

CONTENTS

Alarm	3
Rebel, Rebel	4
Rules	5
<i>short one person</i>	6
Booklover	7
Street	8
Safety	9
Violence	10
Houseguests	11
Sunflower	12
Amicability	13
PTSD	14
<i>you who drift a world of dust</i>	15
RIP	16
Witness	17
What's it Like?	18
Information	19
Against Memory	20
To Seek is to Find	21
<i>what other home is there?</i>	22
Kore	23
Rising Damp	24
First	25
Ark	26
Sharing	27
<i>Anniversaire</i>	28
In Search of a Theorem	29
Cloud Spotters	30
Jet Lag	31
The Cosmonaut's Tale	32
Geology	33
Fish	34

Falcon 35
Pretty Things 36
Wings 37
Face-time 38
Demi-monde 39
Away Day 40
my path's white-cloud 41
we wander life, no way back 42
Maybe 43
is there no limit to all this grief? 44
Company 45
path begins at the very beginning 46
Capricorn 47
Pre-nuptials 48
Seen 49
Choice 50
Affinity 51
Starry 52
Ward Nine 53
Ambivalence 54
Recall 55

ALARM

One frond of the palm tree
always quivers, just one –
as if a storm went through, maybe ages ago,
and it never recovered.

There's a bit of the mind
quivers, remains on high alert, unnerved
by little things: a leaf that curls,
a pen out of place, a picture
tilted to the right, a wren that's left.
Smiles smile but hands stay clenched.

Why such unease? Memory
stays schtum, but heart murmurs
what it can and does recall –
lost palpitations: the missed beat
before the storm,
the arrhythmia after.

REBEL, REBEL

Early bird parents waiting for the home-bell
barely notice a solitary child stalking
the school playground. He swipes at thin air
with a broken tennis racket.

A teacher approaches. *Oscar!*
Come inside right now! Parents turn alert,
considering, as the teacher tries cajoling:
It's cold out here. Then veiled threats: *You're*
only making it harder on yourself!
Oscar has just one reply: *No!* Then starts
to scream: child's a storm inside skin.
Teacher winces, all too audience-aware.
And Oscar? Bored he stomps back into school,
his black shadow clamped to his heels.
Teacher tails him.

Parents discuss. Most support the teacher:
In my day behaviour like that meant the strap!
A few are amused by Oscar's mutinous spirit
but one or two say nothing: silence seals inside them
the thing that heard, stirred; flashed like lightning.

RULES

Grade four, first lesson: English grammar.
Some children sat forward, fidgeting, anxious;
others hung back, feigning boredom.

Who would have guessed it –
though words seemed to leave speaking lips
like wild flies, they were enslaved by rigid rules,
sat it chains in their sentences.

Could free speech, so lilting and light,
take flight again? Flit ear to ear, delight?
Droopy children signed to each other
with dismal gestures, and not one smiled.

Except him, bolt upright, electrified –
these rules had a wondrous logic:
explained how the world worked, how
space spoke to its stars.

Walking home from school that day
he knew exactly, and for the very first time,
how his feet could engage with the paving.

short one person

Wang Wei

Loss is nothing new – so many more than few
lose a leg, lose heart, run short of money, live in lack
of that one person.

Can cause drift, a door to door;
disconnect, a self-depict: *alone and foreign*
here in a foreign place.

No landscape wandered that's not short one
tree, no skyscape not missing that one cloud needed
for completion.

And the lost one? Pops up sometimes in dreams,
summit-bound, winding mountain path,
holding two baskets for gathering autumn berries,
a solitary figure, short one person.

BOOK LOVER

Street stall outside an Antipodean terrace:
books 'for exchange or to take'. Unwanted items?
She does a quick browse of trashy paperbacks,
then notices one hardback, mouldy, old,
published London. Essays on English authors.
Sits in her hands as if it belongs there.

She flips through pages heavily pencil marked;
notes the ex-libris bookplate (like hers as a child)
opposite an ornate signature dated 1920
but familiar as if from letters lost long ago –
someone years dead and never known
is an intimate, time-denied her. She's grieved.

But at least his book can be hers. Takes it
back with her half-way round the world
to continue where both started (upon-Thames),
nicked in her library with like-read books.
Safer from foreign streets than she is.

STREET

Easily done: one slight misfortune
and, at the blink of a bat's eye, there are no walls
to wrap around you, no roof to keep you safe
from the cold stare of stars.

For some it's life-vertigo, lure of the worst:
urge to leave the best behind and leap:
surrender to an outcast preference for
thinking wildly behind recycling bins.

You live from breath to breath, hand yourself
to chance. Mouth importunities to pavement and sky.
Only reply the deadpan glance of a rat after crumbs
from your bread crumbs. Then you steal a six-pack
and know nothing a stone couldn't realize.

Which is just as well as no one wants to look
their alter-ego in the face. Hear its cracked voice:
Spare change? Lepers have it easier and
the living dead are universally better liked.

SAFETY

He was the most dangerous person they knew,
a magician, a messiah, a street-fighting man.

Converted many, his quick-silver tongue
could talk anyone into a tramp, stripped naked,
opting out, and outcast in his image.
Never quite recovering.

To walk with a tiger would have been safer.
And yet, there she was, alone with him. Why?

She said something, and he got her at one go,
took her meaning, spelt it back to her
as she could not have spelt it to herself.
A miracle! Just for one moment she felt safe
absolutely. Thus did he harvest.

But not her. And when he chose
not to choose life she would not stand side by side
with his sorrowing acolytes, all rags
and ravaged minds.

Danger lingered: the not-mourned are not-dead.
Nor is doubt: did she entertain an angel that day?
Amused him briefly, before he sloped off
to captivate another, or try out new boots
on some innocent with a fascist tattoo.

VIOLENCE

Dinner guests are terrier lovers.
Theirs are normally kept on the lead: let loose,
they kill things. It's their nature.

Talk turns political.
Big mistake. Host, who enjoys a good
set-to, waves the red flag. As if to a bull.
What charges is worse than a bull: guest wordage
is ferociously extreme. Are these fascists
facing off across the table?

Hostess rises to her feet.
There is fear. These people are 'off the leash'
yet her husband keeps arguing – never did
have a nose for tipping points. She picks up
plates, knocks a glass; red wine
leaves a blood-like stain.

Serves dessert. As a sweetener
it's on the sour side; curdles the cream.
But the moment has passed. Someone
yawns; speech slows; meanings slur
into meaning nothing much, just small talk:
there's boredom, not blows.

Guests leave without coffee;
say its time they got back
to their dogs.

HOUSEGUESTS

Inside the stone house it was dark, dreary.
The owners were shadows of themselves,
and the guests too were shady, evasive,
wore sunglasses, smiles strained –

weight of too much information.
Wouldn't ignorance be bliss?
Still, they all tried for light-heartedness,
a lively weekend.

Especially *he* tried, showed the visitors
the valley's river, shallow, rocky, and they were
on the rocks, all of them, spotting pretty fishes,
when *she* said, flooded here this spring,
a real home wrecker.

Of course everyone knew
how she barely survived then, how
the pain in her heart just got worse,
and even come summer (he swore then
it was over) it was not 'business as usual'.

He showed them his land on the hillside,
steep terraces, and they all saw where
she used to grow grapes and green peppers
in the past when she still made
meals for two.

Then they passed a pile of stones beside
the stump of an olive, and he said, there was
a well here, and she said, it's gone dry.
No one else knew what to say.

SUNFLOWER

House on return is shuttered,
darkness hunkered-down and musky.
You're as good as a ghost haunting the life you were leading
here a month ago: same tea towels,
teapot where you left it.

But let there be light –
there on the old oak table,
in a glass jug barely able to bear its weight: a sunflower
big as a hand. Brilliantly yellow.
Sun outside sees it too, streams in.

The house comes alive,
white walls gleam, glass shelves glint,
and the sun-on-a-stem seems to turn, your direction,
as a timely reminder that you were happy here
once. So why not again?

A week later the sunflower
bows its head. Seeds turn black, petals
go brown. It's late in the season and in the fields beyond
sunflowers are no longer sun-turning.
Summer's seeping away.

Nothing lasts
exactly. But there is continuation: walls wait,
as does a friend who leaves flowers.

AMICABILITY

She didn't do friendship, not exactly.
I too was inexact or maybe partial
is the word. She was a part-time artist.

I was quiet at parties; she wasn't silent
but said little. Yet one or two times,
to our mutual surprise, we found ourselves
of one mind. On some minor issue.

So it came as a shock when she suddenly
told me of the breathing that had stopped,
and in such a manner. An awful accident
would at least have been an accident.

I too have my ghosts, so I tried to step in.
Not a day should go by, I said, without you
there at your easel, paint brush in hand –
art heals! Not that she listened.

Nor she wasn't unproductive.
I look at her landscape on my living-room wall,
broken brushstrokes, writhing shadows,
and recall what she's no longer here

to recall. It haunts me.
Maybe this is what friends do for each other.

PTSD

His life, still living,
is lived out in two places: oncology,
pure poison, one week out of three,
and his club, its warm fire, the bright chandeliers.
Face cadaverous above a scarlet cravat,
he greets, "You look ghastly in black."
Did he say 'ghostly', she's puzzled:
all those years, countless compliments,
her courteous returns. And now?
She says, "Love that cravat."

As they enter the dining room
his ill spirit starts to dance. Waiter's met
with daft demands, cranky reprimands.
Hands clenched she stares at a painting,
gilt-framed: tiger tearing into a turkey.
He turns to her with a look just like love,
says, "Gave you Post Traumatic Stress
last time we met, didn't I." Eyes gleaming
he adds, "Then again you never have been
exactly stable." Inwardly she flares; he stares,
amused, a skeletal cat with a sparrow.

Dinner over, he dons a tea-cosy hat, winks
at the doorman as if his life were just starting,
not ending. There's a spring to his step,
"See you soon," he says, and she nods,
limps off giddy with grief.

you who drift a world of dust
Wang Wei

O knit me! (who put such words
in your head?) It's not as if others don't
try their best: arms spread to hold,
unusual words are spoken.

Trouble is, house-wide, furniture
remains unmoved, and not one painting
tilts in shock on its hook. Your feet
walk themselves down the corridor

like a shrug, like saying: So? so you're
short one person, so what?

So there's after-life; waits in patience
for attention to fact: alone's never lonely,
companionship's always there:
a star, a nightjar. Breath.

R.I.P.

Fox on the runway,
mistaken, confused.
Light aircraft idle,
unable to take off.
Then an air-traffic message:
Le renard est mort. Shot.
Body shovelled away.

Sound of an impact,
tinkle of broken glass.
I search the house,
find a fractured pane, hole
size of a tiny head.
Below, blackbird's body,
wings flung wide.

Then the snake
in the road, too late to swerve.
Saw it rear up, rear mirror,
maybe survived for a while,
crippled,
embracing itself
in the bushes.

And you?
I never saw it,
your car door smashed shut,
don't know if you knew
a last light.
Sensed you in the sky
for weeks as ether
drifting.

WITNESS

A silent child you stood and watched
as they sliced the legs off frogs
left to belly-wriggle in mud, unable
to leap and too shocked to croak.

You'd liked the frogs, though were
not particularly friendly with them.
But to see their worse-than-death
was unbearable. So why stare?

You heard the boys with machetes laugh.
Laugh ? How could suffering be funny?
'Cruel' began to explain itself, and 'evil',
freed from fairy tales, turned real.

Yet you could not run away, were glued
to the ghastly. As if looking long enough
could effect change: flip the picture
from horrid back to benign.

Your responsibility, it seemed,
in a small-childish way, to undo awful.
As though you had created it.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Saw him leap for a mayfly, circle
back to the bank in a knowledgeable way,
skirting the tall reeds, wriggling under
lily pads to nibble at frog spawn,

and it seemed to me
he knew his life so certainly, that surely
this carp, prince amongst fishes, was the ideal
one to ask. So I put a pressing question:
What's it like to live in water?

He blew a lovely bubble: What other life
is there? It's not living not to feel the flow,
the surface ripples, the deep down slow.
Not being wrapped in water would be awful.

I'm wrapped in air, said I.
He fish-eyed me: Air is nothing! (Him meaning
I was nothing, of no consequence: neither
dinner nor dangerous, unlike a tasty flea
or a heron on the hunt).

Well! I replied, but you'll never know
how it feels to feel firm earth beneath your feet,
that hit of hardness: the security of ground's
faithful grip. He flicked a fin dismissively:
Why on earth would I want that?

Off he swam. I turned, tripped on a mole hill.
Thought I'd ask one of them,
What's it like?

INFORMATION

I need to know
but those who could tell are long gone.
Blood can't speak: history rides my veins
in silence.

Her baby, when? the loss, the leaving
bloodline out there, name unknown.
He did it too, a baby left and
sought thereafter (love ever after
never matching the past's
perfect passion).

Where are they now?
lost kith and kin who'd see in me
themselves, same blood.
But no one's left to point the way,
present the crossroads,
explain the choice.

I need to know
but why? why now?
when it's too late to ask, and all I can do
is shuffle my small hoard of fragmented facts,
try them this way and that,
though they never add up

to a trustworthy truth.
It's as a maker of myths
that I am my own
informant.

AGAINST MEMORY

Take that thing with the frilly party dress,
an 'uncle's gift to a girl in faded shorts and
old flip-flops, hands outstretched to receive.
But the father gives said dress to her baby brother,
cute little guy; toddles around in it with delight.

So what was all that about? Just a dad letting
his son strut his feminine side? All good stuff.
But now notice the girl, nails nailing themselves
to her hands. It's what she does, like the time
he tied a tin can to her cat's tail. Drove it crazy.

Of course he grinned like a prankster on each
such occasion. But for whom were these stunts
intended? Recall the look on the face of the mother,
then ask *why* she never could intervene: what makes
a child indefensible. Which 'not' is inexcusable.

Rehash makes for myth that can't get over itself
and, after all, we're not talking lions here (kill cubs
not their own). Only one thing worth remembering:
people mostly just do the best they can.
Mostly he did.

TO SEEK IS TO FIND

All day she searched for something.
Didn't know what. A lost item of some sort?
a hairclip, a thought, a dead beetle
she'd forgotten to lay to rest?

She wandered the house, peered
under beds, inside cluttered cupboards.
Stared out windows as if a new view
of a tree might be the key. Or a cloud
passing by, or a hare poised mid-garden.

Then for less than no reason she saw
a box she never noticed anymore.
Lifted the lid, found a doll so small
it shrank inside the eye to the size of a doll
for a doll's house inside a doll's house.

Reading glasses discerned a miniscule skirt,
painted hair same colour as hers
once was. Had she put it there?

what other home is there?

Cardboard box arrives unexpectedly.
Light and oddly lively: full of butterflies?
Sender's my larger-than-life mother-in-law.

Inside, under layer on layer of bubble wrap
like riddle after riddle wrapped round a truth
I find twelve exquisite champagne glasses!

For her, flutes fulfilled a cardinal duty
to remark life's high points, birthdays, births
when so many had died. So who was I

to lack the grace to celebrate a peaceful day –
dragonfly sighted, kingfisher diving the pond,
cock pheasant crossing the lawn.

Years ago she'd said, call me 'Mother'. I said
nothing. But this gift, gorgeous, feather-light,
might it mean love of a motherly sort?

Its reception was daughterly.
Not that I'll ever use those flutes.

KORE

Kore! His voice. Autumn already?

She hears, she who is half
of the One-who-is-Two: Mother/Daughter
ruling corn fields, high summer, a Mystery
inventing loss and winter's dawning.

She-too touches herself twice: time
for His loud-booming voice saying,
I'll take you away to be You, not one of two,
you know you want it.

Of course she's never denied that she died
for his Underworld, hungered to descend, leave
the fair-haired Mother, a peachy woman
next to her dark-garbed Daughter

listening out for that deep-throated call: *Kore!*

ending summer. A die-back, a descent
to being queen in His end-place where her crown
as His consort wears well until (love being love) wintry
laments, long and lonely, filter down

and she returns, spring in her step, to her mum.

Time and time again.

RISING DAMP

Water lurks underground.
Lost cellar turned sump? Forgotten *source*?
Turn on a tap and hear a riverine gurgling,
ground water chorusing, trying to join the flow.
Egged on by a long-lost subterranean lake
where eyeless fish still twitch.

Damp rises up the white walls,
swells door frames so doors can't close,
while between floor tiles tiny streams insinuate
and soak indoor air to wet-as-water. Call this
an eviction notice?

A storm brings inundation: uprising
inches high in the hall. Intentions are clear:
plaster buckling, stones wriggling from their walls,
house just beams and boarding floating off
in a temporary logjam,

people and mice left sprawled on the lawn,
house-ghosts clinging to oak trees with
a 'we told you so' look.

FIRST

Her first house
lounded across the Equator,
inhaled heat and exhaled it
as thick viscous vapour
haunting the shutters
in the twilight interior
where night rested by day
and night creatures came and went
and came again
skittering, slithering.

Heat tipped her downstairs,
shrugged her off the veranda
straight into the slow
path of adders, tongues flicking
as she ran on the lawn
to the maw of the sea.
Then the house warned
the sea, and the sea
paid attention: waited with
a rip tide, gripped her feet,
tugged hard.
But she dug herself in,
disobedient, determined:
watched a crab washed away
and stayed.

Bougainvillaea welcomed her
back with a bloom.
House glanced at her once
and she clearly heard
a shutter half open
slam shut.

ARK

My animals vanished.
I was five at the time. In the night
they departed on painted paws and wooden hooves,
padding, prancing, dancing off the dresser
to go where?

They were never found.
There were searches: behind the dresser,
under the bed, in the wardrobe, outside the window.
I told the truth, said I saw them leave, but only now
do I know

where they went:
it was the ark inside me,

I keep people there too,
my departed mother, dead friends, also many
I know intimately but have never met, from other centuries,
other worlds, lives variously shaped
and ended.

Breathing creatures too, human
and otherwise, reside in my ark. Most feel contained,
consoled as if they'd been taken by the hand,
a few are uneasy, slightly queasy; seek
an exit in vain.

I avoid doves and landfall,
an emptied ark would be no use to me.
So far no storms have seriously caused me to question
my course to the ends of the earth. And
my ark sails on.

SHARING

I'm sharing a shocking-pink rose
with a spider. She's a snow-white spider,
pops out between petals when I'm sure she's gone.
Could be poisonous, but we co-exist:
I don't dispossess her of her home and she doesn't
sink her cobweb-fine fangs into my finger.

There are many creatures sharing this house
with me. Mice, moths, lizards on sunny sills.
Not all my living companions are alive –
when the moon touches the top of the stairs,
the phantom duck flip-flops his way down its treads,
in search of the pond beyond the locked kitchen door.

Just as the dead share themselves with us
we share our one-and-only lives willingly,
call it love or necessity; worst thing of all would be
nothing-to-share-with, an emptied-out world,
not a lively thing left to share breathing the air,
nothing shady to interest the mind after midnight.

I share this end-of-world thought with my spider,
ask her, 'last woman standing?', you or me?

ANNIVERSAIRE

There'll be a small gathering –
do-gooders, the curious, a psychologist or two –
at the mouth of the cave, no candelabra or candles,
just a raising of conch shells and cabbage leaves filled
with fresh dew, a few raindrops, feverfew.

The cave-dweller will just sit there
lost in labyrinthine logic, twisting tunnels of thought,
the dark and the winding seeking out that special place,
cavernous, cathedral-like, stalagmites,
faithful stalactites

sanctifying his communion
with handprints, red on rock: the deer and the spears,
stick figures single-file, casting shadows by oil lamps
conjuring his face, fire-lit feasts, beasts
slaughtered in his honour.

Sun behind mountains, night near,
those-who-invited-themselves will disperse down the hill
to their valley, and the cave-person, in an attempt
at good grace, will try out gratitude
for dew, raindrops, raised glances.

IN SEARCH OF A THEOREM

Us must-knows,
busy-bodies bothered by the universe's secrets,
pace blackened rooms, race chalk across blackboards,
struggling, striving
to go figure and find

a single simple insight
sublimely equated, a balancing act,
space and time entwined on the tip of the mind.
A bit of an epiphany? Some might talk of God,
we just call it an awfully good theorem

and if pressed to explain we might coyly
refer to fractional diffusion, free transport,
observed regularity, or an iterative scheme
on an entropic theme.
Maybe violent relaxation –

sounds chaotic, we know,
a mental black hole or blind-spot,
a slip of the chalk after midnight – a mistake!
But we hear music, know how the Spheres spin,
see Beauty.

To seek is to find: reality wants to tell itself.
And it speaks in numbers.

CLOUD SPOTTERS

Cloud spotters are hard to spot –
in their pale blues and off-whites they blend
with cloud-streaked skies as they stand stock-still
on hill tops, roof tops and in freshly tilled fields.
Their trance-like demeanour deflects attention: only falcons
and flying beetles observe them, people pass them by.

If addressed inadvertently, their responses are
inaudible as fog replying to rocky ground.
Yet there's loudness in their longing upward gaze
as if watching were a calling out to clouds
to come, descend and take them in, and into
cirrus, nimbus, cumulous – all shape-shifting
in an endless selfless act of self-invention.

And how cloud spotters adore this, envy it too,
stuck as they are in their sandbag bodies
pinning them to the ground when they know –
just *know* – there's sky behind their eyes, and
they were born to be up there, scudding along
with cirrostratus, altocumulus, cumulonimbus.
An error of atoms made them animal.

Being born in the wrong body is an easier thing
than being born corporal and feeling ethereal.
Best hope: reincarnation as drifting mist. Meanwhile,
cloud spotters point cloud-coloured faces at the sky,
ignore their treacherous earth-loving feet.
Dread sunny days.

JET LAG

Up here, high up,
your body's baggage, checked in.
Emptied of drag, all that weighty experience,
it's like sleep without sleeping. Mind goes quiet, reflective;
no need for rush and repair: nothing can reach you,
you're loosed: excused.

Up here, high up,
time reconsiders itself while you reassess
the silence you hear inside the hum of the engines:
is it death-wish or what that small wish always meant:
just the need for a break, brief bit of non-being
like a pause between chapters in that story
you tell: history of you, by you.

Up here, high up,
inner-altimeter flat-lines as distance unleashes
at the edge of the mind brief flashes of meaning,
here one moment, gone the next, always a half-thought
away from a wholesome conception of what's really
real: universe in a nutshell: a singular insight,
sublimely simple.

Touch-down.
You're set down in a new day, new time zone
where gravity grabs you, reclaims your body
as you search for a passport to prove you have a life
though you know it's still clutching at clouds,
half-way down, and your photo's
unfamiliar.

THE COSMONAUT'S TALE

I'm related to Icarus
on my father's side, and my mother,
of course, was an angel.

Small wonder then, that my feet
never did like being grounded;
felt the sky in my bones

dissolve bones into notions
of flight, feather-brained
but delightful.

I was light, so very slight,
paper-thin, barely skin,
could blow away in a breeze –

it was sky-hunger.
I was dying to fly.

But my needs were
super-stratospheric: I wanted
a flight path

to far-flung stars.
Sought light yet-to-come
from profoundly distant galaxies

permissive of lift-off,
of being weightless in space –
free-floating, not gravity's slave.

GEOLOGY

Touch a stone and you touch
where a dinosaur's claw sought purchase,
where a mammoth trotted,

and the leather-wrapped foot of an early 'you'
tip-toed towards bison, bow and arrows clutched
in a weather-reddened, sooty hand.

Stone opens time-horizons like a fish-eye lens,
such scope! You're in love with
geological chronology,

you hold a smooth stone
in your digitised mind; granite maybe or sandstone,
palm-cooling, thought-stilling

and it honestly tells you how it felt,
scrape of a glacier, or the rough black caress
of cold currents in deep sea trenches.

Or the frisson of free-flying
through space in a comet, it's time turned,
you're flung backwards,

you're a bit of a star, then pre-star
as the glittering past gives way to a beginning,
that bursting forth only stones remember

and like relating to fingers that feelingly
need the whole history: how stones mattered,
how they'll end.

FISH

I am lucky to be able to care
so much for a carp who cares only
for himself and water-weed, tall reeds,
mayflies, and maybe the warmth of late sun
when he surfaces, and I'm standing
stalk-still for a glimpse of the twisting
of his orange-black back, flick of a fin,
his bright orange head foraging.
Then we both breathe light, and I know
we are shining, though dark stalks the pond –
the heron is hungry. And winter's in waiting,
ice coffin assembling. I cannot keep him
and each day scan the pond for tell-tale ripples,
a lover at an uncertain rendez-vous.

FALCON

I'm handed a leather glove, dispensation
to slip the skin, birth-bone and blood.
Breath hesitates: there's wind, early warning
of wings, then he lands, a huge heaviness
pinning pleasure to unsure ground.
His great claws contain traces of sky,
remnants of rain. We're eye to eagle-eye,
breathing in unison. I'm rapt, entranced
as his alien body heat finds its way
up my arm to that place, shoulder blades,
where something shifts, reshapes the way
I wear my hands. At the flick of a feather
I might take flight. My bird-in-the-hand,
to fledge me, lifts off, scatters starlings.

PRETTY THINGS

It was ugly, an ugly day
wet as a wicked toad's back,
and he strayed from the road
straight into the ditch, dodging
a dirty tractor on a narrow dirt track.
A few foul words were said, and
said again, as they waited for rescue
beside a run-down farmhouse and
a ruined barn next to slurry-soiled
fields draining away into wasteland.
Creatures appeared, three mangy dogs,
menacing, baring their teeth, barking;
two scruffy cats, one raised its back,
and a dreary grey goat limping badly.
But by the door of the farmhouse
a birdcage hung, and inside the cage
was a bird so white, so light. A *colombe*.
The farmer's wife appeared, all smiles,
and said, *Elle chante, elle chante!*
And then the dove did, it sang and sang
and the farmer's wife, old but once
very pretty, said, Look, you can stroke
her little back. So they did, with one finger
caressed the soft smooth feathers on
the tiny weightless frame, and knew
this dove was the prettiest thing ever.
And though the rain deepened and
the car was worse for muddy wear,
the day was tinted differently,
with whiteness, lightness, leniency.

WINGS

Commune's *en fête*, there's feasting,
speeches, a parade of *paras*, then
the climax – an air display!

Six jets appear out of nowhere,
form arrows, squares, with astounding accuracy,
then peel away trailing red, white and blue,
diving, twisting, climbing sharply,
to regroup with perfect precision.

There are gasps of awe from upturned faces
as if witnessing a visitation of angels.
Even those cleaving most closely to earth,
fearful of flying, mistrusting of thin air,
feel their most gravific part
go weightless, winged.
Spirits soar.

But chickens scatter.
Useless wings flapping they dart hither and thither,
try the hen house, hide under bushes.
Better marauding foxes, a pine marten or weasel,
than this end-of-world shattering
of the peaceable sky.

Show over, hawks reclaim
their rightful air space over rodent-rich fields.
As for *les poules*, ruffled, beaks agape,
they lay no eggs for days.

FACE-TIME

His face is reflected in the restaurant mirror
but his eyes don't see his own eyes as his own.
He has learned to breathe at a breath-taking distance
from his skin, face formed before

he was born in the dark of *their* risk,
grave risk. It did not desist.

There are extreme destinations where he's
expected to decline to leave his gun at the door,
where the look of danger-management is read,
readily and at glance, a respectful glance.

He lives behind locked doors, high gates.
Once in his place you cannot leave of your own will:
his will alone works combinations, codes
to unlock freedom of a sort. He's never free –

locked into each blood cell, his mission
to defend the dead from what they most dread:
the dying again, history's fondness for replay.
But how can just one man kill killing?

He's watchful and laconic, never says exactly,
or even inexactly, what he thinks, yet orders
wild boar, his father's wartime favourite.
Raises his glass, the Bordeaux looks black.

Then his phone vibrates, it's his son.
Face-time! Man in the mirror laughs,
sound like a bright red bandana,
and he's the youth he never was.

DEMI-MONDE

Some are halved. It happens early on.
Looking up at the only two faces in the world
one has eyes like the wide blue sky,
other's stare is a coal hole.

Ever after such a person does everything
by halves. Put on mood music and only violins
and cellos are heard, not flutes or pianos.
Books get abandoned mid-way, bookshelves
a forest of futile bookmarks. And, as each night
is only half-slept, half the next day is dreamed away.

Then there's the strange and disconcerting
disabilities. Like being unable to see a whole
face in the mirror, just the right cheek or the left,
a chin or a forehead. Legs don't coordinate,
means a lopsided saunter, and stammers
are commonplace, sentences sticking mid-way.

Halved ones strive to be more-than-whole:
have too many shoes and contentious concepts.
Some are overly holy, others stick to sin in excess.
All fear the advent of that black night when
they'll see less-than-half of a blue moon's face.

AWAY DAY

Next morning the mountains
were gone, just gone! Night before
they had taken on cloud-cover under cover
of darkness, and decamped. Declined their presence.
Left the air awfully empty,
fingers flailed in fine mist, finding nothing
to point to, no uplifting heights; no prospect
of a fastness divinely closer to the sun.
Some villagers said a rune to appease the moon,
and libations were left, milk, some honey.
But the simplest soul just shrugged and took the day off
to follow their mountain-less valley to the sea
where watery expanses extended endlessly,
and saw, saw! how 'high' low can be, the horizontal
every bit as grand as vertiginous verticality.
When he got home again, refreshed from a day away,
the mountains were back! high and mighty
against a bright blue sky.

my path's white-cloud

Wang Wei

Bag-to-bag with rucksacks, road maps,
pathfinder pacing, me one step behind, then twenty
as horizons widened from sweet start
to finale in a foreign tongue.

And yes, language changed, I was
studious to that while crossing some border,
Mekong summer, Ganges winter.
Straits of Malacca in spring.

There was an autumn to it: a sitting
in silence. What do words do but divide?
Black garbed stillness taught an 'empty' way,
(call it white-cloud mind, some sages did).

Spelled a wayfaring shift from 'there'
to 'here'. Was this true wandering?

we wander life, no way back

Wang Wei

A Sunday morning, snowy, sent you
out the door, bundled up, fur booted,
to walk all the way to your grandmother's.

Streets were unfriendly, hid their intentions,
tricked: was it turn right here or left?
Snow filled your footprints before they were
made, to make sure there was no going back.

A Scott of the suburbs, scarf round your face
kept your breath to yourself until you found
I am lost made no difference to breathing.
Felt like patting a bear and not being bitten.

That 'lost' could be done made return
a different journey: snowfall faltered,
stopped; streets were tame, slightly slushy.
Nor was home a sameness, more 'house'.

So memory tells you.
But why doesn't it remember to show
your grandmother running to meet you half-way,
and walking you all the way back?

MAYBE

Long last letter, cranky cat-loving Gran.
Love of my life! she wrote, 'I's leaping
for joy. Not one for words, here she was
confiding. Ten pages! not the usual two.

Truth teased and tempted: could this possibly be –
love at this time of her short-tempered life?
Such a going-on, when so much was gone,
across decades, oceans, loss met with loss,

and all that baggage badly tucked away.
Like her 'Not your child!' Of course
he walked out the door. Next husband
didn't walk, just died in a difficult way.

No one called it 'love', least of all her.
And now this. *He's found me again!* for trysts
on park benches, embraces in broad daylight
which couldn't care less, not now.

So how long had this been going on?
When did it start, and where? And which one
fathered which forlorn child? Was her letter
the gift of a glimpse of an unknown man

who might have answered to 'Grandad!'
Maybe her way of saying, there was love,
life-lasting, in the making of your making.
And this counts.

is there no limit to all this grief?

Spring in a time of dying.
Indoors shuts the door on the plague
but, sun out, how is an outing resistible?

So, to St James', all blossoms
and nesting birds: ducks, geese, moorhens, swans.
There'll be new life in the summer.

And I gaze at a mallard,
emerald green neck so gorgeous
I have to look away.

My father comes to mind, terminal, tired,
in Hyde Park, his tearful, 'You beautiful duck!'
I said, 'You used to shoot ducks, Daddy'.

A pelican rushes past, strange
blinkered face, some bird urgency
beyond our viral emergency.

It's oblivious to our trespassing
and how we're trespassed upon:
these invisible invaders

just doing as Nature intended.
So is this pay-back time?

COMPANY

On a NCP roof, abutting a Travelodge,
heavy rain and a drainage malfunction
make a lake where no lake is meant to be.
Grey water on grey concrete, sullen, still.

Looks deader than the Dead Sea;
not one ripple and no reflections
as if the sky's gone empty and
clouds no longer exist.

Pigeons stay clear but, out of the blue,
a Grey Wagtail flits in, tiny yellow bird;
dips to fish out floating insects and
cheeps while he eats with bird delight.

Happiness is contagious. I wait,
binoculars to hand on the window sill,
for his daily drop-ins. Pleasure doubles
when he turns up accompanied. A mate?

In the street below, deserted for weeks,
I spot a couple walking hand in hand,
then three joggers, spaced but in step.

path begins at the very beginning

Friends since our schooldays,
each spring we meet, set off
into Kenwood. Enter the forest,
meet a maze of dirt paths, fox runs,

a circuitous route until a flash of red,
rhododendrons ahead, means we're
almost there, where we need to be,
next to the Handkerchief Tree.

And what a tree! Radiates centrality.
We breathe in its out-breath; exhale
with an *Ah!*; feel how its roots
beneath the earth take our weight.

This year it's late in the season
but a few 'handkerchiefs' still dangle.
Still amaze: square, flat and featureless
'flowers' nothing like a flower.

On the ground, frayed remains
like used Kleenex, as if many have
dried their eyes, blown noses,
pilgrimage done, miracle witnessed.

Acknowledged. Like old friends,
still around after so many years.
And next year? Will our tree survive
winter storms, disease. Will we?

CAPRICORN

They walk the waterline, and it goes way back
to college when they weren't just friends.

And even now, in the corner of his black-fish eye,
she sees herself seen. *Where else has she been*

so admissible? Searches seaweed and flotsam,
finds a flame-tree pod, gone wrinkled and grey

since the sea took it to its pitch-black bed
of shattered shells and bioluminescent flashes.

His new wife comes to meet them, says
Climate here's *Antarctic, awful*, beach house

chilly and damp despite new windows and roof,
bamboo wind-screen and climbing red roses.

Thorns scratch and scrape at the window pane
that night. Moon's a scimitar straight from the sea

as grey waves pound the beach and grind dreams
into sea-snow. South-drifting, free-falling.

Come morning high tide has wiped away every trace
of yesterday's lingering footprints.

PRE-NUPTIALS

Die by the sea, ma cherie, his tee shirt reads.
His intended puts white roses next to the menus,
watches clouds drifting in off the grey Southern Ocean.
Below the veranda a brush turkey scratches,
making a nest to attract a mate. Neighbour's mowing,
trying to beat the rain. His wife shouts, *Ken!*
doesn't hear, doesn't want to. Bride's mother dozes,
dreams raised voices, *You must tell me! Tell me!*
head jerks on the pillow, heart knows the reply
as wave upon wave faded faces float in
on the tide tipped with flotsam, box jellyfish.
Not the one you wanted! a fatal sting. Then it hits,
tremendous downpour. *Ken!* He dashes.
Sleeper awakes, thinks she'll tell her gardener,
tending landlocked lilacs half a world away,
Such a beautiful wedding, sur le sable blanc!
to which he'll sigh, *Ah!* that gnarled *solitaire*,
picturing something he'll never know –
the hand-in-hand, the shifting sand.

SEEN

to see oneself
perfectly, as perfect

in a stranger's gaze

eyes as unlikely
as a caterpillar's

is not love
but like love

unqualified
as homecoming

unusual as
skin fitting

perfectly
a perfect life

CHOICE

I would if I could have the voice
of a butterfly, sound of silence
needing no reply.

I would if I could have the shape
of thin air, freely formless
and less accountable than the sea.

I would if I could have the vision
of an eyeless newt, taught by darkness
that which light obscures.

I would if I could have the mind
of a slime mould: a congregation delightfully
thought-free.

I would if I could have no notion of choice;
turns on yearnings: stones
hooked in the heart.

To sit in one's skin, precise and pleased,
might that not be
perfection?

AFFINITY

Sometimes we discuss it,
that sudden sense of connection,
intense and inexplicable. No forewarning.

Like love at first sight, or call it taking personally
something not of one's person, and yet,
momentarily, as close as breath.

Be it flower or mountain, a fountain, full moon –
moulds the eye to its size, and one *is*
what one sees.

You share spotting a shooting star, how it
took you with it: Earth fell from your feet,
you felt colder than cold, then free.

I tell you how holding a leaf turned me
into a tree. I was rooted to the spot, knew
the clutch of a crow like the touch of a hand.

Then you yawn, I pour more tea
and we find ourselves discussing a TV comedy
neither of us can connect with at all.

STARRY

He thinks only of stars these days,
says that's all that's left. He's leaving
earthly interests, loves and likes;
wants up and out,
the utter: outer space:

soul's on the move, too light,
lighter than each breath to leave his body;
won't wait to let the last breath leave,
craves space right now, moons after
the Milky Way

as if soul once took
light years in its stride and soared
to strange new solar systems to find
a soul-full, soul-safe place (rough out there,
black holes agape).

He says his soul sends messages
as marvellous dreams of a Goldilocks planet,
maybe not 'just right' for life (burping methane,
murky seas of mercury) but perfect for souls:
full of colour and fury.

Fantastic! says his soul. Finds the heavens
so much more interesting than Heaven.
He can't help but agree.

WARD NINE

Your shadow limped,
couldn't step in time
with spin and orbit, Earth's
inclinations a tilt too far
for your unsteady tread.

But here you're healed:
hands laid upon you say
you'll walk again on water.
And night staff doles out pills,
a kind of kindness

to release the knots
in every part of everything
you ever thought.
No need to count to ten,
nine marks

the lift-off when
you float past dreams,
surpass the Kuiper Belt,
find Planet Nine.

Your body drifts on mist
until day staff arrive,
a drizzly dawn. Post office tower
spins a neon prompt:
Good morning London.

You're back
and pain cuts in.

AMBIVALENCE

A watering hole, muddy, deep.

Wild child that I was,
I leant in closer until it saw me, and my reflection saw
my shadow let me go.

Through flesh I fell,
skin left neatly folded on top of tooth-fairy toys
in a fairy-tale circle

refusing to witness
water claiming me, pulling me down.

But breathing wanted
to breathe: made me claw my way, hand over paw,
up and out

to where sunshine
insisted on scorching my skin, while I persisted
in shading myself

with a vision:
girl floating face down, and dreaming me daily
with pity, and relief

that it's me, not her,
forever flailing. And always so out of our element.

RECALL

Out of nowhere come memories
swooping in; snooping on the present.
Not that you're ever very present.

They land, bunch like birds on wire,
then detach. Discombobulate:
can their twittering be true?

You think you detect an unkindness
of ravens. Wouldn't a flamboyance
of flamingos be more fun?

Or think of your robin redbreast,
how you love that little bird,
not just cute but territorial too;

never countenances
competition for your morning view:
he'd see off those ravens!

Then maybe come twilight,
quiet end to the day, an exaltation
of larks might lilt by.