently
navigated the party back to good cheer.

Thus my Tokyo nickname
for decades to follow
with respect
even a little awe
but also some incredulity
a hint of unease
Mr Twitching Fish.

Kosovan Survivor

All too easy to join the Liberation Army. The Serbs had treated us terribly for centuries. It seemed that finally we had a real chance to free ourselves. I and three friends were given guns. Unfortunately we were quickly surrounded by many Serbs, really in the first few weeks of the War, with no choice but to die or surrender. They chained us up and took us to a prison in Serbia. I was held there for three years, though the War only lasted a year and a half. They did not let us out when it ended. We were held in a small room, about forty of us, and they threw food in so that we had to fight one another to get a share of it. I won't describe to you the filthy conditions, the lice and excruciating smells.

All the time I was worried about my wife. She and I had a daughter, about one and a half years old then, and I knew she was pregnant with our second child. But I could get no message to her. Nor could she know where I was, nor even whether I was alive or dead. All I knew was that I had to survive there to have any chance of getting back to my family. I had to put aside all thoughts of what might be happening at home.

One day they just opened the door and told us all to get out. I am not good with your language but the words they used were obscene. It was not easy, for we had no preparation, no money for transport, no assistance of any kind. I had not washed for a long time and my clothes were in a terrible state. I had the most dreadful beard and my hair was wild. Somehow I managed to hitch lifts until I got back to the town near my home.

But the worst was still to come. I had imagined that all I needed to do was to get back to the house where I had lived and then all my suffering would be over. I walked up to the door. It was indeed still my family's house but when my wife answered the door, she did not recognise me. She ignored my begging and told me to go away and never come back.

I crawled away and cried like a baby.

But after a time I thought I would find one of my oldest friends and he would help. He knew me at once and gave me wonderful food and a hot bath. We got my hair cut and he gave me clothes. Then eventually my wife could see it was me and I could greet the child who was my son, now nearly two years old, that I had never seen before. It has turned out well. Three years later my wife and I could have a third child. All three are fine. I am lucky to have a job.

Exponential

Budapest three years into Brussels
uneasy city writhing in
irreconcilably grand history
inflated hopes inflating currency
but life on the ground tough
grinding street culture
mentsd meg magad save yourself
pickpockets about
tourists all too natural a target

but beautiful and charming

midafternoon turning fifty we tire
upbeat from rich colours smells at
nagy vásárcsarnok the central market hall
knowing it is barely a kilometre
we hail a cab asking
szent István bazilika St Stephen's
exquisite mosaiced gem
once host to animal fights

cabbie looks angry
we get in uneasily
wild acceleration harsh braking
clearly he has problems
I fear for our safety
mollified surely it will be short
but then I notice the meter
wildly in exponential overdrive
all too like our cabbie
half way to St Stephen
already twice the airport fare
that for twentyfive kilometres
I cry Stop Stop
in fact we are there now
cabbie turns to demand money
meter showing sixty thousand *forints*
three hundred dollars
I get out
Caroline petrified does not move
trembling I tell her to get out
fearing the madman will drive off
door open kidnapping her
but he waits eyes blazing hatred
demanding *hatvanötezer forint*

I summon unexpected *sangfroid*

saying I will call the police
which single word
even in English
creates a miraculous moodchange
still I fear physical assault
Caroline now safely at a distance
I count out eight hundred *forints*
four dollars

heart thumping
drop the notes through the window

and am grateful for sheer numbers
milling around the basilica

Foinaven Joy

Back in '86 we were 28
with a yen for the hills
Ian and I somehow
talked a nun called Linda
into joining good boots
steady hiker a teacher
local to me no
religious vow just
cautious with men
but yes she was up for it
off we drove
first stop Drynoch Skye
featureless boxes for rooms
but a platform for the Cuillin
up up the *Coire a Ghreadaidh*
inevitable Skye mist beat us
down to Glenbrittle for a dip
no costumes
so underwear sufficed
damp when redressing
but not far to Drynoch

on to the *Ceilidh Place*
Ullapool at its finest
happy day up *Quinag*
coon'yag as we learned
ptarmigan on the upper slopes
gentle sunshine reminding
wester Ross can be heaven

then north far north past
Scourie Laxford Bridge
parking by Loch Stack
to hazard the legendary
Foinaven
four kilometres of marshes
five more to the *Creagan Meall Horn* col
spectacular shimmering grey scree
the silver *Arkle* horseshoe northwest
seven more to *Ganu Mor*
the Foinaven summit
rubble all the way
mist blanketing down
yet seven more back to the col

finally a pause
Lochan na Faoileige

wee loch of the seagull
for an icy swim
Ian and I stripping
Linda at first preserving both
the dryness of her bra
and her modesty below
but the joy of the moment
achievement of a great hike
clean water
glorious air
fine camaraderie
deliberately discarded
now wet knickers
which Ian thoughtfully wrung out

and we could be
deliriously content
Platonic of course
she was a nun
and whipping cold
as the light started to fade
still six kilometres to trek

but a happiness I think
she rarely knew.

Mistah Vertigo

Lemm'a mayk ye sum tay
such simple kindness
we had randomly knocked
long before mobiles
we needed a taxi
Na tayl me
hood'ya get yasselves hier
an what kin' o'an ordeal
hae ye been putting this youn lassie tru

From Sligachan up the glen
eleven kilometres past *Sgurr Hain*
to Turner-famed *Loch Coruisk*
holy in its misty stillness
cradled by forbidding Cuillin
An thayn b'tellin me, hood'ya pass
that wretched Bahd Stayp
our host knew the trail
the Bad Step indeed tricky
great sheet of sheer rock
more vertical than not
catastrophe of jagged rocks
and unforgiving Scavaigian sea
awaiting any small error

we had been cautious
climbed the safety path
settled for lunch already
well tired from the marshheavy trek
beyond the great sheet
but still in view
There is trouble there
I said without thinking indeed
five youths were shouting
had done so fifteen minutes
so we trailed back
the four below were bleating
panicstricken one on a ledge above
head spinning with vertigo
paralysed no exit up
steeply hazardous slide down
angled badly even as quaking
he shouted heedlessly

What's up polite to ask even
when it is plain our seniority
albeit just ten years commanding

pause in the wailing two of them
had already gone seeking help
four hours' trail each way
a forlorn idea. Ian and I looked
up down left right no easy options
jagged rocks near vertical below
waving a grisly welcome to any slip
and subliminal a cultural worry
we did not understand these youths
Mancunian evidently no mountain men
but with determination it seemed
You four please step over there
managing downwards the hysteria
key first step then a two man
human ladder
angled diagonally up
Ian with a viable foothold
spread full stretch
hands above head providing
foothold for me full stretch
angled again
providing hands for Mistah Vertigo
eight inches
five inches coaxing him
the trainer contact solved it
any convulsion could have swept
all three down
life risk far beyond estimate
Ian and I white with fright
Linda pale with concern
but in a moment
all five had gone burst
like a soapbubble.

Och, ye deid all tha'
an' then walked all the way hier
Kirkibost another eight kilometres
An this lassie shiverin, och
I nivver, ye'll be needin cayk.

Dear man, he would not hear
of using his telephone
but silencing all offers for petrol
drove us home
forty-five kilometres
each way

for which we tried to express
a gratitude we had not received.

Hegra Alliance

Greyest Trondheim skies
opened to flood *Stjørdalselva*
river of the valley of *Stjør*.
Angling abandoned
we visited little *Hegra*
two German associates
our Norwegian host and me.

We explored
fifty years' concrete decay
once built against Swedish threat
briefly Norway's final resistance
pathetic small bunker
home to a brief gesture of courage
it seemed yesterday
a hundred and ninety men
one woman
garrisoned under siege fast
starved into submission.

The tiny museum depicted the tale
Klaus, Uli enthralled
especially Klaus' eyes glistened
look how quick we were, he gloated
I astonished
stomach contracting
gull grey floorboard suddenly of better interest
Jon pale white.

Serendipitous, Jon and I found excuses

once in privacy Jon could whisper
thank God you were here
and we breathed.

Wildlife Seminar

Flight Oslo flight Alta
helicopter *Ladnja jav'ri*
surreal marsh terrain
gaunt grey flat cloud low
occasional decadeweathered antler
despairing dwarf birch bushes
grimy greengrey marsh grasses
constant slow water trickle
unseen sun circling looping
ten degrees up south midday
five degrees up north midnight
north of Finland Norway
the *Finnmarksvidda* plateau.

We bivouacked
nearest house Kautokeino
fifty kilometres west
truly middle of nowhere
inflated our canoes
launched into the *Karašjåkka*
paddled gamely downstream
depth barely sufficient
occasionally stepping out
pushing rubber through shallows
jav'ri lake *jåkka* river
we reach *Buol'ža jav'ri*
home for two further nights
surreal bewildering marsh terrain
gaunt grey flat cloud low
not a hill any compasspoint
more decadeweathered antlers
more despairing dwarf birch bushes
grimy greengrey marsh grasses
constant slow water trickle
unseen sun still circling looping
ten degrees up south midday
five degrees up north midnight
and midges vicious midges
midges by the quadrillion
we humans disoriented
but midges knew twilight
where sun never rose or set
only campfire smoke strong
breeze ferocious chemicals
could discourage their passion.

Final afternoon returns
the helicopter doubling our

remote gathering
this group without sense
of our commercial host's vision
to teach true rural Norway
instinctive response to
uncomprehending wilderness
of cultural gulf
the bottle bottle cue
drinking frenzy four days'
supply in four hours
wild threats shouts
disrespect to our hosts
who dismayed stayed sober
with me and Hans-Peter just
thirtytwo steady Bavarian

by two in the morning
some collapsed zipping
tents tight against midges
but Roger cheroot-smoking Roger
blottissimo Roger decided
irrevocably time to go fishing
horrified crazy plan icy waters
chaotic disarray all sides
but Roger would not hear
climbed into an inflatable canoe
Hans-Peter swapped a glance with me
no deterring him so
what staunch responsibility
he joined Roger to parent him
twenty years his senior
more campside singing
from the stragglers I wait
midgecursing by the *jav'ri* edge
tremulous foreboding
for inevitable splash

little excitement for a few drops
of water on their slow mazy journey
north through *Karåsjok*
out west of *Varanger Halvøya*
to the *Tanafjorden*

which duly came some hapless fish
nibbled dizzy Roger leaned forward
bloodrush into deepcold
icewater head first
no words sufficient for Hans-Peter
certainly saved his life
cheroots truly soggy
good news for the midges

safely home I contemplate
the scoutknife generous gift
brutal sharp blade
handsome Norwegian leather case
inscribed *Nick Buol'ža jav'ri*
think of my principled hosts
Jon Fridtjof Bjørn Arvid Harald
like all Norwegians versed
in nature scoutskilled
reverential to their land
mothers fathers waters duties
and wonder what Roger
and his group
learned
from that wilderness.

Fantasias II

Return to the Castle

I who had been pruning apple trees
watched him cross the old stonearch bridge
riding bolt upright black armour
black horse black flesh black
blood black bristles protruding
no doubt even black horseshoes
clopping on the cobbles
how many years he had been gone

it seemed his heart had died
did not ask after Elsa his wife
no word on the good state of
towers granary chapel
nothing on the healthy apples
long gaunt face motionless
as I prepared his meals

two years passed finally I
summoned courage asked
how it had been
he chewed on silently
finally decided to speak

Four years we besieged Tel Akko
bitter sun brutal times
barbarous fighting
they defended crazily one tomb
tomb of Prophet Salih some
tale of a she-camel
we lost so many knights there

then I joined with Sigurd Magnusson
we seiged Saida
crumpled pathetically
there
there in an old *hana*
that I met a *rajul hakim* Ja'far al-Şādiq
not the old scholar but of his school
he taught me the madness of it all

Osiris, Hades, Pluto all underworld gods
Shiva, Seth, Poseidon destroyers
Horus, Artemis, Diana hunters
Hathor, Parvati, Aphrodite, Venus for lovers
wherever you go there is another
name for the same thing
and, worst, Ja'far al-Şādiq

reminded me, the Mussulmen
have Shaitan, our Satan
they are the same

(shouting) the same.

Two more years back in Bergkvara
his face slowly recovering whiteness
finally *he* asked me one question

where are the swans
Elsa had always loved the swans

Cut at the Fulcrum

See-saw Assisi
mountainous weight of Giotto and Pope to the northwest
economic party to the southeast
my room poised at the fulcrum
seventeen fingers of sunshine
splaying from the evening west
silver slither of moonlight
gracefully lacing east
my seven-stringed lute
protrudes from my brain
my atonal melody sings with glow
though I do not pluck its strings
triangles rhombi parallelograms
ingeniously soldered together
regulate my thought structure

Clumsily I switch off both sun and moon
seventeen fingers now etched
inverted in black on my left eye retina
the slender moonslither likewise
inverted in black on my right retina
hoping in this darkness to see more clearly

scenes from Bonaventure flicker
around my darkened skull
even worse for Francis
preaching his congregation with no language
his friends overhear
prenditi cura di te stesso they sling
don't worry for us,
look after your own problems

*Weialala leia
wallala leialala*

return it to the Rhine
in this confusion of voices

I in self-selected darkness
disconnect from the maelstrom

you fluent in the m \acute{e} l \acute{e} e
hold your purpose

my rustic bass voice
my modernist atonal melodies

evaporating melt in the air
like glaciers

you tossing
prenditi cura

we trail back reflecting
still exquisite façades
Basilica di Santa Chiara
Cattedrale di San Rufino
Santa Maria Maggiore even
Chiesa di Santa Maria sopra Minerva
that Roman tribute to the Greeks
half submerged in tourist flotsam
gaze up to Corinthian columns,
and wonder at the chaos
and momentary Giottan glory
of the interval.

Shrunken Temple

The temple has shrunk to a sentrybox
the midden steams six houses high
the sofa has displaced the mattress
brownness pervades
perhaps a mauve shimmer to the dawn
a golden faecal glimmer to the lawn
we built a beerhall
rats and ale
soon we swim in zeroes
coffins banknotes
no-ozone zones
fazed
hard to distinguish night day
summer sky
sofa surfing standard
faded pale ale
fat rats totter high heeled
far-fetched faith in sentries
umber fleas in the carpet
caput mortuum
among copper oxidules.

Fragmentary Solitude

Gracious patient Caryatids
shrunk in my mind's eye
poised back facing me
blurred double an octet
waiting to dance
acropolitical slopes seeming volcanic
have rolled a single pillarfragment
four kilometres away
to sink gently into the auburn
greyblack dust before me

wisps of cirrus floating coolly
in the grey November sky

but watch:
born from the neck
of beheaded gorgon *Medousa*
a golden shimmering *Pegasos*
accompanies a white plaster
horse-sculpture
effortlessly drawing it
across my eyes
they head for the sheets of snow
but as they pass
Pegasos whinnies
tossing his frothflecked lips
in warning in wrath in wilfulness
I cannot discern which.

I ponder the dustbed
the elegant entasic tapering
of the pillarfragment before me
it poses me the question
do I know where its friends might be
for which my best reply asks
does it know where mine are
it is wise and compliments me
for I have been wonderfully blessed
with kindness so many old friends
yet this poor pillarfragment
we converse thus lightly
its explanation of its religious leanings
I cannot follow
but I am moved by its loneliness.

People

Amanda

Spectacular lightning and thunder
not unusual in South Africa
next to me visibly miserable
is unknown beautiful
twenty six me thirty eight
plane largely empty
minutes tick by so many
I start to wonder
does the pilot fear the storm
hail heckling down violently
stinging wings and fuselage
another whimper to my left
Ah I am sure it will be fine
words out before giving thought
it turns out she welcomes the comment
she asks what I think
a plausibly scientific reply emerges
although truly I have no idea
but it provides ideal assurance
she wants to talk
cleanliness of speech thought
directness honesty
the long delay to take off evaporates
as does the flight
she is engaged
boyfriend in America
business trip
eleven days to survive
she has had a week in Durban
kind friends but now back
empty house awaits
we land my thoughts turn
one final night and then home
she offers me a lift to my hotel
safer than a taxi
city of violence
we collect bags and emerge

she has three friends meeting her
I try to excuse myself for the taxi
no she insists we squeeze in
friends' eyebrows a little high
their chat positive but
it covers social unrest
it's '96 street crime rife
carjacking commonplace
thirty a day

me silent in a third seat row
slowing into a suburban office carpark
we pull up she tells me
here, this is my car
we swap the cases
her friends drive off

now one on one again she asks
would I mind coming to her house
for the night
no don't misunderstand
I am simply scared
true she looks it right to be
city of violence
she mentions a security guard
it strikes me
more money for him
in inviting burgling friends in
her home perhaps ransacked already

So I ponder her request
such a sad moment
she never met me until two hours before
fiancé twelve thousand kilometres off
empty highwalled house
electronic gates waiting
to admit trouble alongside the car
yet – perhaps thus – she trusts me
to stay with her
begs me to do so
exquisite beauty
graceful eyebrows tender
complexion soft direct hair
large eyes pleading

this is culture clash
not her and me
but the tail end of colonialism
the pain of the *Pieds Noirs*
the true locals
claiming their heritage
one way or another

here in this safe
Rosebank suburb hotel carpark
miniscule submicrocosm
of all that iniquity

But I have my hotel booked
flight home early next day settled
tired as ever from the trip family

phone call home promised
impossible to explain as well
should anything go wrong
too many ways it could

She can see in my eyes that I can't
leans across the gearstick
haunting tears welling slightly
gives me a gentle warm
kiss on the lips
ruefully
and lets me go

Picking Up Olivia

A sunny summer's day party!

About fifty gathered to launch a friend's book
many of them unknown to me
we lounged around the garden in the sun
some by the river some by the roses
What about tennis
shoes or not four old rackets
slightly flat balls what a freedom to knock about
mixed doubles Lara trying not to wreck her sandals
Olivia barefoot on the tarmac but a natural ballplayer
forehand backhand grace itself.

But the tarmac ate at her bare feet
winning she played on too much fun to stop
all too quickly she had to
suddenly even the grass was uncomfortable
yet a long stretch of gravel to cross
to the house where she could bathe blisters
some instinct took me who barely knew her
surprised but delighted she accepted the lift
goodness knows where the strength came from
forty or forty five kilos surely
at the threshold I could set her down
delicately
and leave her to find a bathroom

yet in those few seconds of closeness a tiny folly
of a tragedy struck me
quite absurdly I had been arrowed
by the magic of this beautiful girl twenty
years younger who had of course
no interest in me whatever

years later it stays with me what
became of her and how can I forget?

Thoughtful Beggar

I briefly escape the promenading crowds
find an exquisite Kensington square
handsome shared garden immaculately tended
forbidding gaunt Victorian railings
fencing all four sides
gravid gates bearing the intimidating legend:
 For key-keepers only.

Thus do surrounding plutocrat mansions
protect their privilege.

Nobody is within to appreciate it.

But look, a dishevelled beggar stoops ahead of me
straggling wide-brimmed hat
ragged coat tatty shoes
draw my eyes to what has caught his attention.
It is a cigarette butt, which he thoughtfully
extracts from between the tidy paving stones.
He pauses debating its worthlessness
and considerately –
for the greater good of the exclusive absent minority –
jettisons the offending scrap within
over the railings.

Majemba

Louche tourists gone
dusty market closing
we idled through, too late it seemed
pink Zanzibar sunset fading
clear light crumbling walls
patrolled by mangy cats

But one older trader had not done
rosewood carvings neatly laid
out redder than his skin
brown wrinkled in the unforgiving sun

Sir Sir

Too old to buy trinkets I thought
looking nonetheless, the usual
semiskilled efforts, typical
African heads animals no birds. Yet
one caught me, in a second it
had a name in my head

Majemba!

A majestic elephant.
Forty five dollars.
No, fifteen before I could stop myself
Forty five, halfway between pressing and pleading
Pathetic thoughts
of the nuisance in carrying it home
No, fifteen, and the sun dropped
below the horizon as I turned to leave

Sir Sir

He took my fifteen
in quiet discreet honest dismay mentioning
he had nothing else to buy his dinner worse
it had cost him more to acquire Majemba.

How dignified he
How shamed shabby I
miserly miserable disgrace,
another louche tourist.

Papagena Panhandler

Toronto twilight, turning chill
the busiest of streets, late for dinner
finance people, I am
suited but ill at ease.
But where is it, this chic-niche restaurant?

The pedestrian stream of stressed commuters
strides relentlessly by, heads hard
focussed on the sidewalk

Who to ask? Ah, a panhandler
gratefully catches my eye.
Grimy rag-tatty, face of
pulverised despair, she is surprised
to get a question. Ah, local geography,
an unfamiliar smile spreads, surely she can help

And in a trice her age halves, briefly I realise
she is young and could be beautiful

another moment alas she realises
even this address fifty metres away
she does not know. An old misery
descends

the chill bites

I need to move,
recall the moneychanger only gave me fifty dollar bills

not the change she had hoped for

her face thirty years later
still with me

Another of Those Girls

When they're older they pick a pitch, an
eye for twilight gusts
a winter like this
stake a brief claim to
a patch of common pavement
atonal voice betraying zero
expectation zero
even thought for a plan
zero and hack it out

the younger ones are on their feet
if they're talkative they've
often embellished their tale

this one had watched me
followed me came upon me
please can you help
so suddenly I heard
it
before I realised how
close she was something
in the honest eyes a fresh
nervousness an educated voice a
genuine hope

aiee the pain of hope aiee aiee

but further apart than 61 to 16
in a Canterbury street
me sure of my being
she asking

close to despair

me idling time not to be early for a dinner
she urgent

Far too late 62 now I figure
me almost sure of my being
wrong (lazy harsh mean-spirited)

At least I could have listened

so many

Lost Memory

Tumbling to greet us the Serchio
as we pass Borgo a Mozzano
we untumble zigzagging upwards west
twenty miniature hairpins
scarce four metres wide
to unpick the locks of a summer villa
gathering family friends
breakfast eggs served by host
our *maestro delle uova*
down steps two centuries old
lunch beneath the *castagne*
walks in Apuan Alpine woods among
old derelict farmers' cottages long
forgotten terracing painstakingly cut
abandoned in the thirties
reclaimed by nature
scenes now of birdlife
ants beetles occasionally
a copulating pair of wild boar
walks down old hunter paths
past *L'occhio di Lucca*
hilltop warning tower
to the timeless holm oaks and
slowly decaying grey masonry
of San Bartolomeo hermitage.

Tending the villa each year dear Roberto
patiently pruning olives
watering hibiscus stowing logs
chaotic conversation in our
shabby Italian but generous warmth enough
we were invited to meet Enrichetta
up an ancient exterior stone
rainless stairway to their
tiny two room stonewalled home fitted
oddly into a crumbling damp old mansion

welcomed as though oldest friends
glowing human kindness
brilliant blue eyes
greying youthful smiles
alas sweet Enrichetta suffered
not daily pain but total amnesia
for all bar her first two decades
still speaking French faintly
recalling her wedding knowing
Ninetta charming daughter

sole pride of their lives
but nothing else to pass the hours
she crocheted elegant little creations
placemats in soft brown cotton

such an honour to be admitted
such a simple limited world
yet *gentilezza* of a distinction
truly rare to find,
mutual devotion of great depth
where they had so little else.

What could we do for them?
Roberto somehow conveyed
he understood Caroline painted
perhaps a recreation of their wedding day
passing a much-thumbed old print

a year later we returned with
an inadequate oil a gesture
embedding the fact of the event

greeted with rapturous weeping thanks

but far short of expressing their love
in the poverty of a decaying
depopulating misty mountain hamlet
a humbling wealth in simplicity.

I, the Albatross

(after Neruda)

Salt-betrothed bird-poet I swoop among tainted winds
aspiring celestial geometry of line sacred thoughts
whirling in cyclonic turbulence not alone
in nesting on the slopes of turmoil
for countless gulls guanay cormorants
manic storm-surviving petrels
even Magellanic plovers as I wander
angular companions in my strife
to write amid platinum spray.

Golden-billed grey-headed pelagic
no honey-house woven of vine fibre covers me
no freshwater draught quenches
never a community gift.
If I survive streaming torrential gales
whipping green pikes of defiance
among fawn reef flaws rent by the flimsy dawn
is it pure prophecy breathing into my feathers?

You who search my nest for eggs of emotion
who seek to disembowel my disharmonic oceanic cawing
Give me your immobile salt-strewn statues
your wind-forsaken citrus flowers
your savour of an infinite homeland
give me your ice-locked heart.

Soldier at Play

(after Neruda)

Ah, the lightning sharpness of yellow orchids in the hair,
young hips, primary colours of her toe-rings,
necklaces which I carefully remove,
giving them my grave, prolonged attention
enhancing my surprise and joy as
I weigh each limpid candle-lit arm.
Ambitious fingers whisper up her softly breathing leg,
discreetly détouring grand triangular curlicues
to reach twin white-oil lamps, sweetly
energetic. Welcoming undulations renew
embers I had thought abandoned;
funereal objects, useless weapons, glower
down from the dusty mantelshelf; waters of night,
tears of monsoon, salt saliva match
the exquisite humidity, as the God of Substitution
keeps watch at my side,
breathing stubbornly,
steeling my sword
while I melt in the heavenly orchid aroma.

Fat Red Oxen

(after Neruda)

Fat red oxen grudgingly plough his eyelids apart
each day prising his life open
Air and dreams his paltry sustenance
wisps vanishing gone without recall
half-paralysed limping from problematic youth
pumping still uneven rhythms
cajoling sun up or down a solitude
To shambled tragic jerks.

So like a look-out now both dull and blind
disbelieving he stands condemned
to shameful ambush
facing the wall into which his hours melt.
The masks he wears pulverise his cheeks
bloodless drooping
fading white magnolias
as he steels himself
To be stubborn as oxen before he dies of duty.

Tribute to Bouncy

Hyenas wolves African wild dogs
all enjoy uneasy respect
not often accorded to strays
but in Khania
feeder to the Samaria Gorge
to alluring Aghia Irini, Gramvousa
Souyia swimmers Souda Bay navals
my friends Philipp and Leila
open to joy in a spirit
had their hearts taken.

Bouncy and his associates
formed a tatterdemalion bunch
mangy half starved leptospirotic strays
mongrel miscasts meandering around a hillside tip
tolerated somehow by local culture
faces scarred from foodfights
threadbare coats no match for winter
untold fleas ticks lice
suspicious eyes betraying boot fear
one or another disability readily visible.

But Bouncy had personality for three
optimism of a terrier
level charm of a collie
perhaps joy from a third breed too
skulked with his mates as default
yet whenever Philipp and Leila were near
his sharp nose told him
dropping whatever dog-conversation
bounding out he came
How are you today? So great to see you.
Have you by any chance ...

Naturally knowing his hunger
not possible to forget an odd half burger
their daily walk roused
come greet leap
that irrepressible
enthusiasm
generosity of spirit
half the size of his mates
but warmth and energy
incomprehensible with his lifestyle.

Trust grew one day Bouncy followed
his human friends back to their home

caution Bouncy
three months' time we leave

Bouncy himself eyes narrowed
high walls high metal gate

no even with proven friends
being locked up was not him

some dogs
even strays
have higher principles
than humans.

Married to a Horse

Old Testament Prophet
tramp sage and recluse
farewell dear David Ahn.

Uncut unkempt hair
ragged stringheld clothes
rubberbooted potterer
always found near his moss-thatched icy cottage
dark down an overgrown bridlepath
Victorian turtle hibernating within
old smithy anvil without
untidy heaven for a master farrier
lifelong lover of horses.

Girls came went could not compete
with Cloudy then Darley then Lily
he planted an apple orchard
in their honour
minced carrot pea apple
raw potato shared the result
more than half for the horse.
Brilliant mind inventor of guns saddles
taught me about Bretton Woods
thoughtful on politics economics thrived
selfless on news of my world
gentle soul befriended badgers
foxes deer all came to his door
knowing he knew their favourite food.

Eccentric to a fault dear David
could not stand medicine
not for him nor Cloudy Darley or Lily
one day he collapsed
four times I found him in
the hospital he saw as a prison
warders out to poison him
touchingly grateful for a visit.

They took his last horse away
too long ill for want of a vet
a Lily too much loved.
It broke his heart
fading strength in her field
straining to root out ragwort
his ashes rest with his horses.

Oceanic Once Wife

Here inland Notus the South Wind grows in silence
he has one leaf remaining
a page of poetry by
a battered añáñuca
and a weary pata de guanaco
decorating vast dry sand-flatness.

There among the waves lies the corpse of a mare
swept in from a wrecked vessel
her eyes died of dead water and gulls
needleholes whose width is bitterness
where bruised pilchards chase emeralds
skeletal riders presiding among
poisonous myrtle mother-of-pearl rusting
revolvers debris of the coastal seabed
scrabbling about her cheeks
devouring brain of bankrupt salt.

Yet for me yet not for me
here battered by the añáñuca
the moon delivered a different wreck
a *serenissima* who drew no sinister fish hunger
who measured the ocean floor worm-drilled
by persistent waves a fisherwoman in her blood
effortless among the endless seaweed
leading in her new home a clean life
retaining distance
her eyes
still bright with strength of reconciliation.

Fantasias III

Il Ritorno di Ulisse in Infanzia

Epic no more
Ulisse has moved on
Ithaki has shed its star
he merely occupies
the floor of a spare room
his grand Aegean vessel
now a simple dinghy
waves no longer stormy
Leucothea long forgotten
he sits up alert
rows with mild intent
just four metres from
one coast to another
grannie chair west shore
to maid chair east shore
but he prefers his dinghy.

So Penelope, were you so disdained?

Agamemnon, thus forgotten
by the mind which gave you
δουράτεος ἵππος the wooden horse?

Telemachus, take care
for your father is
a child once more.

Dedicated to Dodona

shift the camera
pilgrims flock
queues middlemen time
weary ragged shoes

scrambled bedding
profiteering suppliers
heady mix religion potent
hash brew unexplained

short notice non-performance
mystical Pythia young
untouchable recognised
mouthpiece trained

washed fed inculcated
puppet of a rustling oak
voice of a black dove
wrapped in blue-grey shawling

shift the camera
wily troika
hidden behind dank
tatty curtaining

source the hash from Ktesiphon

تيسفون

a trusted Dorian delivers
slick shuttle service

run middlemen like a mafia
maltreat the hapless donkey
of a janitor who permits
foul breezes from their tawdry privy

shift the camera
I who come barefooted
a hundred generations later
find Pythia everpresent

her mouth moves fluently
is it my ears?
no sound save rustling
for the oak remains also

but I read her lips
youthful fresh lips
soundlessly enunciating
in delicate clarity

O earnest wanderer
embed your soul

enjoin its vision
engage its youth

extract its truth
enact its mission

endure the folly
enrage the lies

extend lament
emerge content

embrace
enrich

enchant
enthral

lips evanescent to leave
me alone that day
just twenty five
ah what lips I could read then

Remainers

You wonder who remained
so much appeal to joining up

the promotion blurb:

Visit the legendary palace in Colchis
Glimpse noble King Aeëtes
Thrilling Black Sea boat trip severe
risk of drowning not mentioned
Open up new trade deals
Chance to improve your Megrelian
მეგრული *megruli*
not much skiing near Sochi though
Check out the latest in bronze weaponry
Don't miss Medea's villa,
see the grove where she entertains
visiting fleece-grabbers.

Left behind in Thessalia
the lolchians contemplate life under
powerhungry Pelias
brother Neleus kicked out
stepbrothers sleeping with the fishes
uneasy streets not many
raves or parties
the older generation
recumbent bearded reciting
the Homer that no one had yet written down
a spinster meandering looking for
sympathy and conversation
a pair of posers strutting in the *plateia*
flashing a scarf or a flag
but the buzz of the place
distinctly subdued with the *Argo* sailed.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose
as north wind pufflebag
powerhungry King Boreas
kicks down half-brother Goveleus
not many parties these viral days
the Rattles head for Bavaria
Teresa meanders
while the silent majority
roll their eyes.

Orestes in Colchis

We have had a few skins, my friend,
but I am not that gone. You say you're
some Prince yet barely spent a day
in whatever palace. You've a sister
you never knew who was killed
on the say-so of a soothsayer.
You've murdered your mother's
second husband, and she's topped herself
thanks to your troubles. You've
another sister who danced herself
to death. Then you come here,
you don't speak Megrelian, you
look pretty washed up if you don't
mind me saying, and you expect me
to believe all that
and to get you an audience
with King Aeëtes?

*Dark hollows once my eyes plunge
stretching caverns down my cheeks
skin once white now blood red
sweat dripping from each forehead curl
brain grunge leaks down my spine
stumbling as I must still reeling
how did it fall to me?*

Step this way:

You may have picked the wrong spot,
young reface. We have principles here.
Let's get the facts clear.
Your father had your sister
put to death, some story about
a wind that would not blow?

how did it fall to me?

I'll take that as a yes. Your mother
murdered your father?

stretching caverns down my cheeks

You're not disagreeing. More murder,
shame on your House, and you crawl here?

sweat dripping from each forehead curl

You're babbling. And you've a sister
dancing herself to death?

skin once white now blood red

And now you weep. A grown man.

But it stirs in me. I once wept:

my daughter Medea
you know the tragedy.
She is back here, the Athenians
threw her out.

I tell you, young man,
I sentence you: three months
living with my daughter.
You can sort each other out.

*Dark hollows once my eyes plunge
stretching caverns down my cheeks
skin once white now blood red
sweat dripping from each forehead curl
brain grunge leaks down my spine
stumbling as I must still reeling
how did it fall to me?*

*Be grateful for the birdsong
the white waft of the egret
the angular grey heron flapping
the humble hopeful robin
Find simple ambition
see here my olives they
sway silver sage in
our subtle breeze its
lighter energy in the folds
of these my childhood hills
see here my carvings
Khvicha is my teacher
Mokodia here protects me
kind Dzabuli cooks and tends the house
one day I shall carve in wood
my two beloved children
ah no, I weep once more*

*Dark hollows once my eyes plunge
stretching caverns down my cheeks*

*skin once white now blood red
sweat dripping from each forehead curl
brain grunge leaks down my spine
stumbling as I must still reeling
how did it fall to me?*

Places

Cloudless by Lindos

Aegean night, white pillars lit by stars,
share my bed, let your abysses of blue
flood my dreams. Your mother-of-pearl bruises,
metallic blue glints on lightly ruffled waves,
stir my core. Love me with your vastnesses,
with oceans of your breath,
diamond inundations of your waters,
refract for me joy and perfection.

Lindos, your streets disintegrating, dying,
ashes of your citizens blown by Aegean breezes,
descend through your roots to meet
men of aeonic vision,
minds that shaped your Acropolis,
masons that carved your exquisite beacon
now lit so brilliantly by Andromeda,
Cassiopeia, even faint Camelopardalis.

And I, ears aching at the crassness
of the tuneless bouzouki,
stray to the water's edge,
strain to divine an antique wisdom
from a shabby soggy pebble,
gaze up to Doric columns,
and wonder at the chaos
of the interval.

Moai Rapa Nui

(after Neruda)

Look at them now:
touch this trachyte,
these vast eyebrows,
these lips speaking the silent language that sleeps in our death,
this sandy scar which wolves of time and the sea have licked,
part of a face never overthrown
purpose of a being, cluster of a body
that survived the lava cauldron,
honeycomb in stone.

I who carved them forgot my name. My countenance
is shaped as grass. I clawed through brambles,
broached the crater, wore out so many
fingernails impregnating the still warm honeystone
to give birth to these ultimate cavernous truths,
statues which are what we are,
resonating syllables
of sacred crater fragments.

You who seek to learn
shall scratch at the earth
until compactness is born,
until a golden shadow falls
on these colossal engravings,
as upon a colossal bee
that eats its own honey
lost in infinite time.

Fish, birds, wind, salt
sought out fault lines in faultless lava
among the highest countenances,
while we wrangled over the harvest
ignoring them as they fed
blue flower sugars into the dancing
decay, as they drenched the nuptial bedsheets
with wet pollen from the red springs of man.

I, mortal stone cutter, ate the blue,
perished without residue,
as a sterile dawn, a dessicated dusk dust
watch my monument, impervious
daughter of man, relic of my patient lust,
gazing across the brine with cavernous eyes
at absent immortals.

Lake Bohinj

Water under mist, shade,
vast sheets of damp dark rock pouring sheer
placid waters among vast unburied forests:
we came without tongues
to open your privileged doors
galloping your waistline
settling above your head into boots,
painstaking scrambling
seven lesser higher lakes,
marsh harriers, snake-eagles,
black kites as we climbed,
greyer, greyer rubble above the treeline,
bitter thrilled windchill,
icy snows at the three-headed summit,
two vultures as we trudged south.

We snaked our return to mirroring waters,
welcoming hostelry where a third tongue,
German, won refreshment,
final wave to misty warmth,
and suddenly
eyes wide, all alive on the water,
a vast tribe of swans wild on the wing.

Humbled, our efforts paled,
the white closed over
and we shivered.

Nepal Night Sky

With reluctance I respect reality's assertions
like a half-trained dog howling I resist
among night-time day-dreams of
dialogue between billionaire and dustman,
frog and eagle,
weeping opera singer and accountant.

We trailed up past Bigu Gompa
forty faultless nuns ringing eighty tuneless bells
past a thousand lightly fluttering prayer flags
a thousand-metre landslide
the village school breathing among the rubble
children holding up skirts all day long for want of elastic
fathers lazing while their women work
remoteness above Tsho Rolpa,
multiply grey terminal moraine,
constant clatter of freeze-thaw rock-wrecking,
execration for so many dead.

Yet above their heads sheer purity of air
a beauty we never know
Bok globules, dark nebulae
lithium-burning Tauri stars:
thus the tinkling of tiny glocken in awe
beneath the cloudless shimmer
of a thousand thousand nightlights.

Burial in the East

(after Neruda)

The puffed-up chest of the large-tailed nightjar
keeps me company as I work late
 among fishermen, Asian toads, potters
 and crab-eating frogs,
while aching corpses meander past my veranda:
red muslin wrapped, bedecked with fruit and saffron,
strident, thin, lugubrious, they whistle
jarring ululations amid the startling colours
of heavy poisoned flower wreaths,
 amid confused smokings, beneath lofty keruing trees,
 amid tom-toms and cries of holy fire-dancers.

Because, once around the corner, swept down to
the mud-strewn riverside, their hearts
will roll, burning, loll purposelessly,
 their tremulous ash will waft across the ripples,
 miniature grey waterlilies,
 legs and feet ablaze,
 in an instant an extinct black volcanic soot,
 a vanished breath,
an Eastern unction to bestow
as the nightjar winks.

Outsiders in Bangladesh

An air strike took us
unexpectedly to Dhaka
where bedroom cockroaches startled
by chance it was Eid al-Adha

ঈদ উল – আযহা *Īda ula - āyahā*

numberless goats cattle livestock
being led by men in white
for ritual celebration slaughter
dramatic to see excitement
across an entire community
We have only one night
I volunteered, Let's see the town.

Guide quickly secured
taxi led off toward the centre
tens of thousands of teeming rickshaws
miraculously seamlessly entwined
with bicycles vehicles cows motorbikes
poverty clawed at the window
every traffic light beggars
one-armed one-legged
misshapen figures of desperation
tapping insane expressions
of incomprehending
misery on the glass
their faces our faces inches apart.

It seemed a relief to pause
outside Parliament buildings
an undulating stretch of thinnest grass
gaunt concrete resembling a fortress
we approached on foot five white
faces white arms western wealth
a new class of beggar suddenly
enveloped us a crowd of thirty
surrounding us from nowhere
crescendo of demands
risk of trouble menace in the air
our guide fearing for his tip
suddenly cut through the hubbub
incomprehending we had not
imagined unplanned
tourism such affront
the taxi! we literally ran
chased like animals.

Sicilia in Agosto

Agave sharp and subtle lentisk
alike wilt in Etnaic heat
overhead Oriental Platani sweat
Castagne long since struggle.

All around dry brown fades to white straw.

Flogged dripping in the noonday blaze
I dimly perceive three kinds of life

the wizened peasant, to sun and human oppressors
in equal measure indifferent

the humming sawing singing cicada
chanting sharp-serenely early dawn to deepest dusk

the amoralist extortioner
omnipresent yet absent
in sick ardour silently pursuing the chimerical
hidden from the heat
hiding from the human.

Stepy Akermańskie

(after Mickiewicz)

I launch out across dry earth-ocean
cart carving through the green
a boat wading flooding sparkling
flowers of wave meadows
weaving through reefs islands waterlilies.

Already darkness hails down. No path no cairn
I look to stars for a guide
away there a cloud glints
away again Aurora hints to rise
the Dniester glistens
playing nightlight to all.

I stand to focus
how quietly the migrating cranes
remote from preying falcons
I hear butterfly wings waft the grass blades
the sliding snake chest near-noiseless on the herbs

In which silence strangely intense
I sense the voice of Lithuania
inaudible audible within calling

O, to be heading home.

Faith in Destruction

Hodovytsya, Ziembín, Chernelitsya,
hosts to walls paneless windows
flaking plaster
crumbling roofless masonry
in turn host to nests weeds
ants of attrition.

Saint George Martyr in Kaunas,
Holy Trinity in Pidhaytsi,
Marian Assumption in Uhniv,
rococo wrecks abandoned,
roofs converted
to religion of rubble,
yet walls omnipresent
enduring reminding Polithuanian
art and aspiration.

Mary Magdalene of Kukil'nyky
humility in gracious arches
shadows of caution
chiaroscuro of loneliness
apses of emptiness
belfries without bells
praying for us
altarless in altercation.

An old tide swept
east and south,
a new tide levied a curtain.
Nature instinctively undoes
devoted kindness
from Czartoryskis Lyubomirskis
Pociejs Puzynas
Sakawiczs Tyskiewicz
Czatskis Jablonowskis
even Jan Kazimierz Waza
untold others
acolytes and artisans.

So where?

Ah, for a compass

Sisyphaean Snails

Such sunny memories
parched dry valley more stones than soil
narrow derelict road winding up through ravines
hostelry at Andritsaina sculpted in the lee of Lykaion
σαλάτα χωριάτικη to refresh
sunbeaten trail to find at Vassi

Apollo Epikourios

temple of awe miraculously built
honouring salvation from plague
pristine landscape to all angles
miraculously untouched more than two millennia.

So many blue sky picnics there in my youth
shaded by wild olives
breathing in those elegant grey pillars
effervescent roots of our essence.

Today this great monument stands shrouded
a circus came with a great tent
four-headed member of the Ku Klux Klan
housing winter's damp and mildew.
Within, the bewildered part-dismantled temple
once a statement of life
learns to tolerate hospital indignities
its pillars clamped around the neck
for Sisyphaean snails to proclaim their efforts
to salvage its foundations.

You forty years younger
forty thousand years wiser
settled under that wrinkled olive
chewing grass to the tinkle of a handful of goatbells
beneath blazing Peloponnesian sun
can contemplate the ancient community
spirit vision imagination invention
commitment embodied here
need no prompt to see this travesty.

Visitors come no more
Andritsaina dies on its feet
For Vassi, once a place of matchless awe
Lies wrapped, distressed, forlorn in prone defeat.

Truth in Jerash

A crush of meetings a lull
my two Turkish colleagues choose to rest
distinguished Sergio and I hire a driver
escaping Amman to visit Jerash
breathtaking ruins by
thriving modern metropolis
inspiring Ionic colonnade
adorning unique oval plaza
we resist the noisy queue of guides
emerging into fading afternoon heat
modern Jordanian flies buzzing
to make the long promenade
down this eight hundred metre street
grand temples left and right
glorious *nymphaeum* fountain house
wealth of other fine Trajanic relics

but we cannot help but note
the French family hapless
victims of their appointed Jordanian guide
spouting one solecism after another
embroidering inventing improvising
a performance worthy of *Fox News*
the *Daily Mail* in discarding truth
for a supposedly more colourful tale.

We turn away for sanity but alas
they follow I am tempted
shades of Emerson in *Santa Croce*
to intervene but no the French father
appears to be at least partly aware
we scuttle away again

they catch us a third time
at the South Theatre
trashy tune buzzing in one's head
gruesome one-man fake news fountain

but the glory of two millennia's survival
supervened handsomely
after all I had with me Sergio
firm witness to truth
whose grand ancestors designed it all.

But Fly a Kite

From noon till sunset, Cairo dots its skies with kites
schools shut
green spaces closed
streets less clogged
but skies busier every day.

Dustily I trace youthful footsteps
passing tatty student digs
wrinkled familiar corner shops
graffitied teenage hangouts
shuttered.

Some glimmers: narrow side street
hole-in-the-wall cafés
wizened regulars smoking drink as ever
“Corona couples” meeting
faux-furtive in cars in parking lots.

But the old city a dusty morgue
overgrown with ivy walls cracked
spaces claimed by cats
accumulated debris of decades
grand palazzas
windows flickering antique chandeliers
marble Ottoman pillars glistening dry sunlight
now abandoned wrecks
windows black and hollow
entrances agape
too expensive to tear down
too dilapidated to renovate
yet empty shells fiercely protected
live-in custodians for
nothing worth stealing.

Here is a Cairo lost an Egypt lost
to corrupt impoverishment
failed revolution
decamping of wealth to chicer burbs
carcass tenaciously guarded
waiting for a resurrection

And nothing to fill the time
But fly a kite.

No Other Choice

Note: the Evèny are a semi-nomadic, forest-dwelling, Tungus-speaking people based for many centuries in Siberia. The text here arises from the sculptor Laurence Edwards' trip to meet them in 2018. An uchakh is a reindeer, almost always a castrated male, that has been broken in and trained to be ridden.

A rose dawn rakes across forests of birch and larch,
Turning to gold in the new autumn.
Yakutsk, land of the Sakha,
Vulnerable in vast tracts of the great Lena,
Washed by myriad mythical fish,
Yakutsk where brooding ice crunches,
Marling below pavements that mutate, twist and crack, while
Electric cabling spans the sky, tangling at junctions,
Louise Bourgeois arachnoids netting the city.

Soon the Verkhoyansk mountains emerge,
A vast tented Bedouin settlement,
Before them pale foothills, now trying to thwart the brilliant white crags
Approaching like a tidal wave,
Now like colonies of white limpets fading in purple hues,
Smatterings of fawn staining the tangled valley channels.

Slavering amongst them, the tongues of rivers, panting and exhausted,
While oceans of polyhedra,
Blue, white, blue-white, blue squinting frowning white
Surround somewhere down there the Evèny herders,
Who sway among giant dunes scored by graphite approximations
Runnelling through ravines,
Tributaries now fine lengths of black cotton on white crinoline.
Mountain shadows indistinguishable from ultramarine lakes,
Lakes now freezing over brown water narwhal skin,
Finally cold, cold ice-grey sea – the Arctic.

Restored, we make violent progress through sliding fluid shapes
Hosting violet, lavender and tawny umbers,
Hillsides resembling brindled breasts of winter ptarmigan
Scarred by tracks of previous expeditions.
A snowy owl glides past, apparently unaware, blending into the valley.
We lurch on, pausing near the ocean.
Stacked bleached trunks,
Roots and branches evoking mammoth tusks
Are strewn along slate foreshores,
Resting after epic journeys down the vast Lena.
Two died here last winter.
I wander and return through sun-filled tundra,
Picking out myriad lichens covering the slate,

Stacked like charred contents of rotted filing cabinets,
Winter food for reindeer,
Patiently taking thirty years to re-grow,
Ochres, lime greens, orange and vermilion glow
Amid smatterings of snow.
Clouds climb in spectacular convolutions,
One hundred and eighty degrees of pale blues, cream brilliant yellows,
Mauves, greys and brittle ivory.

We journey chilled through vast white plains
Ringed by dune-like ranges.
Surprising hues whose doming summits recede, setting up contrasts not possible,
Deep purples, intense yellows, dense blues in sculptured chunks
Disappearing to hazed pinpricks.
We clunk through endless tundra,
Floe-crusting rivers yield as we crunch crystal-fresh ice.
Tiny vole tracks betray night time foraging.

Such an empty place.

Nothing rots in this permanent freeze.

Finally they arrive as if out of the hill,
A mass of clicking heels,
Swelling and contracting over the land like a benign tide,
Blends of colour barely perceptible from tundra, approaching in a vast line.
The trembling sound comes ever closer, as
Two Evény herders mounted on uchakhs cast their spell on this transient mass.
The deer tumble over the hill,
Breeze into the valley like flowing lava,
Antlers form a moving forest, circling, circling,
Drawing calligraphic strobing lines against white hills,
A maelstrom of coral forest.
Like a shoal of pilchard they rotate
As if determined to screw themselves, whirlpool-like, into the ground,
Then settle to a cautious standstill, flicking, twitching, grunting, watching.
This ancient mass catches my emotion,
A herd sixteen hundred strong,
Shouldering each other,
Locking the occasional antler,
Some three or four foot in length, others like delicate twigs.
They are of the land, padding the tundra
With hooves soon to come into their own,
On metres of snow soon to fall,
Spreading out tiny hairs between toes holding true
Effecting the gliding motions their herders love.

I absorb their presence,
A sudden mass of consciousness after such emptiness.
Three thousand eyes watch my every move.

Like a negatively charged magnet through iron filings,
They part as I move through them.
We scuttle round with fluffed dogs,
Learning blends of fawn to brown to black
Their disguise since and before the last ice age.

The last I see of them is at dusk, settled.
Their antlers adorn the horizon like edgings of lace.
Dwarf willow pokes through snow
Resembling a myriad of antlers
As I retreat.

A majestic visitation: curtains of luminescence
Swing through the dark trembling fingers of light.
Soft palpable pale greens, reds and electric blues
Emerge then dissolve in swirls of oily haze,
Ruminating on us in a language we have always known.

I reflect as I return to the arachnoids.
I see the shape of the herd flowing down the valley.
In their antlers I see elisions of cloud flowing through Siberian mountains,
Snowy owls disappearing into hillsides,
Blind probing rivers in valleys.
I see silhouettes of men fusing with beasts under the Aurora.
When a thousand antlers spin in snow
And a thousand lungs empty into a single crystalline breath cloud,
I see individuals submit:
The one becomes the whole.

Here there is no other choice.

And once I heard
That of the near-lying islands one
Would be Patmos,
It yearned in me greatly
To land there, and there
To draw near to the darkened grotto.
For not like Cyprus, the rich-in-springs,
Not like any of the others
In any grandiose way does Patmos live,

Hospitable, however, is
In her poorer house,
She nonetheless ...
And when after shipwreck or lamenting
For his homeland or for his separated friend
Draws near to her
A stranger, she is glad to hear it, and her children
The voices of the hot gardens,
And where the sand falls, and where self-cracks
The baked field surface, these sounds
All hear him and lovingly chime
Again with the man's lament. So tended
She once the God-beloved,
The Seer who in blessed youth had

Walked beside
The Son of the Most High, inseparable,
For loved the Thunderbearer the naïveté
Of the disciple, and saw the attentive man
The Face of God exactly,
When, over the mystery of the vine, they
Sat together, at the hour of the communal meal,
And in His great soul, calmly foreknowing Death
Pronounced the Lord and the ultimate love,
For never enough words had He to speak of kindness
And to soothe, when He saw it, the wrath of the world.
For all is good. With that, He died. Much would
Be said of it. And saw Him as He glimpsed victory
His gladdest friends-at-the last.

Yet they rued it, since now
It had become evening, and were astounded
For things greatly predetermined had in their souls these men settled,
Although they loved a sun-kissed life
And to leave were they reluctant the sight of the Lord and their homeland.
Driven in like fire into iron was this
And for them gave company the shadow of the Beloved.
Therefore sent He to them the Spirit

And liberally was shaking the house
And the weather of God growled, raising
Thunder in the distance above their future-staring heads,
As, deep in thought, were gathered the Heroes of Death.

Now, as He was departing,
Once more did He appear to them.
For extinct is the day of the royal sun,
And He broke the straight-blazing sceptre, godly-suffering, of his own accord,
So a Second Coming should be
At the right time.

Would not have been good, later,
Abruptly broken off,
Faithless,
The work of Man,

And joy was it
From now onward
To live in loving night,
And to preserve in naïve eyes
Unflinching abysses of wisdom.
And flourish green deep beneath the mountains also living images.

Yet fearful is it, how here and there
Endlessly from here scatters the Living God.
For only to relinquish the sight of true friends' faces
And far from here over the mountains to trail
Alone, where, doubly recognised a single voice
Was the Heavenly Spirit; and not pre-warned but
Shocked to the roots of their hair, instantaneously
When at them suddenly
Hurrying in the distance glanced back the God
And swearing, thus to hold Him, as though on golden ropes wracked henceforth,
The Evil calling as such
Thus they joined their hands –

But when He dies moreover He on whom beauty was the most draped
That at His shape was a miracle
And the choirs of Heaven pointed Him out
And when, an eternal conundrum to one another
They cannot comprehend each other
Who live in joint remembrance,
And not only the sand, or the willows, it takes away from here
And seizes the temples
As it blows away the honour
Of the Half-man-half-God and His circle
And His unique countenance twists away the Highest One
So that nowhere an Immortal more in the sky could be seen
Nor on the greening soil –

Since one thing I do know,
That clearly the Will
Of the Eternal Father
Weighs much upon you. Unmoving is His gesture
In thundering Heaven. And the One stands beneath
For his own life's length. Since yet lives Christ.
But there are the heroes, his sons,
Come all, and holy scriptures
About Him, and lightning, to explain
The history of this planet,
An irrepressible surge. But He is there. For His works are
All known to Him from the first.

Overlong, overlong is now
The Honour of the Heavenly invisible.
For almost our fingertips
Must they guide, and
Humiliatingly wrenches our hearts a Force.
For a sacrifice demands each Heavenly Being,
But when one of these was neglected
Only harm ensued.
We have been servant to Mother Earth
And lately served the Light of the Sun,
All unaware, the Father however loves,
Who governs all,
Most, that respect is paid
To unalterable texts, and that what we read
We understand well.
Which this German lyric endeavours.

To Casa al Colle

Give thanks for Garfagnana's subtle breeze,
 Its sweet caress,
Its gracious valleys bedding verdant trees,
 Its tenderness.
Its ageless village alleys, ancient wells,
 Lie free from stress;
Its Romanesque resounding chapel bells
 Our souls impress.

In smokeless haze of beauty one perceives
 Benign recess,
Where fragile paths bestrewn with last year's leaves
 Escape the press:
Unspoilt, scarce trodden, for want of use they fade
 To nature's dress,
Their point to urban visitors conveyed:
 Live more, not less.

Scherzando

The Thirteenth Labour

Welcome back once more
energetic Heracles.
Your efforts with ten labours
impressed us all
save blemishes in two
hence two more tasks.
You know me well
I do not brook trickery
yet you reneged upon Atlas
to free yourself from the skies
bringing me Hesperidian gold:

Thus I require a thirteenth labour.

My wife Antimache aches for a child.
I have no wish for another.
Take her with you.
Share her bed for a year.
Accept her choices where you go.
But she must return untouched.

Now Antimache of fleet foot
of sharp mind of deep learning
of passion for the truth
of determination for equity
of joy in the new
Antimache of golden hair
first demanded:

I would to Bactria
take a skiff
float down the Oxus
we shall embrace each night
our happiness will be known
to every star of Pamir
Fergana and Samarkand.

So Heracles summoned
winged Pegasus
soon at the Temple of Takht-I Sangin
where Vakhsh and Panj rivers meet
they prayed for Zeus' support
sacrificing three newborn lambs
and set to float downstream.
Each night Antimache sought
the arms of Heracles

each night he resisted
each night when Heracles slept
Antimache slipped into the
waters of the Oxus
noiselessly to escape
each night Heracles stirred
swam recovered her
soothed her to sleep
with talks of his works
each day they floated downstream
each night Heracles paddled
back upstream
to prolong the journey.

Dear Heracles I weary of this river
I have a fresh demand:

I would to Folegandros
to Katergo beach
they say the Folegandrans
know no clothes
we shall be inspired on golden sands
we shall embrace each night
our happiness will be known
to every star of Amorgos
Sikinos and Astipalaia.

So Heracles summoned
winged Pegasus
soon at the Temple of Hera Eileithyia
goddess of heavenly birth
where the Nine Snakes of Folegandros
meet daily to hiss prayers of salvation
they prayed for Zeus' support
sacrificing three newborn lambs
and set to rest under the stars at Katergo.
Each night Antimache sought
the arms of Heracles
each night he resisted
each night when Heracles slept
Antimache slipped across the golden sands
each night Heracles stirred to chase her
and soothe her to sleep
now praising her many virtues.

Dear Heracles I weary of this beach
My third demand is thus:

I would to Hajji Firuz Tepe
in the northern Zagros Mountains of Persia
where they have wines

wines of a thousand grapes
vintages a thousand years old
grapes with a thousand pips
There we shall be inspired
by heavenly springs of the Gadar river
we shall embrace each night
our happiness will be known
to every star of Rowanduz
Arbil and Mesopotamia.

So Heracles summoned
winged Pegasus
soon at the Temple of Dionysos Eleutherios
god of freedom drinking
in Hajji Firuz Tepe
where the Nineteen Eternal Vines
snake daily up the pillars
where exuberant Maenads dance in ecstasy
day and night sun and snow
there they prayed for Zeus' support
sacrificing three newborn lambs
and set to rest under the stars.
Each night Antimache sought
the arms of Heracles
each night he resisted
each night when Heracles slept
Antimache slipped across the heady vineyards
each night Heracles stirred to chase her
and soothe her to sleep with further wine.

But finally one night partying took on new passion
one Maenad after another passed by Heracles
convincing him to drink
from their psykter-shaped Calyx kraters
a nectar fit only for the Gods.
Three days later he awoke
to find a papyrus scroll
inscribed in the sophisticated hand
of his dear elusive Antimache.

Reading it in dismay
he returned to Eurystheus
deeply fearing wrath
finding audience
handing him silently the scroll
which read:

*Dear Heracles
I weary of your simpleminded adherence
to the wishes of Eurystheus
of your shabby presumptions*

*of your folly in mistaking
my true purpose.
I regret taking so long to outwit you.
I am gone, long gone
I took wing with Pegasus
You shall see me no more
I am called to Atlantis
where they ask me to be their leader
where men are smaller than women
and women determine what is fair.
Head for Delphi
Visit the Castalian Spring
Ask Pythia for guidance
how you may shrink yourself.
I wish you well.*

Tombeau des Nouveaux Omanis

A brand of glory virginal may fold
In cygnets' wings a dream of rustic decks
Where vanish'd heavens' cursèd lore will vex
And suicidal purple hearts behold

For thus Omani sheikhs of wealth untold
Must search al-Khabbah tombs for pious sects
Ibadi votive service well deflects
The Golden Jackal's laughter uncontrolled

With caged princesses' lifeblood running cold
To contemplate their swans' misshapen necks
And recognise their culture's shattered mould

Their tribes resume their Empty Quarter treks
The cryptic desert sand will long uphold
Forbidden truths of Chalcolithic wrecks.

Note: Current (2020) archaeological focus at the Al Khabbah wadi aims to provide key insights on mobility, economy, and material culture of Ja'lān in the beginning of 7th up to the 4th millennium BCE. Minority opinion proposes Chalcolithic (c 3,000 BCE) ascription to the works. The Ibadi movement (Ibadism or Ibāḍiyya, also known as the Ibadis (Arabic: الإباضية, al-Ibāḍiyyah)), is a school of Islam dominant in Oman. It also exists in parts of Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and East Africa. The Golden Jackal is found in the Arabian peninsula; its habitat stretches from Poland to Malaysia. Its cousin inspired the Egyptian Anubis.

L'eau de Bear

The *Paradjanov* mist had hovered long
Teshigahara's sand had drifted deep
The aching Bear, confused at right and wrong
Had countless problems keeping him from sleep.

"A marriage fit to match *Maria Braun*
Aguirre Wrath of Herzog scarcely sane
The Act of Killing truly cut me down
La Dolce Vita ebbed away in pain

"If *Rocco and his Brothers* made me think
Then *L'Avventura* surely made me feel
Mephisto, Colonel Redl made me blink
Yet I survived the gloom of *Seventh Seal*

"So let me drink *The Tempest's* water fair
With Ariel the perfect Beau de l'Air".

[Home](#)

Heap of *Noblesse*

Today I see courage is a heap of aged papers

Some flimsy wartime airmail tissues
some scraps, all their authors could find in '43
some embossed, pre-war notepaper not yet needed for heating.

Dozens of telegrams transcribed in clerk's pencil
hundreds of letters to Darling Daphne Dearest Daphne My dear Daphne
often overwrought at the great tiny tragedy
some from the aged
one from a ten year old niece
several dozen from Sweden
Canada Belize France Denmark
one from Lisbon asked for a photograph of Douglas
in amazement at his courage
to enlarge and hang on their wall.

One from the Chairman of Lloyd's
dozens testifying awe at a huge character
many from masters dames and boys
hundreds too of letters to Dear Mrs Goulder
perfunctory hands already worn by hackneyed phrases
prolix embarrassed
a car dealer
a suitmaker asking what to do with two undelivered suits
a jeweller
several from nannies
a former batman
some from who barely knew either man or widow.

A few practical – what shall we do with the ashes?
Here a photograph of the twenty three bouquets of flowers
that you could not see
here a list of the kind Swedes who sent them
one from the clergyman in Gothenburg
describing the service that Daphne could not attend
somehow asking for a reply
What could she say to him?

Two chilling ones from the Ministry of Economic Warfare
men who commissioned the trip
Lord Drogheda Director General
could not bring himself to say what needed to be said
but started out "Lord Curbishley has asked me to write ..."
Mr Osborne factotum in more honest tone
enclosed the letter from the Swedish Legation
which made plain the view from Sweden

A foregone conclusion a wasted non-risk.

Two from Germany dated '46
both had been "listening clandestinely" in '43
heard they had lost a dear friend
been forced to *sich setzen stumm* for three years
finally they could write to a lady they barely knew
in devastating humility.

Finally one from a man who had asked Douglas
Why are you going?

You would not think much of me if I had declined.

I.m. Douglas Renshaw Goulder

Rebirth in Trachis

I soaked

how long and how much I never knew
sustained by hope
weighed down by worthless companions
sleeping by open pine fires
confused by absurd compromise
breathing sickly sea-salt
missing childhood honesty
ruining my blunt-bladed machete.

So I fled

to Garda's east bank Malcesine
sniffing O venusta Sirmio
(with company
Esslin's *Absurd Theatre*
Pound's *Trachiniae*)
revelling in light white wine
lakeside breeze
stillwater sunset
dreaming of ruins I love too much
among familiar spiders
shipwreck of a girl of bonny soul.

Absurd became infectious

gangrenous vertebrae spun
dizzy in disfoundation
oblivion written in ash
truly scared for my mind
insomniac shattering of glass
water mercifully clogging Esslin –
enabling release.

I fled again

white light of the Aegean
proscenium pillars at Epidavros
what splendour, it all coheres.

I pour a libation even today
for rebirth in Trachis.

Romanesque Deliverance

ground out like pastry
crumbled rolled roasted
an angel idea descends
take wing for clean roots
thus to the Vall de Boí
one sunny Mayday
Sant Climent Taüll
Santa Maria Taüll
Sant Feliu Barruera
Sant Joan de Boí
Santa Eulàlia Erill-la-Vall
Santa Maria de l'Assumpci Còll
Santa Maria Cardet
Nativitat de la Mare de Déu Durro
Ermita de Sant Quirc Durro
gracious Catalan names
gracious Romanesque buildings
balm for any troubled soul

but boots bottle pack compass
mens sana in corpore sano
and Joyce's *Ulysses*
enough to restore
most of basic resilience

up the Vall past the springs
presa de cavallers dam of the knights
past the reservoir up up
two days before the route surveyed
note left where I slept of the plan
request to rescue if not back by seven
gesture of a solo hiker
up up the *barranc de Malavesina*
ravine of the bad neighbour
trouble ahead indeed
already climbing up through a waterfall
thawing snow barely yet water

into soft snow boots sinking
sixty seventy centimetres
sun blasting hot work regardless
exhausting in fact quickly clear
the *serra de tumeneia* ridge
a basic objective
unattainable

pause

snow melting as I reflected
traverse back worse
boots sinking thigh deep

until startled I plunged
vertically down
instant panic
trapped around the chest
legs dangling in the snowhole
momentary violent struggle
dropping six more centimetres
into a tighter snowvice

pause of a different character

torso now a cork
in an icy bottleneck
legs still dangling
one arm trapped
trickle of chill snowmelt
running down my chest
plug pressing lungs
emergency plans six hours away
heartfreeze nearer sixteen minutes

a vast calm
a lucidity
an Antarctic peace
pondering
Saharan horizons
of obligations
back home
needing me
no choice but to solve
down to me to fix

what was this snowhole?

warily probing with a free leg
the vast boulder
begetter of this mantrap
could be mapped
granting tenuous leverage
soft snow had lured me in
the one free hand could cure me out
tentative trowelling
deeply grateful for good gloves
torqueing as it cleared
finally a jackknife
to pant strangeangled

spreadeagled downward
pondering anew
the mercy of escape

a second dousing
back down the waterfall
seemed positive liberation

Oi-o, oi-o, oi-o-o-oh
lung-lust war cry re-echoing
up to *Besiberri*
down to the *Presa* dam
no doubt astonishing
any chance hikers below

and I could return
to what I had been escaping

Cinquantamila Benedizioni

Pilkington Naomi tennis after lockup India at Lords
lizard at Epidauros sprint in Delphi stadium Meteora Delos
Leiden Amsterdam Paris with Caroline Hôtel des Grands Écoles
Shoot the Dog on Corfu cricket on Nisos Ioanninou
classicistes at Dodona deserted Ano Klidonia to Drakolimni
Aos and Vikos Gorges godparenting Mark concerts opera trips
lunches in Coleshill Slow Lane columns on Orford
breakfasts (maestro del uovo) at San Romano
ice creams in Lucca dinners in Borgo Jazz in Barga
walking to San Bartolomeo Vergessen und Erinnerung ping pong
Piazza del Popolo and churches at Todi Angels' Share at Hine cellars
launching Horace and Me tennis with barefoot Olivia wine in the cellar
60th birthday at Clare O'Brien's Alaloum dinner Nafplio
Messini in a downpour the Folegandran Snakes
Christmases at the Old Rectory dinners at Fifth Avenue
singing for ten at Grutti surviving Lockdown Wigmore Hall
celebrating fifty years' friendship

Low Slung Sofa

She settled deep into the low slung sofa
space for just one to her left
twentysomething a touch plump in every aspect
warm enough yet perhaps that vacant spot
to her left told a tale.

In my naïveté I filled the gap
we quickly spoke among the jazz fizz and partygoers
of – strange to say – the physics of love came all too quickly
of which – to my surprise – she seemed to have little feel.

Alas next day the telephone rang
I all unprepared
she wanted to revisit
knowing the Saturday gathering long finished
to finish our conversation.

I failed saying no not finding words nearly kind enough
yes in half heart would have been worse
three decades later I still feel her pain.

Six Arms

Eventually the moment came
We embraced
Not crushingly
Yet not lightly
Just right, in fact
All those worries about trust
Somehow dissolved
And a new truth struck me
For there was not only a warmth
And a happy unexpected nuzzle at my neck
But my two arms
And her two arms
Both gently busy in caress
Were joined by two milky ones
Also keen to press their affection.

Flowers of Freedom

It is the time of the swollen grape.
Cherries dance mermaids in pink and red
decorate my lawn and I reflect on my happy losses.

My *Zwartkop Aeonium*, she was a treasure,
heart of purity, considerate, reflective.
We loved as teenagers
certain of eternity
her many narrow petals blushing
in racemes of star-shaped
dark purple smiles of joy.

Then *Melianthus* won me, honeyed warmth
glowing twenty years
her glaucous pinnate leaves sage
in green fertility propagating triply
modest in her tubular flowering
gentle kind and patient.

Musa Basjoo arrived malnourished
adapted to the soil
soon flourishing in hale humour
painting cream spikes each summer
waving grand paddles in the sky
instability in her banana fruits yet
honest in idiosyncratic goodness.

Finally *Cobaea Scandens*, I had thought,
sharing passion
promising green white
maturing to purple in her flowers
in truth unknown purest white.

In new happiness my house has
both sea and earth
wild hazel Pyrenean pine
daphne choisya
a grapefruit tree I grew from a pip.
Graciously they seek help
make no call for obedience:
I serve noble masters.

Daphne Chestnut Grandmother

Trove of elegance, composure
among birds, kanzan, magnolia,
curling drive, cliffs of laurel,
light-shading sumac, rambling wistaria,
raspberry canes, lawn for croquet, home
to generations of log fires, kindness,
flour, wisdom,
pink salmon, blue stability,
a hidden sweetness among its sparkling dews
a mellow honesty in its direct design –

alas like what once was the great chestnut,
majestic above hibiscus and loganberry,
you are the heart of the family
no more.

Enough, it was your time,
You fell to earth,
your leaves excused themselves one by one,
while the confused soil paused.

Yet you live on as our beacon:
your branches make violins
and in March each year
the daphne in my garden flowers,
and I give thanks for your spirit.

Envoi

Shadow of Meaning

(loosely after Neruda)

What hope could I consider,
what pure premonition save,
what definitive kiss could settle,
discarding root instinct,
to leave me placid
on this eternal turbulence?

At such a time the anxious suspicious,
in natural weakness,
search for permanence;
at such a time the weary accumulated ages
flood like a lunar wave across ocean detritus
onto shores angst-ridden, deserted.

Oh that the being that I am could at once live and die,
accepting this hated industrial truth,
forever immune in my remote heart,
undisturbed by birth or death,
meticulous destructional,
eternal conservational,
transparently committed:
my fundamental duty
as a passionate witness.

Silken Farewell

(partly after Rilke)

Be in this night to excess
the magic force
at the crossroads of your senses
the mind within their rare encounter

The scape below
that contains your heart
sings as a barn owl
licenses your flight
nurtures your roots
commits your creativity

Be free from the wilfully blind
unleash transfigured truth
with your effortless scimitar
surge on billowing satin
glide in particular grace

And if humankind should forget you
speak to the still earth: I am running
to the rapid waters say: I am.

Notes

Fantasias I

The Great Metaphysician

A fantasia based upon the 1917 de Chirico painting of the same name. Not a story but a scene-setter – the whole problem of culture clash is a challenge also requiring metaphysical consideration.

Chasing a Hoop

Again a fantasia loosely based on de Chirico's *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914) with elements encouraged by Arnold Böcklin's *Odysseus and Calypso*.

White Inmate

The de Chirico painting in the background here is *The Enigma of the Hour* (1910).

Stories

Maternity by Arkwasiye

Set in Ethiopia, on one of three visits (2003). Gonder is the ancient capital of Ethiopia. Debarq is a much smaller town on the western side of the Simien mountains. Gelada baboons and Walia ibex are both indigenous to Ethiopia, the former common to see, ranging in noisy groups, the latter not rare but certainly far fewer than the Gelada baboons. The Mesheba river runs through the Simien. Mountain village houses are mainly *tukuls*, made of sticks, straw and mud.

Cooking with Soap

Ras Dashen is Ethiopia's highest peak (4,550 metres), and Africa's tenth highest. Amharic is Ethiopia's second language (after Omoro), spoken by some 22 million Amharas, and is the government's official language.

Sickle Trained

Set in Nepal, visit in 1999. Duwang is a tiny hamlet in the Rolwaling valley, itself a seriously remote location precariously positioned above the gorge of the Bhote Kosi, which takes water off Gaurishankar (7,181 metres), roughly two thirds of the way east from Kathmandu towards Chomolungma/Sagarmatha/Mount Everest.

Trail of Dust

Set in Tanzania (2006). Mloka is close by the Rufiji River, roughly 180 kms southwest from Dar es Salaam.

Gjirokaštër Internet Café

Gjirokaštër is a substantial town in southern Albania. Its picturesque old quarter is inscribed on Unesco's World Heritage list, due to its remarkable collection of old Ottoman town houses. This has had the unfortunate consequence that any alteration or repair to any building within the protected zone is subject to fiercely strong controls. The opinion of the witness whose views are reported here was that the corruption arising was impenetrable for ordinary citizens, while people with both wealth and connections found their way to get approval for designs that were visibly not in character with the old town buildings. My observations confirmed his comments, with poorer housing forced to hold its roofs together with cheap plastic and some startling expensive new constructions.

Nic – o –

Nicosia was divided in August 1974. The witness here is Eleni Nikolidadi, born 1989 and aged 25 when I met her in the Greek part of Nicosia in 2014. The Byzantine Kantara Castle, derelict some five hundred years now, enjoys a spectacular location in northeast Cyprus. There are spectacular Greek and Roman ruins at Salamis on the eastern coast of (Turkish-occupied) Cyprus. Ammokhostos is known in the UK as Famagusta and in Turkey as Magusa. Some 30,000 Greek Cypriots fled from Ammokhostos in August 1974 and had to live in tents in the Greek side of the newly partitioned island until the government could build homes for them.

Los Potreros

Set in Argentina (1990 visit). The Rio Tercero (third of five rivers counting from Cordoba), whose old name is Ctalamochita, flows into the Parana river thence to the Rio de la Plata basin.

Čovečanstvo Lesson

Set in Montenegro (2012 visit). *Čovečanstvo* means humanity in Serbo-Croat. Risan is a small town at the north end of Kotor Bay.

Dolcino Ulcinj

Ulcinj (whose old Italian name was Dolcino) is a town of some 11,000 inhabitants just within Montenegro despite its population being almost entirely Albanian. Shkodër is an Albanian town of nearly 80,000 just across the border on the southeast side of Lake Shkodër.

Hripsimé, Gayané

Set in Armenia (2015 visit). Voskepan, Sanahin, Haghpat, Amberd, Hnevank, Goshavank, Makaravank, Noravank and Akhtala are all names of monasteries which I visited, many dating from the twelfth century and some well prior to that. They were all built in tufa stone; their architecture is strikingly consistent (also with similar churches and monasteries in Georgia) despite construction dates spanning over a thousand years. I take a joy in the wonderful names in foreign places: they speak of their linguistic, ultimately cultural roots so importantly. Ejmiatsin (also known as Vaghharshapat) has a status comparable to Canterbury in the Church of England. Trdat is the Armenian name for the ruler we know as Tiridates III (c 250 – 330 CE). He converted to Christianity, and Armenia became a Christian nation thereafter, the cause of endless trouble for Armenians for centuries with Islam practised west, south and east, and Russian Orthodox to the north. *Khachkars*

are exquisitely carved gravestones, of which thousands survive despite weathering for over half a millennium. There are 900 in a field at Noratus (mentioned in *Wearing the Trousers* below).

Wearing the Trousers

Also in Armenia. The *caravanserai* of Orbelian was built at the Vardenyats mountain pass due south of Lake Sevan. It dates, remarkably, from 1332 and is situated at an extraordinary 2,410 metres altitude. Prince Chesar Orbelian constructed it in a bid to win a share of the Silk Route travelling trade.

Mr Twitching Fish

This dates from 1989: Hirohito, Emperor of Japan during the Second World War, died in January 1989 aged 87.

Kosovan Survivor

The tale here was told me exactly as written when I visited Kosovo in February 2010. It describes events in the 1999 war in which NATO made direct military intervention, resulting in a slightly uneasy peace which has now lasted over twenty years.

Exponential

Hungary joined the EU in May 2004. This tale (which, like virtually all, occurred exactly as described) dates from 2007.

Foinaven Joy

Set in Sutherland in 1986. The Ian who appears is the same Ian (Rossotti) who appeared in *Sickle Trained*. The Cuillin are Skye's most forbidding mountains. Quinag (808 metres) lies northwest from Ullapool. Foinaven (914 metres) is a long, long hike the way we did it. Its name is better known for the Irish racehorse Foinavon (named after the mountain despite the different spelling) who won the Grand National in 1967 at odds of 100/1 after the rest of the field fell, refused or were hampered or brought down in a *mêlée* at the 23rd fence. The fence was officially named after Foinavon in 1984.

Mistah Vertigo

This occurred on the same trip as *Foinaven Joy*. Loch Scavaig is the sea loch to the southeast of Loch Coruisk and the main Cuillin range. Kirkibost is a small village eight kilometres east of the "Bad Step" which is close by Coruisk. The return route by road to Sligachan is twice the walking distance.

Hegra Alliance

The fortress at *Hegra* is one of the very few on the planet constructed after 1900 (built 1908-1910 to counter a perceived threat of a Swedish invasion). Visit 1991.

Wildlife Seminar

From a 1997 trip. Alta is a small town in the far north of Norway, at 70° north latitude well inside the Arctic Circle. *Ladnja jav'ri* is a tiny lake (barely 100 metres across) in the heart of *Finnmarksvidda*, Norway's empty northern plateau, some 50 kms east of the nearest building in Kautokeino (pop.

2,910). The *Karašjåkka* (River *Karaš*) flows incredibly slowly north, then northeast, then north again. The words *jav'ri* lake *jåkka* river are barely known in Oslo: they are a local (possibly Sami) dialect. *Halvøya* means a peninsular: *Halv* half *øya* island. The *Tana fjorden* is a north-facing sea fjord: next stop, the North Pole.

Fantasias II

Return to the Castle

Tel Akko is the Hebrew name for Acre, with a natural harbour at the north end of Haifa bay in modern Israel. The Siege of Acre ended in 1104 CE. The Prophet Salih was buried there. The she-camel tale: early Islamic traditions often involve a motif of a camel miraculously emerging from stone, often accompanied by a calf, and the production of milk from the camel. Al-Tabari states that Salih summoned his people to a mountain, where they witnessed the rock miraculously split open, revealing a she-camel. The she-camel had a young calf. Salih informed the Thamud that the older camel was to drink from their water source on one day, and they were to drink from it the next day. On days when they were not allowed to drink water, the camel provided them with milk. But God informed Salih that a boy who would hamstring the camel would soon be born to the tribe, and that child was evil and grew unnaturally fast. The camel was indeed killed, and its calf cried out three times, signalling that the Thamud would be destroyed in three days. Their faces turned yellow, then red, then black, and they died on the third day as predicted.

Saida is a local name for Sidon, besieged in 1110 CE in the aftermath of the First Crusade by Baldwin I of Jerusalem and Sigurd I of Norway (Sigurd Magnusson). It fell after 47 days. *Hana* is Arabic for a tavern. The better known Ja'far al-Šādiq was an 8th-century Muslim scholar (702-765 CE). He was the 6th Imam and founder of the Ja'fari school of jurisprudence according to Twelver and Isma'ili Shi'ites. The *rajul hakim* (wise man) of the same name encountered in the Sidon *hana* in 1110 was unexpectedly well informed about Egyptian, Indian, Greek and Roman deities, and modest not to mention his own one. The linguistic connections between *Shaitan* and *Satan* can hardly be coincidental: in Islamic tradition, Iblis is often identified with ash-Shaitan ("the Devil"), often known by the epithet ar-Rajīm ('the Accursed'). However, while Shaitan is used exclusively for an evil force, Iblis himself holds a more ambivalent role in Islamic traditions. Bergkvara Castle was once a fortified manor in Växjö municipality in Kronoberg County, Sweden. The de Chirico which was the starting point here has the same name as the poem and dates from 1969. I would be intrigued to know if others have seen a link to shell-shock in this painting.

Cut at the Fulcrum

The de Chirico here is *Metaphysical Interior with Extinguished Sun* 1971. Late de Chirico is always fascinating. Bonaventure (1221-1274) wrote a biography of St Francis which was used by Giotto in painting the famous frescoes in Assisi's Basilica of St Francis. The other four churches mentioned are all in Assisi town, among them the Chiesa di Santa Maria sopra Minerva having survived in substance from its original Roman construction.

Shrunken Temple

The de Chirico here is the intriguing *Furniture in a Room* 1927. Caput mortuum (literal meaning "dead head") in alchemy signified a useless substance left over from a chemical operation such as sublimation, thus the epitome of decline and decay. Hence it acquired a meaning as a colour (known

as Cardinal Purple, popular in religious paintings) from a variety of haematite iron oxide pigment, used in oil painting.

Fragmentary Solitude

The de Chirico is *Two Horses by the Sea* 1926.

People

Amanda

Rosebank is a comfortable suburb of Johannesburg. I remain haunted by this (1996) tale as I had no means of knowing what happened.

Picking Up Olivia

This took place in 2013.

Lost Memory

The River Serchio runs south down the Garfagnana valley on the east side of the Apuan Alps before turning west to reach the Mediterranean Sea marginally north of where the Arno does. The *Occhio di Lucca* was built in the fourteenth century, a small tower on a local hill with a commanding view from which early warning could be sent to Lucca of any impending attack. Its context contrasts sharply with that of the nearby monastery. Six visits 2009-2014.

Tribute to Bouncy

Khania is the principal town of western Crete. There is a major NATO base nearby at Souda Bay. Visitor attractions include the spectacular Samaria Gorge, the lesser but also charming Ayia Irini Gorge, the Gramvousa peninsular and resorts such as Souyia on the unspoilt south coast. 2016 trip.

Married to a Horse

Cloudy, Darley and Lily were the names of David Ahn's three most beloved horses. He died in 2020.

Fantasias III

Il Ritorno di Ulisse in Infanzia

Late de Chirico, again always interesting: *Ulysses' Return*, 1968. The poem title is a play on the title of Monteverdi's opera *Il Ritorno di Ulisse in Patria*. Leucothea was the goddess who swept down to salvage Odysseus after his final shipwreck and help him to reach the beach by Alcinous' palace.

Dedicated to Dodona

Dodona, 40 kms southwest of Ioannina in Epirus, northern Greece, was the site of Zeus' Oracle, second only to Delphi in ancient times as a source of dependable prediction. Ktesiphon was situated on the eastern banks of the Tigris, about 35 kms southeast of modern Baghdad. In recent years

visitors' experience to Dodona has been hampered by incipient works to repair the theatre. Inadequate funding has meant, like at Vassi (see *Sisyphaean Snails*), that the actual achievement of restoration is making negligible progress while the repairers have been permitted to construct a hut and leave debris which obstructs the visitors' ability to imagine what this exceptional place would have been like. Hence the poem's otherwise unexplained nostalgia for my earlier 1982 visit.

Remainers

The de Chirico here is *Farewell to the Departing Argonauts* 1920. Colchis is in modern Georgia. Megrelian (also Mingrelian) is one of the Kartvelian languages locally spoken. It is closely related to Laz, from which it has become differentiated mostly in the past 500 years, after the northern (Mingrelian) and southern (Laz) communities were separated by Turkic invasions. It is somewhat less closely related to Georgian, the two branches having separated in the first millennium BC or earlier.

Orestes in Colchis

There is no de Chirico backdrop here. The Medea legend here is variously told, most famously by Euripides. Daughter of King Aeëtes in Colchis, Medea met Jason when he arrived on the *Argo* in pursuit of the Golden Fleece (to satisfy the demand of Pelias, the usurping king of his native Thessaly). They married and had two children. Catastrophe ensued when Jason's infidelity drove Medea to murder both Jason's new partner and their own two children. In Euripides' version, Medea ends by fleeing to Athens and is unpunished. The Orestes tale is even better known but for completeness and in Aeschylus' version: his father Agamemnon was manipulated by the seer Calchas into sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia to placate the gods and thus achieve a favourable wind to sail for Troy. When Agamemnon returned home to Mycenae after the fall of Troy, his wife Clytemnestra murdered him to avenge Iphigenia, leaving two further daughters Elektra and Chrysothemis and a much-too-young son Orestes to cope with life in Mycenae under Clytemnestra and her new lover Aegisthus. Orestes was sent away to grow to sufficient strength to return and resolve matters, which he did, murdering both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. Orestes was pursued by the Furies: Aeschylus' great *Oresteia* trilogy ends with a court scene in which Orestes pleads his case and is ultimately acquitted. There is no classical legend regarding Elektra's death: the idea of her dancing herself to death is from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's libretto for Strauss' opera. The poem here shows Orestes unable to admit to his murder of his mother. There is no classical legend of the Athenians tiring of Medea and sending her home to Colchis, nor of Orestes wandering to meet King Aeëtes in Colchis (in modern Georgia, see the note to *Remainers*), nor of his ever meeting Medea. I hope I am not alone in finding the idea of those two deeply tragic figures meeting and trying to converse immensely poignant.

Places

Moai Rapa Nui

Rapa Nui is the proper name for Easter Island, part of Chile and home to some hundreds of extraordinary huge *Moai* sculptures. The text here draws heavily on a Neruda poem (*Los Constructores de Estatuas (Rapa Nui)*) but repositions it. One day I hope to visit.

Lake Bohinj

Lake Bohinj is perhaps second to Lake Bled among Slovenia's most picturesque lakes. It forms a good base for a visit to Triglav (2,864 metres), Slovenia's highest peak, whose name literally means "three-headed". Trip about 2010.

Nepal Night Sky

Bigu Gumpa is one of the stronger surviving nunneries in Nepal. Tsho Rolpa (4,810 metres altitude) is a large moraine-held lake at the upper end of the Rolwaling Valley (see note to *Sickle Trained*). Tsho is the Nepali for Lake. Bok globules are isolated and relatively small dark nebulae, containing dense cosmic dust and gas from which star formation may take place. Typically they have a mass of about 2 to 50 solar masses contained within a region about a light year or so across. T Tauri stars are a class of variable stars that are less than about ten million years old.

Burial in the East

Dipterocarpus sarawakensis, locally called the Sarawak keruing, is a species of tree found in peninsular Malaysia and Borneo.

Outsiders in Bangladesh

Eid al-Adha is more normally written in Arabic script but here it is written in Bangla. 1999 visit.

Sicilia in Agosto

I have long been surprised by the choices made by Mafia capos: they live by fear and extortion, so never get to relax and enjoy life because they create such countless numbers of enemies. So their lives are in pursuit of a chimera. This does not seem to deter the perpetuation of the tradition.

Stepy Akerman'skie

Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855) was the national poet of a Poland-Lithuanian Commonwealth which did not exist in his lifetime. He was banished by the Russians for political offences and deported over five years to a sequence of places which included the Crimea in 1825. The poem here translates the first of twenty "Crimean Sonnets" written at that time. *Stepy* in English is steppe. Akerman was the (Turkish-rooted) name at the time for modern Bilgorod Dniestrovsky, the names respectively meaning White-Castle and White-City-on-the-Dniester. It lies 40 kms southwest of Odessa.

Faith in Destruction

The churches and place names here join together in dereliction. When Russia annexed the formerly Polish parts of Ukraine and Lithuania, it became impossible for worship to continue in a Catholic church. Large numbers of fine buildings had been constructed, mainly in the 18th century, heavily due to the generosity of individuals from the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth (who are listed). The result for the buildings was that they simply fell down as nature gradually wrecked the roofs and nobody cared for them. Raimondas Paknys, an outstanding Lithuanian photographer, committed much time and trouble creating beautiful, tragic, atmospheric photographs of the ruins, often in far-flung and obscure places. These were mounted in a remarkable exhibition that I was lucky to see in Vilnius in 2019.

Sisyphaean Snails

A different kind of tragedy in decay. The Greek authorities determined that since the foundations of the astonishing temple at Vassi, positioned in the middle of nowhere in ancient times as today, were decaying, the temple needed saving before it fell down. But the result is that the “restoration work” has barely started after 25 years of putting the temple in a tent which contains the winter damp and thus may well be rotting the stone more seriously than the foundation decay. I would have preferred to allow the building to fall with grandeur. I knew it so well, eight visits before 1985, most recently in 2014. It seems unlikely that it will re-emerge even in my children’s lifetime. Lykaion is the mountain on which the Vassi temple stands, in the heart of the Peloponnese. Andritsaina is the nearest large village, whose economy has been destroyed by the closure of the temple. *σαλάτα χωριάτικη* simply means a country salad.

Truth in Jerash

No consideration of cultural tensions today could be complete without reference to the decay of truth. “Emerson in *Santa Croce*” refers to a well-known scene in E M Forster’s *Room with a View*.

No Other Choice

Set in northern Siberia. I have visited Russia but not Siberia: the detail here is all from the sculptor Laurence Edwards’ trip there in 2018 as guest of the renowned Siberian anthropologist Professor Piers Vitebsky. Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) is a sculptor famed for her (often huge) spiders.

Patmos

As with *Truth in Jerash*, no survey of cultural tensions today should fail to reference the importance of religious issues. The Armenian poems hint at that; here Friedrich Hölderlin’s extraordinary, visionary poem *Patmos* gets overtaken by them. Mount Tmolus is in western Turkey, a mountain range on the south of Sardes, forming the watershed between the basins of the Hermus in the north and the Cayster in the south. It is connected in the east with Mount Messogis, also mentioned by Hölderlin. Pactolus, to modern Turks Sart Çayı, is the river in whose waters (so the legend goes) King Midas divested himself of the golden touch by washing himself. Herodotus claimed that the gold contained in the sediments carried by the river was the source of the wealth of King Croesus. The river empties into the Aegean sea north of Izmir. The Taurus mountains are also in Turkey, but Hölderlin’s geography was a little hazy: they are some 600 kms distant.

To Casa al Colle

This short lyric honours a much loved location in the Garfagnana region of Tuscany, in the same village where *Lost Memory* is set.

Scherzando

The Thirteenth Labour

It might seem perverse to provide notes for something as light as this, but to be consistent: Heracles’ eleventh (first supplementary) labour involved tricking Atlas to get him to reassume the weight of the heavens after Atlas had handed this responsibility to Heracles while Atlas stole the three golden apples of the Hesperides for him. This dishonesty would (perhaps should) have enabled Eurystheus to require a thirteenth labour. Antimache was Eurystheus’ wife. Bactria’s territory varied over the centuries but its principal location lay north of the Hindu Kush mountain range and south of the Amu

Darya river, embracing much of modern Afghanistan. The Oxus was what the Greeks and Romans called what today is the Amu Darya, historically a major supplier of water to the Aral Sea. The Pamir mountains lie due north of Afghanistan in eastern Tajikistan. The ancient Silk Road ran along the Fergana Valley eastwards from Samarkand in modern Uzbekistan. The Greco-Bactrian temple at Takht-I Sangin indeed lies by the confluence of the Vakhsh and Panj rivers, source waters of the Amu Darya. Folegandros is a little-known Greek island lying between Milos and Ios in the southern Cyclades. In modern times Katergo beach has been known for naturism. Folegandros is not known for snakes but there is an urban myth that the wriggling shapes in a wall at Delphi were carved by Folegandran snakes. Amorgos, Sikinos and Astipalaia are other little-known Aegean islands. Hajji Firuz Tepe is in the northern Zagros Mountains of Persia, close by the Gadar river and not far from Rowanduz and Arbil. It is important here because the excavations at Hajji Firuz Tepe have revealed a Neolithic village, occupied in the second half of the sixth millennium BC, where some of the world's oldest archaeological evidence of grape-based wine was discovered in the form of organic residue in a pottery jar.

Tombeau des Nouveaux Omanis

This references Mallarmé, who wrote deliberately obliquely. In particular it references his famous *sonnet en -yx* which rhymes -yx seven times and -or seven times, which I take to be gold versus the unknown. Hence the sonnet here in English rhymes -ex (or -ects) against -(g)old. The content slipped so smoothly into something all too relevant to culture clash in Oman that the piece hardly belongs among the Scherzando section.

L'eau de Bear

Some self-parody seemed fitting. Paradjanov and Teshigahara are relatively obscure art film directors. The other titles in the three quatrains are all art films.

Home

Heap of Noblesse

My grandfather Douglas Goulder was shot down over the Skagerrak in October 1943, aged 51. He was in a neutral, Swedish, passenger plane, on a mission to negotiate the transfer of Swedish shipping insurances back to London as part of the economic effort to starve Germany of foreign currency. The plane crashed on the foreshore of Hållö island, 100 kms northwest of Gothenburg. He left a widow and three sons then aged 9 to 16. In 2013 I was given an archive of some 300 letters and telegrams sent to his wife Daphne Goulder which prompted this memorial.

Rebirth in Trachis

Cultural roots are a vital part of our existence. The reminiscence here dates from the early 1980s. Esslin's definitive book on the Theatre of the Absurd highlights what happens when we try to cut ourselves off from those roots, and deeply disorienting it is. Ezra Pound translated Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (The Women of Trachis) in 1956 when in St Elizabeth's mental hospital in southeastern Washington D.C.. The play is extreme, telling the tale of how Deianeira, wife of Heracles, thought she was feeding a potion to Heracles that would restore his fidelity to her, but in fact she mistakenly sent Heracles a catastrophic poison, from which Heracles died in great agony. I left for a holiday on Lake Garda with these two extraordinary books. It was the Sophocles which proved the antidote to the mental poison of the Esslin. "What splendour, it all coheres" is Heracles' transcendent cry (in

Pound's translation) when the machinations of the Gods are finally apparent to him. The link to the challenge set by Eurystheus in the *Thirteenth Labour* will be evident.

Romanesque Deliverance

I owe a debt, one of many, to Harry Eyres for suggesting the trip I made to the Vall de Boí in 2003. There is a wondrous music in the Catalan names of the churches which form part of the Unesco-designated World Heritage Site. The peak of Besiberri Nord (3,008 metres) crowns the valley where the story took place, at the western end of the Aigüestortes National Park.

Cinquantamila Benedizioni

It would take many words to explain the allusions here adequately. Happily the point of it floats above the detailed meanings. The title means "fifty thousand blessings". It was written and presented to Harry Eyres on the occasion in September 2020 of a dinner at the time our friendship passed fifty years' duration.

Low Slung Sofa

The occasion here dates from 1982.

Flowers of Freedom

Zwartkop Aeonium is an exotic plant from the Aeonium family of tree houseleeks, whose name comes from the ancient Greek "aionos", ageless. While most of them are native to the Canary Islands, some are found in Madeira, Morocco and in East Africa (for example in the Simien Mountains of Ethiopia). Melianthus is a genus of flowering plants native to elevated grassland in South Africa, commonly known as "honey flower", with large pinnate leaves with prominent stipules, and erect racemes of nectar-rich flowers. Musa Basjoo (popularly the Japanese Banana) has vast leaves, 2 metres by 70 centimetres, and inedible banana fruits, but is quite a sight and has been cultivated in Britain since the late 19th century. Cobaea Scandens, variously known as Mexican ivy or monastery bells, is a species of flowering plant in the phlox family.

Daphne Chestnut Grandmother

This tribute to my grandmother is counterpart to that in *Heap of Noblesse*. Kanzan is a variety of *prunus* flowering cherry, of which she was particularly proud to have a fine specimen.

Acknowledgements

... respect for places:

People reflect places reflect people. We all grow from our geography. Particularly: Stromboli, Sicily, Garfagnana, Assisi (Italy), Ogygia, Trachis, Vassi, Dodona, Lindos, Patmos, Khania, Iolchis, Athens (Greece), Vall de Boí (Spain), Hällö (Sweden), Hegra, Finnmarksvidda (Norway), Budapest (Hungary), Bohinj (Slovenia), Gjirokastër (Albania), Priština (Kosovo), Ulcinj, Bay of Kotor (Montenegro), Nicosia (Cyprus), Foinaven, Kirkibost on Skye, Duddenhoe End, Littlebury, Englefield Green, Kensington, Canterbury, South Georgia (UK), Rapa Nui, Atacama (Chile), Los Potreros (Argentina), Toronto (Canada), Ejmiatsin, Dilijan (Armenia), Duwang, Tsho Rolpa (Nepal), Dhaka Eid al-Adha (Bangladesh), Tokyo (Japan), Djakarta (Indonesia), Singapore, Jerash (Jordan), al-Khabbah wadi (Oman), Arkwasiye, Ambikwe, Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Mloka, Zanzibar (Tanzania), Rosebank (South Africa), Cairo (Egypt), Bîlhorod-Dnistróvsky, Kukil'nyky (Ukraine), Evény (Siberia).

... respect for Hölderlin, Rilke, Mickiewicz, Neruda, de Chirico and others:

“Patmos” here is a translation of Friedrich Hölderlin’s great poem of that name. “Silken Farewell” contains six lines translated from Rainer Maria Rilke’s last Orpheus Sonnet. “Stepy Akermańskie” is a loose translation of Adam Mickiewicz’ first Crimean Sonnet. I am indebted to the great sculptor Laurence Edwards’s trip report for most of the detail in “No Other Choice” and to a journalist whose name alas I did not write down for detail in “But Fly a Kite”. A dozen or so of these poems have links to specific works of Pablo Neruda. In two or three cases, they are close to being loose translations; mostly the links are tenuous. Neruda once admonished Alastair Reid: “Don’t just translate my poems, I want you to improve them”. Of course one could not imagine doing that. But his remark gives hope that Neruda might have been delighted to think his exceptional breadth of imagination could have been the springboard for a free and new part of the collection here. Particularly: Sistema Sombrío, Entierro en el Este, La Noche del Soldado, Los Constructores de Estatuas (Rapa Nui), No Sólo el Albatros, La Noche Marina, Oda a Una Castaña en el Suelo, El Sur del Océano, Significa Sombras, el Lago de los Cisnes, Establecimientos Nocturnos, Sonata y Destrucciones, Arte Poética, Serenata, El Perezoso. Finally almost all the “Fantasias” are prompted visually by works by Giorgio de Chirico.

... respect for people:

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Afterword

The interactions of different cultures have been the cause of numerous wars; yet those same interactions provide us with a wealth of diversity and richness. We mainly grow up in one place, one culture, which tends to generate a comfort in the home culture, so that, for some, other cultures can feel a source of potential threat. But I have loved so many encounters with other cultures, despite challenges. So my purpose here has been to light up frontiers and illustrate issues. We all need to be more human, to be fully aware of cultural frontiers, to embrace them and smooth their difficulties down through understanding. We need to be rid of the sickening disease of lies on social media, and for that we absolutely must be closer to the truth and think about mankind and his and her umbilical links to the land where they live and the languages they speak. It is for this reason that I emphasise local language text and script – aside from their intrinsic beauty, they are at the essence of the solving of these challenges. The collection aims to highlight perspectives on the two extremes of the risk of problems and the reward of richness, filtered through the limitations of how little it is possible to reach to the truth of these matters as a traveller. Virtually all the narrative tales here are unembellished from actual personal experience. Collectively I hope they illustrate two important truths: that everywhere one may go, human warmth, honesty and goodness is there to be found; and that attitudes in other countries are often superior to our own.

Travel itself can be a source of great trouble. The Nepal that I discovered in Rolwaling valley, scarcely trodden by Europeans in all history, is so different from the heavily-beaten tourist tracks in that country. *Trail of Dust* shows how a well-intentioned idea to donate to a local school on the ground in Tanzania can easily give rise to a poor outcome. But these tales cannot be told without somebody making the visit to create the experience.

I pay special tribute to the individuals it has been my privilege to meet in this context, especially Yoann, Amalia, Eleni in Cyprus, Amanda, David Ahn, Junji Tagami, and the unnamed subjects of poems like *Kosovan Survivor*, *Maternity in Arkwasiye*, *Sickle Trained*, *Papagena Panhandler* and *Another of Those Girls*. They tell so many truths.

Despite settings in thirty countries, these tales miss out on countless other countries. There is such a wealth of potential in our global diversity. We disrupt such heritage at our peril.