

Poems at Sixty

Chris Gilchrist

December 2008

FAR SIDE

We sleep in the scent of blossom
dreaming without stir
lingering on the far side
of the pale shades of afternoon

There is no knowledge here
our being is adrift
roaming the chequered squares
in patterns heard through yesterdays of the mystics

Coiled in myths
spirals of water falling deep down
through moebius consciousness
and crevices in layered times
to reach roots so long unknown
that cells sharp with awaking
send echoes clear to the sky

AUTUMN

The elderberries droop at the end of their branches
like wrinkled old women's breasts.
Bitter now the blackberry,
bright red the hedge-sprawled rosehip.
This year's slow fall to its cold ending
lays a leaf-lattice on earth, water, stone.

Staled by summer's persistence of green,
the eye delights in daily variation,
as yellow-green chestnut falls,
beech slowly curdles,
birch sheds golden drops
and thorn maroons its fading scarlet.

The air over the ploughed field vibrates with plovers' wings.
Playful as ever, the peewits dive,
flattening their fat black-and-white wings
mere feet above ground, soaring, calling to flock;
feasting on the fresh furrow, they only pause
in their winter-wary southerning.

Spring for young lovers, autumn for the passion of experience.
Its musky scents reach deep into the dark,
its pangs of parting pierce and tear like thorns,
its impossible yearnings point to a far-off place,
more real than this, this wondering flesh, this earth.

INVERSION

Where through the wind the sky names points on earth
the life in leaf, stone, water lights again;
as old an instinct quickens human birth;
while Adam's shadow hovers, there is pain.

Pain at the centre, whirling turns away.
At the periphery, bright flowers bud,
recalling from the time of the first day
the flowing of a stronger, brighter blood.

Afar his green hill-ring soars sparkling;
here in the under-autumn, she decides.
Empty the eyes that recognise no king
and from the winning of her game no gain derives.

Throughout all faith can't fathom, seeming can,
and so a flow, rooted in change, persists,
a form of veils and shadows: is this man?
Both echo and reflection do exist,
but only to one who sees and hears.

WINTER

Sap to the roots sunk, trees stand temple tall,
splaying their twig tracery against the orange on blue winter dawn.
No bird stirs in the star sparkle,
faintening as the east-glow swells the horizon.

The wind waltzes in small steps,
patting a cheek, lifting a skirt,
fretting the frost-crunchy grass.
Dimmed by the icicle-overhanging moon,
the station lights cast contours of brick on tarmac,
castles soon to be swept away by the tide.

A shining yellow caterpillar creeps in, pauses, sweeps on.
In this brief interval the rite of passage completes.
The dawn is dead: day dawns.
The temple with its tree pillars fades
as a pearl filter pares instinct to pale light.
The sunrise celebrates reason's rulership.

EASY

Happiness is simple.
It's when you say
'This is it'
and it is.

Unhappiness isn't simple.
It's when you say
'This isn't it'
and it is.

DRYADS

Looking across the valley from the limestone shelf
I see the slim and supple ash
flaunting their pale already naked limbs.
The wind sets their young slender bodies quivering,
they dance erotically, whipping each other lightly with their fragile twigs.
And after a lashing frenzy in the autumn gales,
at the stillness of solstice they stand purified and silent.

Slower to shed their summer finery, the beeches glimmer
behind a thinning veil of purpled brown,
their smooth-shaven trunks and branches
now seen, now hidden in a rhythmic sway.
They make a slow pleasure of nudity,
prolonging the sweet lust of disrobement
in foreknowledge of the lesser windswept joy
implicit in the weight of grander limbs;
and after carnal grinding by the storm
transform to temple pillars, solemn, austere,
until the time returns for tight-rolled leafbuds
to swell again between spring's quickening fingers.

JUDGMENT

It is a severe moon.
Reconcilement of the seven ages
comes in the midst of the gambolling of clowns.

As if we were cast ashore on dry sand
but here no hand
will stretch out of the water.

People throng the city streets.
It is a time of high tide, full moon:
gay colours muted by moonlight.

What rhyme, what reason in a half world?
The day will press a thorn of knowledge in my side
and the old warhorses of the circus ride on.

A downturned glass, tokens of petals.
That laughter has left its imprint in caverns
that will re-echo it when the signs fall due.

But over the dunes, the sea-grass, ocean,
a clear sight of the old clothes,
clouds hustled away by the wind.

GRACE

The worm is deep beneath the hard-baked topsoil,
the snail shelters under a heavy stone.
The birds flap wearily to and fro across the garden
seeking any morsel of food for their young.

Seedlings have browned and withered,
flowers have burned and dropped.
Grass cuttings, instead of composting,
have formed a dry thatch.
Everywhere the wind stirs up dust:
instead of spring green, there is brown.

I dreamed I heard angels singing: I awoke
to find the world wet, the grass drop-heavy, the trees adrip.
And from the branches of the ancient beech and huge old sycamore
blackbird and thrush were giving liquid thanks
for their world's refreshment,
breaking their sun-weary weeks' silence with ever-new song.

Deeply I feel, deeply I know:
I too can be thankful for grace.

AFTER THE EVENT

Out of this clouded heart
flash pains that leave me cold
and further from this, my art.

The golden age was always yesterday
but even knowing the truth of this
I feel it slipping away.

In tune with myself and everything
I found delight in wonder
awed by the great gathering

of my small self and all particulars
into a seamless oneness
beyond the reach of thinking or ideas.

The memory of this agonising joy
is faint, its faintness painful too:
gold is dulled into a base alloy.

The wine I drank still lingers on the tongue,
like soft horizons, half-remembered dreams:
the wine of air, not only breathed but known.

Now all my hope is that this breath will free
my heart from darkness, and restore
that not-me-centered sensing of eternity.

SEEKING

I seek the oneness that will encompass
me and all
and yet I fall
constantly back on three that flow like grass,
or wave like trees in wind,
transmute like women's eyes
or flutter through the mind
like autumn leaves.

KNOWING

I only know me by what I see in your eyes.
Searching for the essence of the mystery
I'm aware of this axis and turn around it.
Everything else happens as it must,
but I won't be distracted. At the centre
there's a fine humming vibration.
I know this! And there's no reason
why I should ever leave this holy place,
whatever I'm doing, whoever I'm with.
The turning is now.

TRAVELLING

This journey I go
is my self that's going
This way that I go
is the world that's flowing

These answers I seek
are the questions I'm asking
These masks that I wear
are the person I'm masking

Time's a dream and time's a river
Know the flow and be a mirror
Be the flow and live for ever

The pursuit of these dreams
is the dream I'm pursuing
Our actions of love
are the loving we're doing

These games that we play
are the rules that we're making
and the rules that we break
are the lives that we're shaping

In the world is on the way
Seeing here is knowing there
On the way is in the heart
Loving's the same everywhere.

FATHER

The anniversary of your death
came and went like a train
that was going where I didn't want to
so I stood back and watched it.

The photograph still catches me sometimes
as I get up from my desk. I turn to it on the wall-
momentarily I've forgotten,
and reach out to you, then stop, defeated.

Vague wishings- but if I look at them,
they contradict reality-
are a sudden pain, come and gone,
leaving behind the forever question of meaning.

Of course there was a lot went unsaid,
but that'd be true however much we'd spoken
and mostly we didn't, but understood well enough,
so that's not a true regret, not really, no,

it's just the pain of absence
attaching itself to whatever's available:
in a day's fishing, a rest on the riverbank,
sprawled in waders, ready after exertion
just to look, quiet, easy- and there's the shock,
knowing that I do this the way you did,
so it crystallises in me: I'm all there is left of you.

I can't not feel older. It's a fact:
I'm the older generation now, the buck stops here.
Before, being me was enough. Now, there's more;
this view of life needs me to keep things in their place,
but if so, my feet will always fall into footprints,
and this scares me.

It's letting go that's hard, not dying, we can all do that-

I sat beside you in your unconscious last
heavily breathing voyage, and I knew,
so I read from the Psalms, your favourite poetry,
the enlivening beauty of the old translation's words
against the sterile angles of the hospital room,
and your breathing eased as you heard the psalmist's blessings-

Your ashes down the forever river,
your words fossilised on typescript pages,
your grandchildren shaping divergent life paths,
and all our memories of you fading,
leaving only an innermost sense of self.
This is how it is, now and always.

Father, I know you now.

THE WAY HOME

Here in the city where too many people throng
nobody's sure what is right or what is wrong
so many motives hidden in so many lives
so many twists and turns, we hurt and learn
and travel but never arrive

Like the tree in the wind let me bend and not fall
Like the still lake let me reflect what's above us all
Like the budding flower let me trust the sun
Like swallow in the springtime let me find my way home

Here in the city there's a madness in the air
nobody knows what's broken or how to make repairs
so many theories tell us what is best to do
so many plans and schemes, we dam up our dreams
and just keep muddling through

Like the stream in the valley let me find the right way
Like the birds that sing at dawn let me welcome every day
Like flower and fruit and seed let me grow to what is more
Like the waves of the ocean let me find my way to shore

Here in the city we're all strangers passing by
nobody knows a good life or even how to try
so many things that free us turn into things that tie
so many fears and wrongs, we shed our tears and long
for a happiness that needs no reason why

Like the stag on the hill let me know where I stand
Like the hare in the heather let me know who I am
Like the mountain eagle let me soar alone
Like the salmon in the river let me find my way home

ISLAY

The moor is another island
stained with moss and russet grass,
speckled with heather, myrtle's faded greens,
and all a symphony of colour, soothing the eye
with its wavelike rise and fall.
And on and on, the undulating ground
presents the mind with this, and this, and this,
until everyday chatter falls into silence
and the colours tend inwardly
towards the secret harbour of the heart.

LEAF FALL

Fall of intense acorns, the under-oak earth is densely packed,
each brown husk fat, vital, thrusting its pink shoot
into moist rich soil, levering its way
through stubborn grass, harsh roots.

Leaf fall late this golden year,
warm autumn after hot dry summer slowing the death
we all wait for, as the dried earth's heat
is slowly slaked by slants of cooling rain.

Single leaf fall is a ballet-
slipslide downstrokes suddenly intervalled
by long curlicue transglides
through viscous supportive air.

A single leaf, fall of a hero,
sticking to his post till the last possible moment,
dodging, ducking in a hurried retreat-
he knows, we all know, how it must end.

Not a single leaf fall multiplies images
sigh upon rustling sigh to the world's edge,
a recurrent reluctant wonder;
how would I fall?

Saw not: a single leaf fall from grace,
lost place in the high sun, banished
to underworld darkness, deep-layered forgetfulness
far from the hope of a fresh green rising.

I saw not a single leaf fall.

MELTING SNOW

The thorns the happenings of life have pierced you with
will work inwards until your flesh
turns bitter with unfulfilled memories.

If you try to pull them out,
the barbs set firmer, tearing the fibres of your breath.
Don't waste yourself fighting an invincible enemy.
Be like melting snow.

When you yield that powerfully, nothing can harm you.
The barbs dissolve.
Your heart runs sweet and clear as a mountain stream.

UNSURE

When I come home you don't listen
you just sit and look inside
you're as far away as an old train whistle
or someone you once knew that died

There's a time for that, and hey, there's no distance
there's a time for that, no resistance at all
we have time for that, we pay for existence
and when you let go you fall

When I look in your eyes, I'm sure I don't know you
when I listen good, I know who you are for sure
but however good a trade is it can't paint a picture
can you tell if this is after or before

There's a way we can go, make our own island
there's ways to go, if I can leave myself at the gate
we have ways of going, maybe I'll lose your mind
you're never found till it's too late

Empty the past, a cup of spilled coffee
turn your eye to the horizon from the shark on the sand
in the moment I'm empty, I could be you or me
there's nothing here for a judge to understand

You're a living emblem, not a home for reasons why
I'm a living emblem, except when I try to be,
we're living emblems, wordless stories that can't lie
I want you to, need you to let me be free

STORIES

The time is close
It closes round us like a shell.
The demons shimmer,
waiting their turn in the arena.
If delight is here, it will soon be gone,
wrath will as soon depart as arrive, and fear, and-

Shake like a stag's antlers,
dance like a fox's feet;
be as content as bees in sunshine,
a bear with a honeycomb.
If you can make a song,
you can make a singer,
but where does wanting to sing come from?

The way it's told, everything is everything,
but if you're the storyteller,
why this story? And for what?
Answer, and graduate
from one life to another.

FLU SUTTRA

Friend, in this latest illness I have suffered,
and what is the point of suffering
unless one can share its fruits with friends?
(and if there are no fruits, then, like the sterile fig tree,
one may incur a curse even from an enlightened man).

On the first day, a slight tremor passed through me.
Looking back, I recognise this as the start.
Homeopathy prescribes Aconite at this point
but only if taken now will it be effective
and, as usual, I missed the moment.
Almost immediately, ignorance descended:
instead of responding to the new stimulus,
I pretended not to be ill, and continued
all my normal doings, slavishly following
all my usual habit patterns, and incubated
the mental form of the illness overnight,
so that it could hatch and grow the next day.

Which it duly did, overtaking my body with racking cough,
exhaustion, erratic changes in temperature, aching of bones,
queasiness of stomach and dullness of mind.

Now I changed into the shape of an animal: wounded,
retired to the thicket, not knowing the nature of its injury,
aware only that it suffers and must suffer,
the animal endures. It can only endure.
It rejects companionship. It refuses food or water.
Its skin is too hot (or too cold); its breathing too fast (or too slow);
its pulse too hard (or too soft).
So I lay sick, as I have seen cattle or dogs lie sick,
wholly identified with my illness, becoming it wholly.
An act of sacrifice? Of expiation? Why lay me down
under this affliction? Why submit?
And yet there is a kind of pleasure in this submission,
a fulfilment of the knowingness the body can only have
when it is racked, and a depth within me asserts
that only by wholly knowing being-illness
can one be free of illness: so I rebut
television, books, magazines and simply lie,
half-conscious, sometimes aware of the breath.

According to Indian philosophy, sound
is primarily a mental event. The form (the word, the note,
the melody) is a direct mental perception:
the sense by which sound enters, the sense of touch.
In a similar way I see illness as a mental event;
the way it's responded to, at that level,
affects the quality, the consequences
of what happens physically.

I'm not suggesting you can always turn illness aside-
sometimes you can, in the same way
you can step out of a draught-
but that awareness of its existence before the flesh
alters the nature of the being-ill process,
making the suffering conscious, transformative.

A sleepless cough-filled night forces a blade
of thought through the hard ground: that cough, painful back,
all my aching muscles- indications for Rhus Tox?
So I try it, several doses during the day,
but it makes no difference. I turn on the answerphone,
turn off the external world, restlessly wander
from one too-much-energy-demanding thing to another

until I have to pull my self together for a meditation class,
and amaze myself by becoming still and calm,
and not coughing once for three hours,
and being gently aware of the breath
and yet not being detached from being-illness,
nor ruled by it, and for a short time
applying loving kindness to this suffering.
Necessity is all-powerful.

Afterwards, I sink back again, but with a vestige of clarity
review my homeopathic facts: cough worse lying down,
worse at night, indifferent to family and friends-
Sepia: and so it is, for a few doses
banish the rattling cough, and I sleep.

In theory better rested the next day,
I'm even more strongly gripped by inertia.
All I want to do is lie on the sofa under a blanket.
But the phone rings. And rings: I have to work,
which means thinking, and writing, and sitting
at the word processor, all of which I obscurely resent,
the child in me claiming his right to opt out of the world.

I visit the osteopath; under his hands, I relax,
and walk home lighter, so much so that I start sneezing,
and go on sneezing explosively for the rest of the day,
and the queasiness is still there, and the aches,
and the weariness lurks ready to sandbag any vivacity,
but the phone rings, demands must be met
by more thinking and writing and faxing,
and it's interesting, now that I haven't got the energy
to argue with myself, how easily I can sit down
and write and complete what's needed- as if being-illness
had absorbed all the no-saying power I've got,
leaving none for habitual reactions.

Holding onto the serpent's tail has taken me deep:
again I've seen how I choose to suffer. I'd forgotten,
but remember now that I'm on the upward spiral
towards the light, that it was my belief that
to suffer less you have to suffer more
that led me to take the downward snake path,
to see how far into being-illness I could go:
not enough clarity, I have to tell myself,
there are still things about this body-and-mind entanglement
you could know by being there when it happens.

Will exerts itself again. Ennui threatens me
in the long afternoon, so I pick up Keats
and learn by heart To Autumn, a poem
I think I already know, which makes learning it harder.

The body is still sluggish, heavy and the lungs
are still oppressed, but the next day demands action,
and so does the dog, so I go to the Forest of Dean.
Disappointingly, the oaks aren't as autumnally resplendent
as I feel they should be; they're old and tall enough,
real English giants, but their range is modest.
It's the beeches that are the real stars of the show,
making a multicoloured racket amid the somnolent firs.
The subtlety and variety of shades
of green, yellow, brown are what delight me:
if spring is sorbet, autumn is chocolate ice cream.
The walking is good, the steady rhythm,
the required effort to keep going; several times
I reject short cuts and easy loops,
even abandoning the path to cross a trackless plantation.

The everyday mind recurs with greater frequency
in its associative sequences. I realise
these have been absent the past few days, due to my sojourn
in the serpent's realm. I find myself resenting
the chatter, the internal conversation, then stop
to sit on a lopped-off tree trunk
in the middle of the forest, squirrels' leavings
of chewed-up sweet chestnut around my feet,
and watch small shoals of leaves swim to earth,
and feel happy, and cough.

May I be well and happy
May you be well and happy
May all beings be well and happy.

DREAM

Since I first met you
life is not what it seems.
You are the lover
I've known in all my dreams.
But now I feel I'm lost
in a world of TV screens-
I only wish I knew
am I the dreamer or the dream.

Since I first met you
I dream all my days,
all my everyday happenings
pass in a haze.
Our nights are wonder
but then the dawn gleams;
again I'm left asking,
am I the dreamer or the dream.

I dream I love you
more than you love me.
I hear a secret message
'That's how it's meant to be'.
I want to die in love
so I will be no more,
like one wave together
we'll break upon the shore.

Moonlight and roses, that's what I feel.
My friends all tell me it's time to get real.
Their world's like dust and smoke,
I know what I've seen,
but still I wonder
am I the dreamer or the dream.

I dream you love me
more than I can love you.
I look in the mirror,
ask if this can be true.
A face is shimmer
ing, I think it's a sign,
it may be me, it may be you,
I know it's divine.

Together again, the world fades away.
My heart implores you, o please let me stay.
You smile at me, we smile at you
a silver voice whispers
let go and be true.
I've lost and found you, how it's always been
I am the dreamer and the dream.

TO FALL

I am beyond all travelling.
This hereness of birdsong at midnight,
the river's rock-rushing music
gaining and fading with the breeze-
this is all there is, and briefly I rest in it,
a pearl in the great ocean's shell,
before splitting myself into question and answer
and wanting, absurdly, to make something of wholeness.

There's an ending. Finite.
but that's just a view of a little me:
I don't really know any such thing.
What I really know, when I know it,
is this happening now,
this sudden midnight wakefulness,
delicately poised between the different journeyings
of sun and moon.

I'm easily enmeshed in doings,
believe in them and make them real,
spinning a whole world into being
from just a few fragments,
as if as conversation about the universe
could create the universe.
The only way I know how to let go
is to fall. Which is why
I seek the secret of being here selfless,
of letting go without it being important,
of being presently in the breath.

RIVER IN THE GARDEN

There's a river in your back garden.
You can't see it, but listen!
The gurgling, sparkling flow
is always there in your inner ear.
The river chuckles its way
around boulders and roots,
it knows they can't contain it
just as deep down you know
this river can burst its banks
and sweep away everything
you think shapes and orders your life.
Deny the river and risk the flood,
or wade, listen, bathe, drink,
and find a new yet strangely familiar
place to live,
an unexpected life.

OCEAN

The ocean of emptiness
beats upon these shores.
The edge of silence roars:
that's all I can remember.

WISDOM

Without calm abiding, wisdom crackles
like lightning that flickers restlessly
between the clouds. It comes and goes.
You shrug and say: It's just summer lightning.

With calm abiding, wisdom thunders
like lightning that radiantly
Splices heaven and earth. You duck,
thankful you weren't blasted to bits-
and everything has changed.

ENDING CONFUSION

It's inescapable, what we all long for.
The disguises we put on death,
ornate surroundings concealing emptiness.
Except for seeming, nothing is as it seems.
An earth-stamped foot is an elephant,
or a road digger, or your lover
in a bad temper. Mixed with drifty clouds,
does this make a dream or a lesson?
The only end to confusion
is the ending of whoever's confused.
When the boat's launched,
it skims over the waves,
shedding its weak memories of the land.

QUESTION

A chunk of setting sun
bursts out from a low cloud bank.
It shoots separate rays up into the blue,
but impossibly there are also bars of light
crossing them from north to south.
And the rays pass through soft wispy cloudnets,
but somehow behind them
there are sharp white clouds like dragons
or continents. And it all has this tingle,
this champagne sparkle.
I have to ask, who or whatever made all this,
Did you do it just for your own amusement?
or was it so that I would say
'Wow!' and 'Thank you!'

SALAAM

Like a dog on a lead
keen to follow a scent
the music tugs at you.
Persistently it brings discord into harmony
and in this ongoing refutation of duality
buds open into bloom in your chest.

In this uncertain-edged forest
the path could go anywhere,
but it's only ever your heart
that it's going to, coming from.

When your small creatures are content
your vision opens the path into vistas,
a leaf to a lake, a nut to a mountain.
What a delight, the vast and tiny
love each other in a weaving dance.
It doesn't matter whether the dance
makes the music or the music makes the dance
so long as you never cease
to sing and dance.

Like a dog on a lead keen to follow a scent
you tug at the music.
Follow.

THE GATE

I stand in front of the gate,
awed by its size and the absolute darkness beyond.
A gigantic wind gets up behind me,
and I have to shift stance and stand sideways on
to the gate to brace myself against the pressure.
I have to move, though, and discover
there's a map engraved in my flesh:
if I move in accord with it, I flow like mercury,
but if not, the wind tears my hair out
and abrades my skin. I come to a stop
where the map curves into a tight spiral.

Again I turn my back to the awful wind.
Streaks of light rush past me to the gate-
it's stars being swept to freedom.
The darkness beyond has a black glow.
It bulges towards me, tilts the map
to impossible angles, instantly crumples the gate
to vanishing point and leaves me
with the distant sound of high clear voices
celebrating a passage of necessity.

Remember. Recollect. Recognise.

OLD MAN

This old man
speaks more slowly than he used to,
with a gravelly burring
like an animal dragging itself
on a damaged foot.

This old man
needs a rest in the afternoons,
but can't forget the days when he worked
with the chainsaw for hours without stopping,
only a few years ago.

This old man
nods a heavy head,
a few strands of silver against the brown-blotched skin,
the eyes withdrawing,
the nose sunken from its former pride,
the face softening, gentled by the imminence of death.

This old man
is quite deaf without his hearing aid,
sets the morning radio loud enough to wake the dead,
turns up the volume on his favourite arias
and slumps, travelling backwards in time
to memories palpably more real than here and now.

This old man
is broad, but shorter than he was,
no longer stands commandingly,
must make an effort to hold himself upright,
has to think before walking.

This old man
no longer revels in provoking furious arguments,
has stopped treading on everyone's toes,
even professes to like young children,
is slowly abandoning bits of himself he no longer needs.

This old man
goes to the parish church on Sundays,
the one where he was christened,
meeting at the church door or the curling rink
old men who live in each others' boyhood memories,
and are more real to each other there than here,
where they meet tentatively, trade a neutral word or two,
knowing that only the graveyard will bring them close again.

This old man
sits at his desk and writes laboriously,
pausing often to gaze out of the window into the past,
and yes, this old man is me, my father;

with the authority of fatherhood stripped away,
his ways, his thoughts, his gestures, deep down mine,
echoed arrogance and weakness,
shared appetites and needs of the blood-

as if only age could unveil the truth
that earlier he could not be, I could not see-

and what is it that I must shed
before my son can see the same?

FASTER

The faster she goes,
the faster she must fall.
On the way she looks for heroes
who might answer her call

Man with a raven on his shoulder
man with steel blue eyes
scares you to make you older
even he can't make you wise

The more tender she feels
the harder she'll find
behind her appeal
a fluttering mind

Man with a wolfhound at his heel
man with a coiled leather spring
challenges you to be real
will play you for anything

The faster she runs
the deeper she runs dry
chasing too many suns
that polish her sky

Man with a grassblade in his hand
man with a skybolt in his breath
go with him to dreamers land
find a door leads past death

IN THE WAY

The old man sighs. The sea before him sways,
pitching its steady pulses into the sand.
Green of old bottles, grey of old skin,
meeting at the border of dead black weed,
bones whiter than a week-worn shirt,
an infinity of trivia bleached into a tide line.

Leaning on whalespume from years ago
the old man listens. The same dull roar,
swish and surrup on the suck-back ebb,
varies enough with each new wave to blow
uprooted tufts of memory along the shore:
'Nothing is unchanging any more'
he nods to the faceted brilliance of the sea.

Even the vastness palls: the flat straight beach
allows his gaze the largest open span
of white-tops, splattered with dots and flecks
of light from a weak, cloud-hazy sun.
'But how the horizon imprisons this!'

The curvature mocks him with its minor scale,
uncertainty of evaporation at the edge
of the known, eternity shaped into a pale
question of distance. 'Well then, what else?'

Sand crept into his cracked old boots
causes the tired old man to pull them off,
shaking a flurry of grains into the wind.
A few fall on his trousers, standing out
against the shabby blackness of the cloth,
'Bringing infinity closer to home' -
his single laugh is like a fox's bark -
'And if not here, then where?'

He rolls onto his back, resting his head
on a worn-white piece of tea-chest,
thrusting his feet into the sand for warmth.
The gulls coolly follow the wind,
filling the long interval to the clouds.

'Yes, there is always something in the way -
the clouds too, another barrier, another fragment.'

A gull swoops low. 'I'm not carrion yet!'
he calls loudly as it swerves away,
dipping a wing to regain height.
He watches it recapture its place in the current.

'What's in the way - is the way',
and as the clouds give the sun breathing space,
the old man turns on his side and falls asleep.

AIR

Listen! Listen! Listen!

The air spirals in
through thousands of secret passages,
making your chest rise and fall in easy waves.
Your heart bumps, propelling the pulse
you feel at your neck and wrist.
Lower down, the alchemist is at work,
converting food and water to sunlight energy.

You don't do any of this,
nor create your thoughts and feelings.
It's all a gift, unbounded,
ongoing, freewheeling as a river.
Try and hold onto it, pretend at control,
and this energy will tie you up and down.

If you want to surf, let go into generosity.
There's no difference between the sunlight
in you and the rest, so why not share it?
You're going to do so in the end,
so you might as well start now
and find out how to do it properly.

Once you get started, amazingly,
you'll have all the time in the world.

ST MICHAEL'S FIRE

I've seen St Michael's subtle fire
add flavour to the vagrant sky.
I've watched the churning fresh-born clouds
from the Atlantic set and scud on by.
My feet have found affinity with rocks,
my eyes with Cornwall's turquoise blaze;
I've let my mind be waltzed to calm
By patterned sparklings of the waves.
I've let the old earth grab me by the tail
and tickle my forgotten senses into life:
far-see, long-hear, deep-touch, remembering all
the ways that hid in body from the light.
The pinprick lightpoint frecklings of the swell
have tranced away the urban sense of me:
at last I can be silent and inhale
the endless restful seethings of the sea.