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POSSESSION

POEMS
by CECIL GRAY

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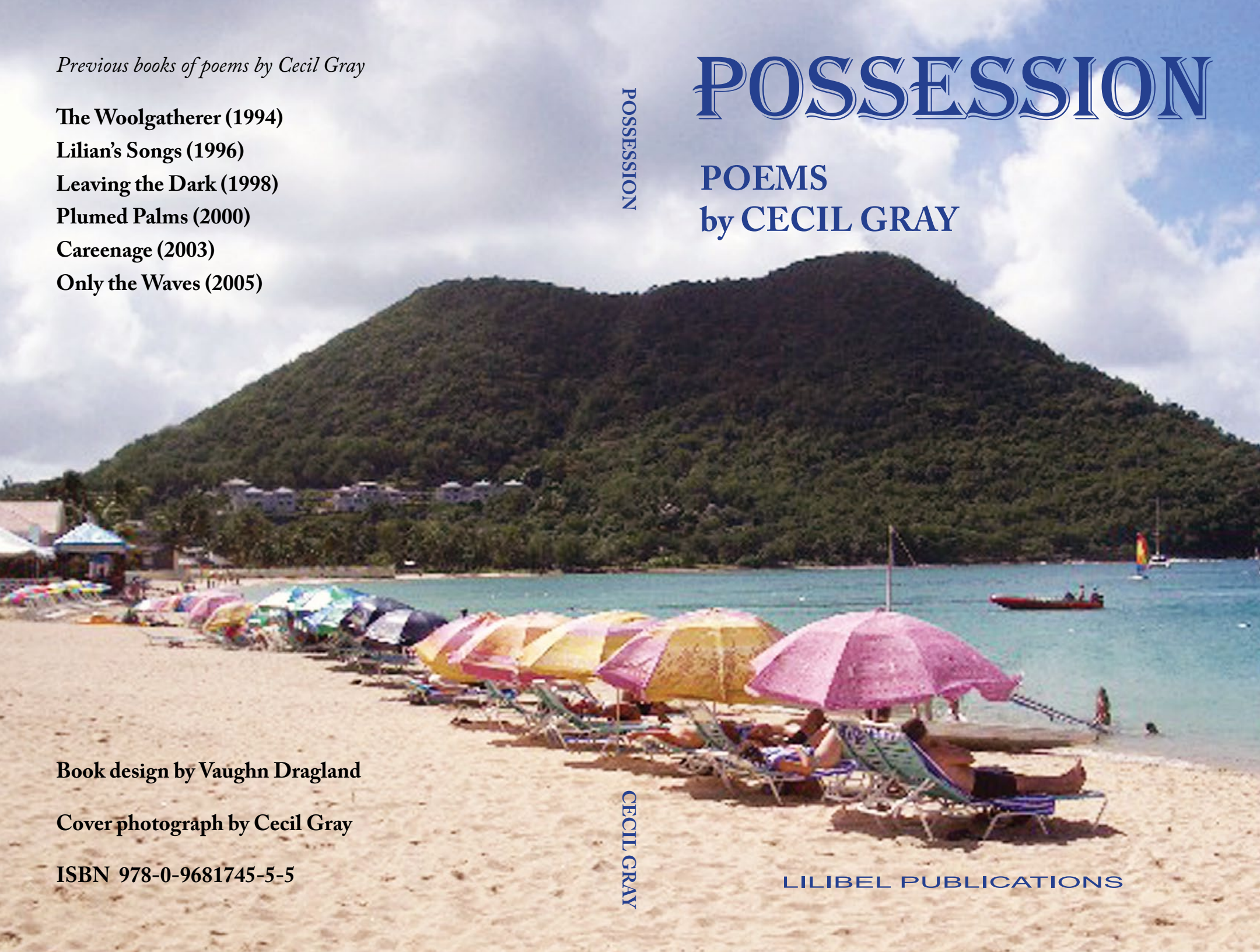
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CECIL GRAY

LILIBEL PUBLICATIONS



POSSESSION

POEMS

by CECIL GRAY

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For my children and grandchildren

for Irene

and in memory of Freya Watkinson

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ALWAYS THE SEA

*Like all who live on small islands
I must always be remembering the sea
Frank Collymore*

It is always the sea that I too remember
as I rummage through images to assemble again
fugitive remnants of days that were lived
in years incredibly far and faint
just leaving a trace of memory somewhere.
The sea rushes in and covers the shapes
of all other remainders, all the sharp stones.
It cleanses the shore of pain and fear.

In one early frame it brings back a harbour
like a swollen green lake furrowed by launches
rocking moored sloops against the quay's tyres,
turning at sunset to thick molten metal.
In another it glints like a blade between trees
seen from a bus but far from the road,
flashing and vanishing down past the branches
like blue strips of ribbon from the horizon.
Sometimes one re-animates an ocean
of heaving and rolling hollows and hillocks,
and a lone boat rearing up and then ducking
head down like a bull goring the billows.

But most bring repeats of a sunbright beach
with fishermen's boats drawn up and resting
out of reach of the surf's teasing fingers,
me warily watching the grumbling, tumbling
breakers, watching some children at play,
laughing construction workers building bunkers,
and the water adorned with a million crystal beads.
Such recurrent prints largely limit the view
I get of the past, like idyllic postcards.
I should rummage for others and reach for one
less seductive, less liberal with glad recollections.
Scenes with a halcyon shore are fine, to a point,
but they shut out the shark-infested waters,
tenacious undertows grasping for legs.

Yet why, when the sea's silver salver serves a prize,
should I invite dormant tsunamis to rise?

ECHOES

For my children

I should have read you stories on my knee,
fed you a children's treasury of myths,
ogres and witches, giants and fairies,
serving you helpings of virtue's victories.
I missed my chance for that, falsely busy.
Yet I believe the light that lit my face
told everything, burnished pages with tales.
So I watched you run on beaches of islands
we lived in, ramble on mountain retreats,
your squeals of innocence happy and free;
with love's eyes I thought your grace unequalled
when you swam, saw your dives perfect and straight
as pelicans' into splashless circles.
Together we searched far away cities,
streaking down autobahns, cutting valleys,
finding the campsites before dusk closed in,
pitching tents like gypsies, mapping countries.

Yes, we had our share of kindnesses
growing years can provide, savoured flavours
family rituals left on taste buds,
quaffed mugs of laughter, tightened bonds of love.
I keep it all to gloat on in my den,
memory's rare gems fortune placed in my purse.
Yet now I wish for a missing emerald:
I should have read you stories with a hug
and hand in hand traversed a fabled world
we would have stowed and visited again.

But that perhaps is greed. I've had more than
the bounties I could seize. And I still hear
their echoes coming back, celebratory
refrains from scores of your ripening years
when you taught me songs to sing in my heart.
Those tunes embolden me like a braggart
to shed regret about unread stories.
Let reminiscences sound their trumpets.
For, as my road's closed end daily draws near
sweet chimes of those years ring out loud and clear.

ONE YEAR

One year like a stranger I walked about
the town I was born in just to evoke again
the pangs of belonging like a waif to its streets
and gutters. I wished very much to reclaim
how it felt to examine things as a child
learning to walk with a lamp on the world,
like passing the doors of the homes one step
up from the pavement, yet proud and snobbish;
like the 'parlours' we went into to buy
peppermints; tram cars I once or twice boarded.
There were buggies with trotting horses; vendors
waiting like lifeguards outside the school gate
selling tulum, mauby and sugar-cakes.

My young eyes looked down dim gateways to yards
of rooms like stables where people had to live.
That was so long ago it was all swept away
by the tides bringing change all through the years
after. As I walked I was sad with the thought
that it seemed it never had happened. And no,
it wasn't nostalgia, no wish for it to come back,
just a feeling of loss, as if the trunk of my life
had brusquely been bulldozed, levelled like an error.

At the end of that walk I was smaller
inside, so much of me had been erased
what was seen was just half. Though I wear memories
that whiten my hair and can still hear the clip-clop
of horse-drawn carriages, nobody now
knows of that story. Time replaces
childhood's inventory with the gifts
it delivers. The town was groomed in the style
of the day. No walls spoke of lives like mine.

APPRENTICE

She would bite off the very end of the thread
and hold the needle up into the light
and poke and poke before she got it right.

And then the thread was drawn to equal ends
which she rolled together sometimes in a knot.
I watched and learned and in good time even got

the chance to do it myself, leaving apprenticeship
for a master's status. Now I think I see her again
a long lifetime later watch me jabbing in vain

over and over missing the eye of the needle I aim for.
Then I remember when she failed to pierce it
she placed the thread's end on her tongue for the spit

to bind it, so I dip down for these frayed strands to stick.
Anxiously I take another stab as if one was for practice.
I miss again but I keep punching, still an apprentice.

COOL NOW, CALM

As the sea enfolds the surf within itself
so my life's days are swallowed and disappear
with a breaker's sibilant curling white hair.
I sit and watch the sharp edge of the ocean
trying to see a ship, some single mast, a skiff
whose furrow leaves a mark that in the low sun
gilds the foam even here and turns natural loss
into the shore's shapely shells, its shingly sand.
I wish for nothing more, merely to endure,
a pebble on memory's soft powdery strand.

Vain aspiration! All things sink out of sight
where the horizon draws its line of silver,
where sunset makes pyres of the day's journals.
I study the embroidery froth creates
and see a final briefing in the ripples
the shore's ravenous sieve quickly dissipates.

It's all cyclical, isn't it? Ever since
everything started, despite comforting myths
like warm blankets, dissolution comes to end
every trivial parade. So the evening
by its nature falls on time like a taper.
Twilight has its own comforts like any age -
those consolations that supersede failure.
I am learning to be content. It's enough
that what has been done has been done. When the wind
turns wavelets like pages and new scrolls begin
whatever was fashioned vanishes like spray.
I am glad I had days to do what I did
but I'm cool now, calm, as it fades away.

SUNSHINE ALIGHTS

Before these Himalayas of snow we trudge through
restore features of the smothered road, thawing
into streamlets and puddles, sunshine alights
on the crests of the ranges and on roof tops
and billboards. Then minute flares of colour dance
at the sun's command like sequins on a queen's
attire. This evocation of lustre
appears en fete to ease winter's stern, prolonged
discipline lashing the spent spirit to pain's
whipping post. When fierce blizzards obliterate
the known world around us and lanes are buried
under peaks and mounds torpor seizes the will.
But then comes the brief gift of iridescence
which today the eye feasts on. Flashes in flakes
signal an end to the aches, a glittering
promise that soon straps will be loosened, frozen
dirty hillocks melt into air, while every glance
at the luminous frosting sunshine ignites
provides glints of consolation for sharp-clawed
months. Miniscule sparks burst as we dodge the sludge
and a grateful gladness waves away distress.
Soon every street will have a change of outfit.
The clangs of the street cars will be louder then.
But today we have ice-cold incandescence
flickering in snowfall and that lights the heart.

MESSAGES

You would have seen him before he let go
if you had turned. He just wanted to seize
a line to hold on to, far from the ledge.
But it could not be helped, you were busy,
could not be expected to pause mid-stride
with your goals just coming in sight. He tapped
on the glass of your glance on the off-chance
some ray of stray attention might be bent
his way. Still, it never came. Inch by inch
the edge closed in on his feet, offering
him peace and freedom, where he'll no longer
need a stretched hand, a word of compassion.
Then he teetered, grasping the air for hope's
last minute repeal. You had drawn the drapes.
So when he left, booting his bags behind,
and flailed through nothing your curtains stayed closed,
as they always were even when you seemed
to be looking outwards, scanning the view,
taking in frantic fevered messages.

BUGLES AND DRUMS

I can still hear the lights-out bugle
at eight o'clock coming from the orphanage
on the opposite hill. It came to my window
punctually, bringing its signing-off message
across the gap of dark shadows between, clear
martial notes of its command reaching every ear
on our hill. And I remember well how
it made me sad, how the night went lonelier
as I stared out where lights were dimmed now
and I thought of the orphans with no real love
to enfold them, no special arms to fall into
for cuddling hugs, only the rules of the day.

Later sometimes, on moonlit nights, I would hear
a faint distant drumming, rhythms of Africa,
east of the Belmont hill, a mile further away,
and I knew in a yard somewhere a ring of
Shango's followers were singing and dancing,
flouting the rules of a hostile power,
hidden like felons from the law's iron glove
since beliefs had to come from Europe's scripture.
For that was when we all jumped to the reveille
blown by far off buglers and to be African
was an offence.

But the dreams of a small
boy then never recalled bugles or drums. Their
themes were of school and play. Yet, like everyone,
he learned there were things to be suffered
to live, things that had to be secretly covered
as if no one recognised them, no one remembered.

FRAGRANCE

When, every January,
you were moved to a higher class,
it was the smell of new books
that elated you most;
though you got only two,
they were enough
to make you take deep breaths.

There were throngs in the bookshops
with long requisition lists
for history, geography, arithmetic;
you saw bookbags that bulged.
But you guarded your two
with your blue exercise book
at pains to make them keep
that untouched aroma,
the scent of burgeoning hope
of escape to strange new worlds
and new understandings.

Every whiff you inhaled induced pictures
of headspinning ventures to come,
of pages with places never heard of,
of people and tales of faraway realms.
You felt tingly tweaks of excitement
as you thought of entering them
like going sky-high on a swing.

None of that happens today,
new books you purchase are scentless,
or a drought has spread a desert
where the breathing mind inhales.
Expectations have withered to straw,
to disillusionment, so nothing
is hoped for, nothing brings fragrance.

EPITAPH

i.m. P.E.Ferdinand

It was your busy walk,
portly buttoned up paunch part of it,
that drew young imitators,
the way you jostled each minute
to fulfil its proper function
urging on sticks of chalk.
In the long list of your debtors
my name stands there with the rest.
Fed by your tutelage, notions
of entering fenced-in acres
fluttered vaguely through the head.
Only I can tell how you pressed
my whole future into my hand
when I resisted, having planned
blind alley options.

Seventy years later,
you're the one I still owe
my story, though favours like flowers
adorn the tale. Yes, I alone know
you forced me to cross a high barrier
I thought was uncrossable,
lifting the latch on a gate
and nudging me into a world
timorousness had named a planet
far beyond my telescope.

I grope for words to grace an epitaph
simple but true for you in your lonely
place somewhere I never knew,
knowing only the labourer who
used all of his days loosening lariats
strangling poverty threw around us.
Yet, now the sun slides into the slot
on the twilight's horizon
I've found no one keeping your name
burnished with eulogies.

It seems as if virtue that glowed
has sunk like a stone into oblivion.

As for me, I wish I could salvage
some of what time's piracy stole,
how you trampled duty's boundaries
to give all that you could, pages
wide open before us
showing me all of that world.

Let the street hear peals that I pour
on the uninformed air, let all eyes see
this obelisk raised in your memory.
I whom your caring set free
tell with my tongued bell shore to shore
a giving prince who died uncrowned
lies somewhere now in hallowed ground.

FOUR FATHERS

I

He is always revising the portrait
he has of his father, stamping phrases
he'd used before, rectifying what fate
served up soon after his birth with praises
that echo. Fresh metaphors are supplied
from notes he made of utterances said
by those wrinkled survivors who took pride
reclaiming a dear friend's name from the dead.

His father lives in his pen's loving lines,
a lifelong ardent payment of a debt
recalled now in reverential diction.
Each reconstruction once again defines
the legacy he celebrates, and yet
its memoirs come from memory's fiction.

II

He was never a father, could not call
anyone son or daughter. In life's game
he was named a loser, allowed no claim
to love or friendship, just consigned to crawl
in supplication for crumbs left to fall
from someone's table of love. Smear'd with shame,
he was the butt even his wife took aim
at, stood up to be shot against a wall.

But to one little boy in need he gave
the only chance to slip from the drawn noose
of hunger. Destiny was tricked to waive
its sentence of life in squalor's enclave.
The boy went on to cut his tether loose.
A father lived within that beaten slave.

III

The talk turned to childhood in the room,
and fathers' unrealized ambitions,
how they fancied they could then disentomb
their dessicated dreams and have their sons
ascend achievement's Himalayan heights;
how they as erstwhile mountaineers would show
paths to use and the most storm-free campsites.
Yet for each son each remained a hero.

When at that table one bent face became
as silent as a gravestone no one knew
there was no failed trailblazer he could blame
or praise, no disguised boasts he could flaunt too.
But there was a father he never saw
as if he had lived on some other shore.

IV

With his children rowing beyond reach
of his lifeline a man must reappraise
whether he told them of mariners' ways
he knew for steering to a sheltered beach.

The question of whether he should impeach
himself for negligence presses a hand
on his shoulder towards the judgment stand
to give account of what he did not teach.

If they roll helpless as some reef appears
across their bows he would shout too late
warnings he should have mapped to show them how

to shift a prow when inclemency leers
and veer away from treacheries of fate.
Now as he watches billows blast a bow.

CUTTING EDGE

You have to be innovative and bold,
he was told, if you ever want to be read.
Your words on a page look too old-
fashioned, formal, traditional.
So he scattered the words instead,
some here, some there, some severed.
But that *avant garde* gimmick
was just as stale so he wrote backwards
for a fresh mystique, the margin
down the wrong side, a different trick.
He expunged punctuation, scorned capitals;
felt that was not enough, penned only
letters arranged in columns and rows -
the A's faced the G's, C followed E
and the D's went under the O's.

Proud of being up to date, he risked his neck
and sent a poem to an arty Review.

He waited in pain. But then came a cheque.
How original, the editor said. A breakthrough
in subtextual meaning. So truly postmodern!
That showed him his lifetime of error
and he was determined to shed it.
He'd discovered the rule of literary success
and that really energized his spirit.
On the way to the bank he came up with ways
to make more dollars, with his name lit like the sun,
starting a school of poetic invention.

Without software to fit his computer
he handprinted his lines upside down,
making some run zigzag like a stutter.
He aimed to win innovation's gold crown.

He was on the right track, for the journal
immediately doubled his fee.
And he finally went totally minimal.
Like Beckett with "O", he just sent the page empty.

TAKE FIVE

I was listening to Brubeck and Desmond
doing 'Take Five', being mesmerised by the slow
closing cycles and my mind shot back beyond
pain to the time when Glen Miller used to blow

me away with 'In The Mood', back to Glen Gray
and his immortal (to my gang then) 'No Name Jive'.
I imagined too hearing Duke Ellington play
and wishing we could bring him there with us, live.

Desmond and Brubeck were inducing a trance
where memory made waiting hyenas take flight
and blew me back to school fairs we went to to dance
'Stardust' and 'Deep Purple' holding a girl just right

and weaving through spaces with continuous glides.
None of what moans in the mind was dreamed of then,
just girls with their eyes full of their glamour as brides.
It was all innocence, the ways of the world unknown.

Other times broke their barriers too. Billy Eckstine
on the hi-fi crooned 'Tenderly', and 'Moonglow'
swept in from Artie Shaw's clarinet; like old wine
Chet Baker's saxophone served 'Over The Rainbow'.

Now 'Take Five' came from the speakers and banished
everything else, everything else that stained
days that became our lives. The years vanished,
leaving the vista clear as if it had rained

and polished the air. With our top ten, my gang
sat around record players spinning LPs,
sometimes treating the neighbours to tunes we sang
with Bing and Sinatra, in falsetto keys.

What heavy roller through the years crushes such zest?
How is celebration so ruthlessly suppressed?

DUST

Monsoon rains had not yet come and the dry ground of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh yielded pale swirls of loosened dust. Ancient forts and palaces collected sweeps of it. Congested streets choked with the sounds of motion, the steady din of voices, motor bikes, tuk-tuks, rickshaws, all vying for fissures of space to push a way through, horns hooting and snapping like manic mongrels, and cows lazily winding on slowing the traffic.

In other times, long before Ashoka, long before the Aryans, civilized kingdoms shared the vast land. There in that season, where unshod feet stirred the dust round a thousand temples, we walked with guides who unrolled princely carpets the past had woven. But the saris were still red, green, saffron, as if the dust could not touch them, not from the powdery roadsides nor the fields weeded for planting. And the bazaars sparkled with baubles, handwoven textiles, the finest of silks, sitars and tablas. Comfort lounged around in gazebos and gardens while the despairing poor swelled by millions, the desperate destitutes whose lives littered the roads, and Varanasi's ghats were thronged by believers launching lit deyas on the dawn's grey river, begging the Ganga to bless their devotion with its holy healing handfuls of absolution.

We scuffled the dust where the fingers of epochs pointed, enraptured, beguiled by padding camels, the maelstrom of cars and cycles, grandiose hotels, and tiers of bangles ringed with glittering gems. We strolled intoxicated in Udaipur and Jodpur, in Agra and Gwalior, Delhi and Jaipur, and still do, sometimes imagining a bearded beaded saddhu trudging in thought. With burnt dust that adhered to the brow like caste marks, saris and teeming roads stay fixed in the mind.

We'd come away with the usual artifacts
of excellence, fine silk scarves, small carvings, rugs,
as if those objects preserved an aura round us.
But in wishful reveries we kick away fetters
that keep us hobbled here and travel in thought
to domains of Vishnu, Shiva and Hanuman
to wander like pilgrims in those places again,
back to the age-old seductions of Rajasthan,
Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana.
Their spell did not leave us when we left their land,
their namastes bless us still, a draped garland.

TORONTO, JUNE

For Cam & Susanne

And now the days of splendour have returned
the land has changed from white and wears its green
lawns and verges. The days of pain have earned
the town this season of release to preen
itself a while. The trees now seem obese
with surplus leaves lustred like emeralds,
the lemon light has renewed laughter's lease
which only winter's severe face annuls.
So pavements now are thronged with celebrants
dressed for the sun, faded legs getting brown,
each pair aspiring to elegance
stepping blithely down the streets of the town.

In Bloor Street Village West a shirtless man
with bounces in his stride bobs his way through
the stream of revellers. A June day can
dapple its hours like an avenue,
fitting the sidewalks' cosy enclosures
with little tables of chat and coffee
cups, friendship's stories as ambrosias
for leisurely sipping. Philosophy
has not yet mused over this seasonal
bloom of the spirit. It comes in response
to sky, air, sun sent like a personal
gift after long denial. Radiance
with a blue sheen shines the day. The city
gets heady with festivals, joy's drumbeats,
uncorked barrels of pleasure flowing free
before the mercy of the earth retreats.

But with you two, June's kindness never ends,
yearlong you keep a larder for your friends.

SCEPTRE

With my little hand fitted into yours
you kept me at a trot to reach the church
thinking devotion to its script would bring
the miracle you prayed for and provide
manna from heaven and guardian angels.
But you were my angel and I pedalled
my legs to keep up as if the church doors'
hinges were squeaking shut. I could feel fear
tugging me through the dusk, counting corners
left to go. It was always a race with
bells, but pews and liturgies were the means
you knew to release us. You bowed and knelt
in meek supplication. No sinful doubt
once entered your head. You, my grandmother,
who knew one book and could question nothing
showed me your way to live, clasping belief
like a sceptre. Your word was my law.

Now I sit here and ask your forgiveness
for my one act of mutiny. I found
out later that scrutiny dispelled faith
and I wanted to re-open your grave
to say I was sorry I could not kneel
unless proof's knitted lace decked the altar.
Even though cold in the rain I saw how
you wore fictions for comfort. Be not sad,
whatever earth your dust has become now,
that I walk with peace differently clad.

BLUE MOUNTAIN PEAK

Steeped in the morning mist and soothed by silence we looked down. It seemed the whole wrinkled island was below as we peered through stretched cotton wool discerning the waves of foothills rolling out to the coasts. The early light weakly suffused the encompassing view so we could just see the land as a dark-green crimped up quilt rumbled and left as ranges and valleys.

The long climb had been an ongoing slog, making the calves twist and burn. At times footings were much harder to push from, and the scree sent us slipping and kneeling on loose gravel when the path's winding made the soles slither and drew out groans and grunts. But we'd done the 7000 feet, happy because companionship was all that really mattered, camaraderie that takes you on and up, helping you to surmount jeopardies strewn along the way. It was strong, that handclasp we shared, Leo, Barbara, Mary and I, though time gloated just behind and gloomy knowledge climbed with us.

Here now, past the sparse shrubbery, past the scent of pines, after filigreed ferns, we had come to the clearing that was the crown of the peak and a depthless ocean of space submerged us. Through it we found Palisadoes, the harbour's guarding finger, very far off, and followed the surf's finery fringeing it. Hours passed as we talked or silently gazed, but I chased away prowling thoughts of the day when goodbyes had to be said and we had to take different flight paths to divided islands, separated worlds. Up there everything stood still, enduring. I could hold parting at bay.

Then darkness started to rise from the valleys, drinking the light. We turned from engulfing dusk coming at us and began the trek back down, strapping down thoughts and speech, crunching heavily on the grit under the sky's first stars, the ferns and fateful farewells left to approaching night.

PERIPHERALLY

There are not many statues in this city
as if from fear that a wrong choice will be made,
so when the air freezes and snow fits a wrap
on park benches and railings there are no bronze
figures to refit in white uniforms, ones
with dripping icy beards and powdered shoulders,
just those that cower and lie where grates allow
a breath of heat to rise from subway tunnels
and draw their cardboard blankets closely around
them and clamp their teeth and sometimes slowly die.

Our hearts rebel against it as we pass
and every glance bedevils the eyes like glare.
But though thrown out of stride we cannot evade
the push behind from the day's obligations.
Lest we be caught in maudlin puerility
survival flicks lamentation's switch to off.

We are whisked swirling on like windblown flurries
having to scurry before a meltdown comes.
So when shame growls it is fed business theory
or some impeccably reasoned argument
to explain the orbit that the world is on.
Reassured, we assume long faces of pity
and notice cardboard beds only peripherally.

GOODBYE

i.m. Freya Watkinson, 1933-2008

As the train paused at small stations with a nod
some of its travellers changed, like fresh players
replacing ones whose time was up. But the mood
stayed the same, as if my fellow passengers
all had sombre destinations. Fields went by,
passing the windows like patterned counterpanes,
and hedges and backyards. Observation bred
its fictions. I glanced at a woman whose eyes
gleamed like tears in the light and thought how sorrow
shadows us with a gun, unless we take arms
and face the stalking hitman to exorcise
lament's lurking lycanthrope. I was going
to see my friend who had stared at her foe
from her bed knowing his talons on her throat
would never slacken, yet never winced nor blinked.
At a more lively stop the change of tempo
turned the mind to comforting prospects, pictures
showing prized achievements kept in her scrapbook,
pages I wanted to turn slowly for her
pointing to what remained unassailable.
In my plastic bag with a book I carried
the same old wish her reserves of courage
were still high, that she still did not bat an eye
nor that look of disdain the enemy met.
I dreamed I could take her a writ of reprieve
restraining that gaoler with clamps of iron
and that I splintered the rack she was stretched on.
Quietly I shredded the script pain had penned
as the sibilant rails slid me rapidly
on to her ancestral homestead, her tower,
where that unwavering will repelled the siege
maiming despair mounted each day. Miles flowed by
while I weaved other fictions in which time's wheel
ceased its ruthless spin spattering suffering
randomly where celebration should have been.
So it was her pillowed face smiling at me
I could see when the train stopped at Salisbury.

But then Tessa called from the car there waiting
and, as I sat and buckled up, softly said
she had died, died as that dawn lightened sleep's last
allurement. I was too late. Cold-blooded fate
had denied me that one last visit.
So I saw nothing of the road we followed
driving back to the house. I do know that I
climbed up the stairs, that I saw the off-white rail
of the chairlift, then took a step in and stopped
near the bed. Then, at that moment, truth's grenade
went off in my head, seeing her face, waxen,
rigid, open-mouthed. And I know a great howl,
without shame, broke out of me, pain's sluice opened,
that I rushed out from the bed to the landing
swallowing hard as I could, strapping down sounds
erupting like whimpers, hiccuping sorrow.
Forty years of friendship rose up in my chest
in bursting waves, crashing down on gutting rocks.
Beginnings and endings come from no plan we
devise, elude our choosing like zephyrs.
So the clasp we shared, never losing fixed faith
in each other, venturing on pathfinding
exploits together, snapped as offhandedly
as it began, leaving just memory to see
her lanes again, her garden, her stone tower.
Calmly now, without sobs, I can bid goodbye,
her face in silence and in that cast of light
death cannot dim. And I must let go these lines
as they brim once more from sorrow's inward spring,
my eyes, self-willed, are making the letters swim.

AT PLAY

In the late afternoon sun in the playground's
tumult of voices they slither down the slides

raucously shouting and laughing, jumping on
moving carousels like a group of cheetahs.

Squeaks come through the chatter when little triumphs
are suddenly won, and the babble increases.

Everyone of them wants the light to leave them
more time for the fun they have here together.

I follow them as they stand in a circle
holding hands, hands of various shades of skin.

I watch them, so ingenuously linked, so
innocent in their readiness for friendship,

and I feel tingles of hope coming alive,
then more from their unrepressed delight playing

their game. Here now on this orange-lit playground
I see the quick candid bonding they seize on

like a shared oneness. It is what attracts them
all, though soon it will be time to go home,

to separate encampments and tribal flags,
and soon they'll learn they must pull their hands away

from those of a different hue. But that day
still tiptoes in silence round games they play.

STARTING AGAIN

Except on Christmas calendars that stores
doled out in December advertising paints,
hardware, furniture, and so on, they
had no way of knowing how winters brought
the white gleaming snow they saw on pretty
greeting cards with chimneyed houses. Nor
did they know of hooting winds that blow
and pierce the thinly clad like bayonets.
To them it seemed the perfect place to be,
to get away from saddles on their backs.
It was a dream that kept them looking far
offshore for rescue or relief by outside gods
whose fleecy snow suggested better things.
I often wonder how they would have coped
if wishes had come true and then their success
had whipped them with its icy punishment.

But I believe I know. I saw the stubbornness
they flaunted then, as if they could resist
controlling deities they could not see.
So if I could bring them here now in a fiction
I'll see them pushing through the winter's wind
head on against recurrent icy journeys,
stumbling sometimes, rising, starting again.

TREE

For Gayle

The Christmas tree switches hues in the corner,
its green fine-needed branches tapering up
to a star. Strips of tinsel glint like mirrors
of light in a leaping sequence. Already
a whiff of the pine scent affects the senses
as in the fireplace little yellow flames dance
over resinous chunks of wood like pleased celebrants
jumping and waving, bursting crackers. Clusters
of cards honour the room with wishes. Snow's cold
has lost dominion in every heart here now.
There is joy in the voices, joy in the world
that is home, a filling feast of peace and love.

But this is still an acquired happiness,
like but unlike other times I remember:
like the years when some small fragile toy
was the only sign of seasonal joy,
when Christmas trees were only in stories
and we didn't need fires, just
the greetings of neighbours and friends,
and, far in the background, the carols.
Then came the years of middle-class rituals -
the shopping, the dinner, the exchange of presents.

All were, in their different ways, happy;
all now on a page of the mind dog-eared by memory's
fingers. I am drawn to sparks each sharp snap,
each crack in this fireplace spatters
and the same surge of thankful contentment comes
through my reminiscing thoughts. The lights
of the tree glitter with red, blue, white promises
of enduring neighbourly love, promises
we fervently celebrate. They make us forget
how brittle intention is. So we slip in fresh hope
with the gifts under the tree, neatly wrapped
in paper of silver, emerald and gold.

KITES

There is the throwing up of the kite with a run
if the air is too still and the swift drawing in
of the thread in a hands-overlapping motion

to get take-off. Then with slackening and sudden
hauls ascent begins and the wrist assumes its task
of jerking and shifting. The kite's playful head soars

and wavers in response to biddings the hands ask.
And it plunges and climbs like a skiff from the jaws
of high swallowing billows. Through the air it weaves

motifs for insignia briefly pinned on the sky.
So when fibres fray, fail and snap a wide space grieves,
just as I, mute survivor, inaudibly cry

for the losses I've suffered, those friends who once dipped
and rose like birds then spiralled off into silence.
On a day of easy climbing taut thread was snipped

leaving me here drifting alone in their absence.
They had good days of ducking and bobbing, each one
winning endearment with exciting patterns. Now

that I no longer ride air streams caught in the sun
I look up remembering the different ways how
worn lifelines were severed and like blown spinning leaves

one after another I saw them flap and twist
and shudder before giving up and letting go.
They had moved deftly in their time, then, unnoticed

they pitched in an unstemmed flood from emptying skies.
And for me now only a wistful dream relieves
the hum I hear of premature buzzing flies.

COOPERING

Down on the docks he coopered every night.
I did not know exactly what that meant
but made a guess it had to do with saws,
hammers, planes or chisels, for those were what
I saw him best at. There were times I stood
and watched the curling shavings falling
at his feet, making the scent remain in memory.
Even then he seemed unskilled at winning
due respect, one made fun of and jeered at
by others in the shop. And yet he chattered and joked
with them as one does with friends. It made me
squirm to see it but I said nothing. That
was his way, I supposed. And then I learned
he'd left the joiner's shop or had been fired
and had turned to coopering on the wharf
at night doing overtime. An image winged
itself into my head and stayed there pinned.
In it he worked alone with the vaulted roof
of the cargo shed sending back sounds
of his hammer driven home straight and well.
I checked again the lodgment of that image.
He had lost his stooping shoulders as he moved
about. Jauntily he rolled the barrels
that he'd done, sure of the skill that had sealed them.
And I heard him receive kind words like refreshment.
So he didn't have to giggle at derision,
didn't have to pretend he wasn't slashed
to the bone by unmindful ridicule.

CAPTIVE

There was a white tiger in Oranjestad
that paced a cage indifferent to the gaze
of awed or curious eyes attracted by
its fierce frightening power cornered and controlled
in a shiny showcase for idle diversion.
It's smooth and muscled heft patrolled the space
in stony-faced reflection on its fate,
inborn dignity bars could not diminish
in every step and turn, undisguised
repudiation of ugly imprisonment
however glittery the crate, rage that its rule
over the world it lived in fell into impotence,
reduced to a silent shuttle, fun's spectacle.
Unbudging head and pleating shoulders stalked
the same trodden trail all day cage-end to cage-end
soundlessly, though the keeper sometimes sat inside
and served it food with grins and smiles for tourists
and the tiger squatted sculptured in marble patience.
From its safe vantage watching fear sometimes
offered respect, almost a perplexed reverence.

Nothing was said of the morphine it needed,
of the ruin that clawing cancer was wreaking.
But that demeaned, declawed emperor, a pinioned
player in a curb-side sideshow, pacing
that prison with unbowed composure, was slowly
escaping shame and it's tipped penetrating spears,
slipping, spiralling free of loiterers' stares.

NO MAN'S LAND

Some Sunday mornings under the balding plum tree
where mottled morning shade always stayed until noon
a loud itinerant barber would set up shop
with a chair a tenant lent him, flapping his cloth
like the stern call of industry, a flag of war
against hair needing tonsorial attention,
shrilly whistling the latest popular song.
And soon a client from the encircling warren
would shuffle from a room, half-dressed, and share a joke
with the barber, waddling like an emperor
looking for his throne. So then the clipping started -
newspaper carefully spread caught ringlets and shreds
while the barber narrated his gossip and heads
under his hands hooted and tittered and snickered.

But in her lightless room an evangelical
spinster, Miss Roach, like a bubbling crater spluttered
resentment at them for grossly disrespecting
the sabbath. 'Unsaved heathens!' 'Pagans!', she muttered.
And sometimes she would stand at her door and loudly
call down damnation on them, hell's final fire.

Paul, her ten-year-old son, was not ever allowed
to be with us when we pitched marbles or flew kites
in the yard, nor even to acknowledge we were there
having fun. He was interned like an alien
in the war between the rooms, his mother on guard.
He would just pass and glance at what we were doing
and his half-turned face clouded over with defeat.
We understood, but we too were the war's conscripts,
not free to opt out of feuds our parents waged
about who was superior and who was not,
could only share a grin with him, showing we knew
how snipers kept him friendless across no man's land.

REPEATS

I hear you repeat every time we meet
the same exhumed anecdotes of childhood.
I chuckle and smile and say what a feat
it is to remember them, lest I should

hurt or offend you. Something would trigger
a story and the old spiel gushed once more,
the exact tale, no smaller, no bigger,
so many times I've lost track of the score.

I once shared the nostalgia those detailed
anecdotes roused, glad they were lodged so deep
in your brain. But then repetition failed
to enthrall me and my mind went to sleep.

I will not accept it as ripeness of age
or creeping Alzheimer's. I will not lose
you like friends we lost, excised from the page
with our names. I certainly refuse

to think you, the last one left from the years
like mist in the distance, are showing signs
of wear, so I turn away from those fears
that your mind's being bound by hardening vines.

And yet my resistance points a query
like grief's blade at my throat. When a story
has had its hundredth telling recently
why don't you remember you told me?

Then I choke up inside, as if silence
shouted an answer, its final sentence.
And I seek more repeats of those stories
for my dread of your leaving to ease.

IN THE NIGHT

In the night when you cannot see the waves
except where a stray light fringes them white
you hear their eternal growling that time
is just an illusion life makes us place
faith in, with its card trick of day and night.
That repeated roll like a heavy rhyme
of a dirge on the dark shore of the bay
pulls you into contemplation to face
the obdurate question of what endures,
what worth abides with the bones in earth's graves.

You listen and fancy more illusions
swish out like froth to nothing in the sand
knowing that the ones most stubborn are yours.
What still remains of truths, for instance, once
the pillars of what was real? Effusions
of trendy praise lose the timbre of their grand
flourish, like surf that seethes into silence,
and ambition's gold dust turns into clay.
With erosions of empires statues
fissure and fall, stone palaces decay.
Power's glory peters out like a fuse
and the flames of fame burn just for a day.

The breakers' rumbles and thumps ceaselessly
come through the night into your darkened dreams.
They will go on bursting infinitely,
slapping the transience of vaunted schemes.
Yet that perpetual grumble and roar
relaxes your restless questioning heart
for sweet slumber, making you exult for
the deep wide-armed shore, for being a part
of a timeless spin letting waves resound
through your sleep, endlessly running aground.

SMALL CHANGE

He was nearly always there as we came out
of that wedged cinema on Cumberland Street,
crouching often in the bitter cold
but looking up with bright expectancy
as we drew near. And I would fumble
with my cold fingers deep into my pocket
as if in search of change, feigning surprise
that none was found, acting that excuse
although I never walked around with any,
because I felt I had to, felt I owed
that false apology for what seemed callousness.
Still, we would stop and Irene would extract
from somewhere buried in her layered purse
at least a toonie, often somewhat more.
Then he would ask about the film we'd seen
and make some comment like a knowing fan.
As we walked on we sometimes quoted him
and talked about the film with different eyes.

And then he wasn't there, not once, not twice,
not ever. We didn't know what to think.
Irene clutched at hope, I fought despair.
She said some luck at last had come his way,
I wondered what new pit he'd fallen into
and whether people acting sorrow
pushed him there.

OLD MEN

I used to think, when I was young, old men
sitting on park benches dreaming at ten

in the morning were characters fit for
a play. I wanted to ask what they saw

through their watery-eyed stares that the brain
repeated as reels of pleasure or pain.

They would smile sometimes to themselves as if
some discovered insight came with a whiff

of scented memory. I would watch them gaze,
gnawing on the gristle left of their days,

tasting stale flavours of lives they had led.
In a page of a play they sat unread

as I now settle in the script time penned,
using mementos remembered to blend

past and present. I peer for passing looks
to see how they assess me in their books

of youthful chapters. The slouched character
their fictions make me some ancient actor

would be asked to do. That does not matter.
There's no ego left for them to shatter.

Now everyone is tired of my themes
I must preempt a park bench for my dreams.

OSTERLEY

Osterley! the name falls softly
into the ear like a feather,
though it's only a place to pass on the train
leaving leg-weary London, speeding swiftly
from station to station sombrely on for a plane
to cross the Atlantic, tied to the same old tether.
It comes after Northfields, past Turnham Green
but before Hounslow, East and West.

Osterley! I've never been there but a picture
comes out of nowhere and floats in my mind
with a wide green common, a newsagent's den,
street corner stands with bouquets like harlequins,
a rust-brown pub and brick chimneys aligned
down a long street, arms linked, standing abreast.
I will get to know it perhaps one day when
I can wander and look for a rumpling stream,
listen idly to birdsong in pastoral weather
and admire white-flannelled batsmen a team
from the borough counts on.

That must happen soon
lest some hand comes quelling my quest
for the hush that name suggests. It's past the noon
of my brief day and still Osterley stays unknown,
just a glimpsed name whose vowels echo behind
right to the airport. Yet I imagine steeples
pealing out calls on Sundays, offering rest
with the lanes' peace, the byways' contentment.
I hear a soft supermarket hubbub, people's
patient patter in stalled queues, the bass tone
of red double-decker buses plying the same
slow restful routes of sleepy roads that wind
through the outskirts, where seasons are spent
in a calm unhurried quietude as in a dream.
That's what silently swirls in my head, hearing its name.

When I pass it again rushing by I will see
what meaning those syllables still have for me.
But the plane's drone tells me be ready to lose
a fictional churchyard and its guardian yews.

PLOTS

There is a stage that keeps no memory of
actors that hands once hastened to applaud.
Designers re-arrange the scenes and shove
used sets aside, from an audience bored

by historical dramas. No playwright
dares submit a script with roles for heroes
left to be forgotten in a dying light.
Dimmers are turned down and the curtains close.

Meanwhile old playbills cannot be effaced
from plastered posts. What was done adheres
to present walls, so permanently placed
it tints the garb a new performer wears.

Though scripts seem freshly tailored for the times,
their themes distilling current pantomimes,
and players think they turn from dated plays
the plots rehearsed were penned in bygone days.

WET STREET

It was nearly midnight and somewhere
not very far a radio was sending
on the still, sleeping air Debussy's
Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun.
Rain had just fallen and the street lamps
fixed small orange islands on the asphalt
where a dog heard it too, distant but clear.
Outside the window the avenue's trees
held their heads steady as if to listen,
the rain's lacquer making the black leaves glisten,
and the music entered, adrift and forlorn
from beyond darkened doors far and eternal
a dimension of time only music can find
with a lament for the earth from some other world,
unknown, unreachable, in which all
the day's drilled dogmas fade and dissolve like flakes
of snow. It told of feelings furled away
in cloistered places, unexposed, those aches
we suffer unspoken, the ineffable
loneliness of living, like a wet street bare
and empty, washed clean of cars and people.
The music took the mind to zodiacs unknown,
far from earth's turning toil of night and day,
drifting unmoored into a weightless zone
where, lost and languishing, we float alone.

REPERTOIRE

I hold on to the times
we danced most of the night
to the tunes of the Bee Gees,
Lionel Ritchie, Roberta Flack.
Do you too wander back
to the bounce of calypsos
that we danced on those floors
and recall the musicians
who named us 'dancers'?

Fortune was generous
and filled our purses
with unstealable treasure
we could store and measure
on days when the music
in places for dancing
was played in a tempo
our feet found unfitting
and left us indifferent.

Sometimes I go dreamy
and for just a short while
I'm certain that time
has re-opened its ballroom
and has welcomed us back
where we dance without pause
songs of Kim Cairns, Ken Rogers,
Diamond, Streisand, and Cross.

Do you reclaim those joys
from a place with your gemstones
holding them out in a palm
to see how they sparkle
because nothing can dull them
or diminish their glitter?
They live deep in my heart
where they dance to its rhythm
with soca to celebrate
the years we have shared.

When I quietly hum that old repertoire
husbanded memories strum the guitar.

OUT OF A BREAK

Out of a break in fog Mrs. Widdowson comes.
That night as we drove from Heathrow to Nottingham
the road often dissolved in the mist and appeared
beyond. Then, as strangers known only in letters,
we arrived at her door and were greeted like lost
friends finding home. We'd grown up in a colony,
from birth had learned basic rules that said someone's race
established limits of freedom, rules that had come
from Mrs. Widdowson's land. All that was scoured
from the mind with her solvent of love. In the days
we spent with her we were her children, fussed over
no less than her own. And it was not patronage,
hospitable noises to allay our doubts.
We were not so blind, so unknowing, we could miss
the nature of that bonding. She gave us her hand,
her grace, an unreserved embrace. That month we saw
gleamings of the earth's finest ore, and each day more
of her worth glittered. What gave her most happiness
was being able to wrap even strangers in care.
When we were there we felt folded in lovingness.
But we never saw her again. Our return
was too late. We had only the print of her face,
and the glow of goodwill that she lit, to retain.
Now down the mind's road the fog opens apertures
and I glimpse her throwing her arms open again.
That's among fancies I save giving life meaning.

WALLS

Suspicion nagged him with a cynic's doubt
when kindness unabashed came on a tray
of smiles. It whispered reminders about
caste marks tattooed on his skin that outstay

his well earned triumphs. He had read the rules
of survival it displayed on the doors
that were slammed in his face, laid down in schools
whose plan sent him falling into the jaws

of exploiting machines. The law was clear :
dollars measured the worth of every song,
bankers set the exchange for every tear.
In assembly-line style herds moved along.

In the throng, with pockets torn and empty,
one of the helpless buffeted with sneers,
he bore with shame the stains of poverty.
In deals investors made lives were the shares.

His understanding opened when he saw
price tags on manhood he could not afford,
grins as the plastic masks hypocrites wore.
It was such grievances his memory stored.

Caution kept him a detained denizen
obeying warnings, red alerts, alarms.
If he saw a beaming welcome beckon
he stepped back out of reach of luring charms

sincerity spun. Taking his prison
cell with him everywhere, he never knew
its walls were ones he built of hoarded pain,
that just outside fruits of happiness grew.

IN SOME COSY BOWER

In some cosy bower of that once-green campus
let his ashes find their chosen home.
Let him merge with that dear ground. Place them
under the gaze of St. Catherine's Peak and far
John Crow Mountain just where he used to sit
and watch the curling tendrils of haze
drift west past the hills that breathed of escallion
and the tilled and terraced slopes teemed with the sounds
of toil. In the grey of his ash let your eyes trace,
if they can, how that loved place made him an
instrument, gave him the task he shouldered.

All that is gone now like an ended shift,
the past like a swathe of land over which
seasonal cutlassing winds had blown.
He had wished in vain blossoms in the landscape
would have stayed undiminished.
That is what he had striven for, had pressed and pushed.
So at his long life's end whiffs still carried
the salt sweat of labour he'd eagerly tackled,
happily pursued, till it was time to be sent
to sit on the sidelines and settle in silence.

But let his ashes go into that earth
that his heart held holy, let the last flakes
lie deep in a fissure where rambling roots
can follow and find lumps of usefulness
still clinging to what bone dust still remains.
There a fresh breeze might sometimes pass
raising with it spiralling specks of what he was,
taking faithful remnants floating past the trees.

CHILDHOOD

There was a time I thought that Santa Claus
was real, and though we had no chimney
he would bring my fervent wish for Christmas.
I put great faith in fairy godmothers,
depended on magic and miracles.

That was the time I thought that angels flew,
that Eve and Adam sinned and I was born
innocent but doomed. Threatened with torment
for missing a mass I learnt that heaven
let you in if you believed one doctrine
and no other. Belief was first, your deeds
took second place. Unbelievers bellowed
in the flames of hell where sinners were burnt
forever. I was a child and was fenced
in by the ropes of myths that kept out reason.
Then I was rescued. (But that's another
story and happened to just a few.)

The point is how should I feel now about
the people killed day by day by one sect
or another in the name of their creed,
some myth of mankind's childhood? Do I spend
my days like a cynic without concern?
While I await an answer, everywhere
children are made to pledge their service to
some dogma's claims, getting prepared to jeer
at what is called error in some other
scripture. Twin flags of death and war are sewn
on childhood's rompers. Some dated folktale
is knitted over their eyes like a veil.

IF I WERE

For Irene

If I were a Caruso you would hear
the notes love's voice delivers sweet and clear,
and as festive arias I would bring
you tunes joyfulness teaches birds to sing.

If I were Keats or Byron verse would be
my chosen means to tell the world of glee
that has me tripping, skipping everywhere,
like a child sampling stalls at a fair.

But I can flaunt no masterpiece of art,
no consummate opera of the heart
in which a singer's rapt exultation
copies the notes of my own elation.

I can only wave a flag for any
passing eye to read its dance. The story
semaphored tells of lusted star-filled years
replete with meteors like bursting flares.

And if I start singing like a tenor,
at this late time letting my octaves soar,
it is because of nebulae that spanned
my darkening sky, a spangled garland.

You bring that gift, ribboned year after year,
keeping me scudding still on life's river.
So though I fall short in daily acclaim
that river's pleated ripples chant your name.

Yes, if I were Caruso you would hear
arias of rejoicing pure and clear
declaring how fulfilling and how rare
is this enduring oneness that we share.

LAUGHTER

By the orange light of a small kerosene lamp
a boy of fourteen would read at night circled by
poverty's musty odours, yards from the greased damp
of darkened passageways. Every night he would fly

out of that windowless room to special places
fashioned from books and lessons, places in pages
of stories and history. He moved among faces
he conjured up, falling asleep with images

of other landscapes, of distant unfamiliar ways.
In *The English People* he was given heroes
to admire how they won lands like his. His praise
was innocently grateful. From the proper prose

of tales like *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *Henry
Esmond* rose shires he wished for as home. His mind
flailed against the meagre world that bound him so he
sometimes safeguarded eyes and ears, stayed deaf and blind

and migrated for hours each day through the door
of the Library, leaving his wondering schoolmates
to the yard's adventures. He found fields to explore
and harvests he valued on well-planted estates.

More and more like an eager innocent seduced
by promised knowledge he eluded his comrades
to get away from diversions he felt reduced
his chances, leaving them to childhood's escapades.

Worried eyes watched him turn like a judge from their play
and enter a chamber where none wanted to go.
Then they left him alone to follow his own way
like someone unknown ploughing his far-off furrow.

And he did not discern the deepening defile
he was cutting, that on the far estranged side
friendly boys were waving as if to an exile
who had left home, calling him across the divide

he was digging. He just felt spurts of excitement when pages that he read danced in his head. Instead, the space between them widened and the tenement stayed to him a prison camp from which he had fled

to redeeming pages. Yet he was overcome by dejection when later on he was ignored and unwanted, when he was barricaded from the banter and the pranks. He felt snarled at and clawed.

The raw gash made remained an unhealed wound that eased its throb only inside the Library's hypnotic walls. Confused, he asked himself why he had displeased everyone, and he found that it made him heartsick.

He sneaked from his door with heavy despondent feet hiding from open disownment, trying to bear his strange loneliness. But, meeting them on the street he laughed and grinned a lot, to show he didn't care.

NOON, SUMMER

It is summer in London and parks
have laid out their grass like green
carpeting under the spread of the sun.
There noon's pallid patrons lie,
legs outstretched or drawn up,
letting fresh seasonal light
lift their eyes up to clear blue skies
and drifts of changeable clouds
like dreams they know well going by.
Crafted mosaics of flowers
in solid circles and in borders
encourage the restful thoughts
everyone seeks now. Sandwiches
are deftly unwrapped. It is time for
unhurried breaths to be taken,
for calm composed laundering
of the morning's mindsets.
In the midday flow on the pathways
there are those that amble, gazing about,
with the sun's implanted roses in their cheeks.
And parents with children in tow
look for a kiosk for some quick relief
from tugging pleas, high nagging caws.
Quiet chatter whirrs and hums
where three or so share a space
they have laid claim to as refuge.

Then an unsparing summons comes
barging in through the gate,
silent gongs resonate its call
and the brisk bustling back begins;
heels on the pavements in urgent staccato,
sightless weave through slower bodies,
the swift shift of face
like a visor of armour,
the change into battle dress.

SILENCES

When the magnolias let lilac carpets of petals
cover the ground around them they do so in silence
saying nothing of the banished arrows of winter.
There are other silences when the mills of thought pause
from regrinding the grist the world feeds to their rollers.
Sometimes silences become hiding places we seek
where with turned heads we can think of the morning's
birdcalls
and music, and wave away hisses of snakes nearby.
From them some soundless renewal is sought to salvage
feelings lost by the soul, to make judgment whole again.
And there are other silences too, the ones we draw
over unease, folding it up in flaps of a quilt.
We brave it out and pretend memory speaks in error.

In King Leopold's embezzled Congo, for instance,
ten million Africans perished by the bullet,
the bayonet, the chicotte, the whip that made mincemeat
of their flesh as they went chained to cut down the rubber
he pilfered. Chopped off hands counted in baskets, and heads
arrayed on fence posts, told of reluctance or slowness.
But anyone can say it didn't happen. Flaunted
denial brings no jail sentence, stirs no media
attention. It is a silence used like a censor's
eraser and keeps the story scrubbed of savagery,
as always, exorcising horned evil from the tale.
It is all ordinary, expected, and preserves
the lies that history nurses on, the sculpted postures.

NO QUARTER

I have no wish nor vigour to reconstruct
the places memory buried with its spades,
piling up layers of forgetfulness.
There seems good reason why our minds deduct
paragraphs from a tale or a page fades
from a journal leaving us to guess
at smudged details. In my own unpenning diary,
for instance, Gloster Lodge Road and the lime kiln,
deep under the sod of a lifetime, have lost clear
definition, but when exhumed in a reverie
still reappear with a diptych of haloed
protectors.

That's how my mind will remember
the years spent there. In the steel-toothed trap of need
I breathed tenderness and love. No child was more
treasured, more guarded with care. The faces
of menace I glimpsed would quickly recede
as if by some miracle. Empty shelves had a store
of devotion I lived on, letting embraces
hold me away from the day's descending whip.
That is the elation musing brings back.
That I'll never forget. Understanding showed
me the unpayable requital I owed.
And yet the make-shift meals of bread and water
must have come on days they flailed in the grip
of despair, pinned on penury's tightened rack,
terror at the throat, its grasp giving no quarter.

EYES

It's their eyes I still see, even now.
In that season of drought, in Agra,
in Delhi, and in Kwajuraho,
I did my very best to pretend
I did not feel heartsick, looking away.
I assiduously cultivated
the averted gaze, closing my shutters,
doing an act like a god carved in wood
lest my commiseration burst its dam
and gush a flood of useless sorrow
on the pervading dust,

For everywhere
pyres blazed in their eyes, those children
– shoulder blades evolution's wings –
raising drumstick limbs and dirt-daubed
scaly skin, wealth's detritus, mewling cries
for the mercy of thrown rupees.

I saw how
charity towards one draws a swarm,
an ambush with frenetic plucking
fingers, smeared, smearing. Like a flung bone
to a pack, like a sieve's false flash, hope's
fake glint would bring a rushing frenzy.

Was it just self-defence to recoil?
Or did I inwardly want to tell
hunger's visage to keep its distance?
I moved on, letting the noise of horns
and voices replace the whines of pain.
But I meet their eyes still, like deyas
of hope burning out. They remain there
lodged in my head in dogged silence
watching to catch me shamming again
that I'd not known what waited for them.

MEANING

He lugs his bag of what his life had been,
making his way among the lively legs
on Yonge Street; thinks, perhaps, their days begin
as once his mornings did. His pace though lags
behind the rushing throng. He doesn't mind,
content to mingle still within the din
of endeavour's tumult. I've heard some parts
of his story, parts he plucks from their pegs
from time to time. I've had glimpses of goals
attained, marks of distinction won, plaudits
like popping champagne. I heard too of shoals
that had to be crossed, a home that defined
what love was, the kind of labour that starts
the tides of self-worth rising. Broken bits
of his tale had been brought up on my screen
where the useful years sped on and the spin
decanted him from a world where the poles
to navigate by were minds and hearts.
Then time used rigid rules to intervene.
I see him scan the bustle with a smile
like one who's vaguely affected by its
hectic missions. His own feats fill a file
shelved away where guarding dust might allow
you to read it. It lists piloting roles
he played, and reasons why he stole the scene.
Tasks once incised their imprint on his brow.
They mean nothing here, they mean nothing now.

FICTIONS

To have to go from home and then return
when years have spilled like water down a hill
is to saunter streets a stranger to re-learn
the alphabet of corners that are still
familiar yet unknown, like a lined face
cosmetic surgery fitted with new skin.
Progress sprawls at a table and its grin
spreads over rubble like a birthday treat
while history slinks away on tired feet.
I who had once frolicked in every lane
and kept them holy, their dust enshrined,
hearing some echoes of an old refrain
rushed back with dream intact only to find
home is what one remembers, the collage
the mind mounts in a frame so you can deal
with estrangement; memories camouflage
the erosions they cannot halt nor heal.
I could not stomp down the same lanes again.
And my heart felt a weight as if gravestones
had entered it, heavy with lament for
obliterations a new age condones.
For me it was too much. With what remained
of damaged fantasies I purchased space
in this other life, invisibly chained
to sunk moorings. Now fictions of that place
still turn to pages of deleted time
and figures flicker in a ghostly mime.

SINCE THAT FIRST GRAVE

Since that first grave dug in rented ground,
remembered only by a stone-arched gate
and how the black hearse set a hasty pace,
the sites have grown in number, widely separate,
in plain soil shorn of epitaphs of grace
by mowers the years have used with a profound
disregard of pedigree or race.

From slow beginnings when time's tidal motion
let sorrow linger long between each new demise
the rate began to rise, finding a running stride
that sent each stab of shock sinking inside
a wound just struck, its pain and racking cries
merging as one with others just begun.

Passing that grey stone wall a whole block long
all through the years I wandered in that town
I sometimes glanced through the arched gate where lanes
and gravelled pathways took fresh mourners down
to their last acts of love, sobbing, heads bent
over linked wreaths of flowers like chains
on the hearse, to place a coffin among
the ground's crowded tenants. And each lament
I heard made old secret scars rage again.
It's the general face of grief we see,
blind to the bleeding cut that cannot heal.
Solace offers to caulk it with hope's seal
yet, inside, where suppressed whimpers are sent,
nothing dissuades the tears from gushing free.

WELL

For Mervyn Morris

He cups a thought like a bird
held in his lean palm of words
sparse and spare like abstinence
keeping it clean and pure,
and safe from thick leaves and branches
that clutter and blur
with profuseness
its true shape and colour.
It does not tremble or flutter,
full-bodied creature,
to seek a perch elsewhere,
just rests within the lines
where it finds its real existence
in the shorn phrases, stark and bare
as truth is.

And yet the poems
are lush with accretions, draw
from the mind what's rooted far down
in what has been lived. Each chosen
word comes with its history
revealing what it is made of.
And down to those layers
he has bored a deep well
where he lowers his pail
until it is full
and sprinkles the bird
in his palm.

JANUARY

i.m. Jimmy King

Every January on this Barbados beach we
think we see you approaching, your short white pants making

you look like a bwana, and a feeling of pleasure
sweeps in like a wave of fine heady champagne breaking

over the day. We re-focus again and again
with the lens of elation, assured we are taking

you in the frame. Brief illusion always catches us.
But, since it's all we have now, we're glad for its faking.

SCHOOLYARD

The schoolyard and the street offered their share
of roughnecks, taunting the weak with their grins.
The scent of fear was their fix. To cower
into a shell like a tortoise or to cringe
at the chill of their jeers was to appear
a rewarding target. Clouts on the back
of the head, pushes to stumble over
an outstretched leg, knocking away the books
from an arm, those were just minor torments.
It was how young bullies made the yard wince,
donning masks of violence to convince
themselves the faces covered did not lack
what they thought made a man. Maimed malcontents,
they harassed anyone who seemed afraid.

I look back and wonder what cure they found
beyond those years and are they still around.
Did time take away the worms of self-doubt
they were prey to, and are they now devout
penitents on Sundays? I know that we
should have shown more understanding. Pity,
though, was no help when some troubled mugger
clinched your neck for the yard to admire.
That leaves resentment rooted in memory,
perhaps a fading scar still on your knee.
Yet, strange enough, I hope some scouring
was done, their bile was not still souring
other men's days. Sometimes though an old smell
I knew seems to tell they are live and well.

IN THE SUN

We'll not grow old together, you and I.
Time's immutable statute stays beyond
the reach of supplicants wishing the law
to be repealed. Its sentence was pronounced
when we ignored provisions widely known
and seized the day, making it our own.
Now that the sun has but a segment more
the pact we made then cannot be renounced.

But what words can appraise how fate was kind?
Every gladdening flower it could find
was thrown to us. And still they strew the way,
as jaunts and laughter celebrate the day.
There's still bright light and chances to be won
for free and happy skipping in the sun.

CAMERA

Take the unused camera you carry encased
and focus the lens on this shore of white sand.
Pan the setting like a photographer framing
as if for the first time the muttering surf. Pause
where incoming waves enter between the inlet's
thumb and forefinger with a change of mood, subdued
and equable, reduced to furrows and creases,
wrinkles on blue. And you should adjust the f-stop
for a slow exposure. There, where the slanting light
brushes the water, do you see the bullion,
the jettisoned pirates' doubloons, flicker and sink?
Look above at the laden wind-driven convoys
of cotton wool clouds, sails spread magisterially
like galleons crossing that ocean. They disperse
and merge, changing formation as if to signals.
As you stand, centre that camera's eye on languid
grazing yachts, their stripped masts up like swaying javelins,
tautening and slackening their tethers. Then turn
to the east where green hills hang their feet in the sea
and a far silhouette of undulating peaks
offers a gazing mind a cure for discontent.
Be not surprised if gladsomeness squeezes the heart
as if the viewfinder had just found its true range.
It was always right there though you did not know it,
wandering half-blind to your only affluence,
as these cruise passengers on today's scheduled stop
hustled down the beach to doughnuts, pizzas and fries,
wanting converts like cultural evangelists,
fail to see where they are, the true delights proffered,
and trample on unknowingly, talking of home.
Let the lens take it all in, let the shutter click
not only on sea grapes, palm trees, hoary breakers,
but on a waking figure throwing off his sleep.

RAFTING

He was called to the island to connect his story
to the islands' narrative of fiction and poetry,
but he was no critic and could only tell how
he grew with the language, how bygone poets
drummed their music in him and made him grateful
that fortune, though leaving him locked in his prison,
opened his eyes on their lines. He avidly
quoted from poems that stayed in his memory,
some from what was once called 'the mother country'
but more from his own green islands' treasury.
Yet he felt he was boring and hastened to end it.
So he breathed with relief at the burst of applause,
and the dread of disguised displeasure disappeared.

There out of a yesteryear's engulfing cloud
faces emerged as if time had paroled them,
figures from a fog, some paunchy, some gaunt,
old friends shaking his hand, claiming attention.
And a rushing joy filled him, happy inebriation,
being reminded of what they'd once done together
more than a generation's walk back in the mist.

Amid their crowding reminiscences he
felt lifted up, borne down a river, sharing a raft
that had bounced over rocks and had just come
to a quieter stretch. Beads of the current gleamed on him.
That is what gives days lasting luminance,
more than staccato sounds of clapping hands,
that remembrance of arms linked, pressing on.
That's what he now hoards, deeds dared with friends,
dipping through, bobbing on, rafting round rapids.

QUIET GOING

I walk alone on this sand-paved beach like a wraith from an Arawak village the centuries scratched out of memory. At the spumed end where the mangrove sends down hawser-like anchored roots and refuses to be shifted the last lapping sound of a stream swallows its murmurs in surrendering silence to the sea, and there are domed rocks like grey islets the waves in frustration slap and mount. From the fringe of sea grape shrubbery a few coconut palms rise possessively over the shore, like sentries watching for new marauders. This field of silver I can wade in is still the sun's, not freebooters' that circle the island for places to capture. Yet my footmarks keep resembling a native's made uncounted years ago, like one imprinted by a runner from swords and guns. The soft sand shifts under my feet as if to escape such flashbacks, as if to say it is time to bury the dead, time to expunge whatever was suffered. I heed its counsel and, sweeping my eyes around the cove, I wish the island fruitfulness, wish that it grows in self-confident wisdom, and that its people live in equality's peace. May all of its gleanings, whatever they are, be theirs. Arms of the headland embrace the scatter of glinting pennies strewn by the light on the incoming furrows, a soft splash is made by rollers as they somersault into foam, the sinking sun follows a thin silver road to the horizon, as I slow my entreaties and ready myself for leaving, leaving the shore and the island and all I remember of days I have lived. Twilight turns the tinsel sea grey now. My quiet going will leave no imprint of pain except on my T-shirt, heavily soaked with rain.

POSTCARD

You must have sent this postcard months ago.
I cannot read the postmark but I know

that sometimes sorters lose what seem like scraps
of trivial news when their treadmill snaps.

So this card rose from deep corners of night
and now I hold it in this anxious light

and hear how homesickness in your voice wanes
so of the pain it once had none remains.

Each phrase seems crafted in a way to warn
the map you took of home has now been torn

into strands with abandonment's fingers.
Only that tone of displeasure lingers.

There in the cold snow of distance I see
how you merge with the background, strutting free

of these small islands, hear your old regret
they cannot supply the soul its diet.

But it hurt, nevertheless, your leaving
while the rest of us here go on cleaving

to what we have. Your long delayed postcard,
you would know, makes it painfully hard

to sustain that faith, to affirm that size
is no measure of worth. These islands prize

that undisguisedly raw simple fare
they feed the spirit on to fight despair

and they make the most of that just as if
they shape masterpieces on which to live.

Your card betrays you. You'd said that the mind
needed more than postures you left behind.

We might have heeded strictures from your tongue
if you had stayed to counter what was wrong.

But we send you pardon, and we promise
to urge the soul on to masterpieces.

SPECTACLES

Were we not born so adaptable, able
to adjust our pain by reaching for
close-at-hand sorporifics, by turning
the eyes away; born with the will
for survival that we exert to learning
how to fill up the day, what to ignore;
feeding on opiates capsuled like aspirin,
applauding media celebrities for empty fame;
getting skilled more and more at the game
of pretend and evading the effort
involved in choosing to endure what comes
with staying awake, open-eyed, would we still,
like happy children, revel in make-believe,
swallow the pills or say we can do nothing about
what might is used for, just as if it's not
known for its flaunted mission to leave
people dying everywhere, whole countries
pilfered? Would we go on as if
it's not our business? It's the logical way, no doubt,
to survive, to remain open to happiness.
In truth, who wants to suffer anyway
when we can just adjust our spectacles?

CHICKEN ON SUNDAY

It would have been more merciful with a cleaver,
I suppose, but they had no cleaver, no blade
for swifter death. And so with a closed hand
over its eyes and head the hen was swung
like the crank of a motor engine and its neck
was wrung in a twist of fleshy rope while it still
kicked and fluttered. I would turn away,
angry at the cruelty of that act of murder,
though I thought it had to be done, the day had come
when my hen had to feed us. Though perhaps it was just
for the show of it, to let it be known we had chicken
that Sunday. So the meal stained my plate with questions,
doubts. I didn't think then of other killings done
for some to go on feasting, and read later of virgins
placed on altars. It was just that my hen trusted me
and used to pick corn from my palm. Then we killed it.
An early lesson in betrayal and survival.

But I must have got used to it, that stab of guilt
that became less piercing when wings struggled and died.
Later on, facing plates my palate found alluring
I doubted more and more the agony suffered,
considered it inherent in benefits we prized
that feathers be ripped out and necks snapped.
So that in later years it became easy to bear
the demolition of innocents in their beds
by missiles and bombs and not shed a tear.

FOOTPRINTS

If to let imagination shape
what you cannot remember
is to connive with revisionists
who fabricate history
I am, too, perhaps, guilty
in my dimming December.
So many pieces escape
from their place in the jigsaw
the picture is patchy with gaps
like holes in moving mists.
Yet I coax and cajole reveries,
poking at dreams to discover
which lead to premium ore
long lying forgotten.

But the landscape
leaves some fields as barren as before
with just crumbled days like schists
the fist cannot hold. Don't we all lose
such chunks of our selves? In crowds
of the city aren't there those who grope
to recall raptures that have perished
like flakes, always clutching at clues
that lead to nowhere? What remains
is imagination. With it we cope
with gaping craters when memory refrains
from filling the hollows it left. At least
we have that recourse when jilted
by yesterdays we court. A feast
of wishes waits to take their place,
serving fancies to feed on. And wicks of hope
keep their flames leaping. I make
a plea to memory to retrace
tracks washed bare by a sneaking sea
but its footprints are faint and fade
away like the surf's white lace.

AT THE SEA'S EDGE

To stand at the sea's edge as the seceding sun
turns saffron though the waves still swell without rest,
as the crests that unceasingly bloom into white
seem to spark in a flare of lessening light,
makes you think of the horizon as a line that history
has drawn with its delicate scalpel, severing
not merely epochs and their obsessive fashions,
not just counties of family wars, but also
the dispossessed, the cheated, from dreams of happiness,
all who go weaponless to greet interlopers.
Today Iraq, yesterday all of Africa, and before that
the lands and the people of what's called America.
At the shoreline as day drifts from its moorings
you watch the low sun leave a page of that story
and your sorrow deepens as dusk pursues the light.

The air's now suffused with twilight's in-between
lustre and peaceful vagueness. The tinge above wanes
to violet where rose-hued streaks of cirrus hover,
the horizon's drawn string loses its tautness
and the eye looks inward. What's the point of knowing
that there will always be Alexanders and Caesars, a Rhodes,
a Hitler? Empires that cling like leeches?
A star pinpricks the nearly indigo dome and
in the dense dimness the shore's foaming fringe
finds some light to dive in with a whitened whoosh.
It revolves with us through infinity where change
does not travel. Yet change is what they hope for,
those who like convicts hammered and welded and lathed,
those who have seen harvests they tilled taken away,
ones stepped on like roaches by imperial boots.

The sea is now covered by darkness but a cruise ship,
a far city of lights, follows a line to some port.
Night birds flit about like thoughts unanswered.
Somewhere predators are still busy at work.

POSSESSION

He has come back after two decades to repaint
the faded colours of murals on his mind's wall.
He has come to the bay he once knew as a place
they had hoped would be theirs, its beach of gleaming sand,
the diamonds the stream elatedly channels down,
the teasing tickles of ripples wooing the shore,
such homegrown pleasures all theirs, come independence.
He remembers the pictures that were clearly drawn
of freedom. Now he walks along where the sea grapes
root in sand that the tides cannot reach, covering
part of the beige skirting under the green mountains.
What he observes is a pitched camp of thatched roundels,
volleyball sand courts, beach chairs, water sports kiosks.
Water skiers slice the smooth teal water, sail boats
fill their cheeks and slide around in oval patterns.

There were days when he came here with only the sun
in possession and small havens of shade from some
proud palm trees, not fun-seekers dropped by the planeload.
They say that brings blessings, he thinks, jobs and dollars.
He smiles at oiled bodies getting copper-coloured,
the idling languorous yachts spanning the bay,
a fawning craft vendor, servers with wagging tails
speaking American looking for tips. The new
landlords with their safes elsewhere turned history's pages
backwards, proprietors now of dreams of freedom
while the surf seethes, losing itself in a lather.

A late schooner breaks the line of the horizon,
caught in the setting sun. He waits for it to shrink,
watching the ebbing tide slap at sea shells that still
playfully turn over, watching the displaced heirs
to the land gathering nothing, the white hotels
commanding the shore selling access to the surf.
He sees the land he longed for now offered for sale.
Nothing belongs to the dreamers, keyless trustees.
He leaves the question of gullible betrayal
and slowly measures his way up past the sea grapes.
Back on the road he finds he cannot look up
to the mountains, and he hunches against the chill.

WHILE IT LASTED

I was named the eggbeater. My touch was slight,
my mother said, and I was given the right
on the rare day when a cake was made
to hold the bowl close, safely and snugly
in my nine-year-old clasp to my belly
and whisk away till yellow froth was thin, light,
with about a billion bubbles and almost white.
But that only happened when Christmas came,
and sometimes not even then. All the same,
when the mixture was poured into pans,
and taken to a neighbourhood baker's oven
and we turned to other sprucing up plans,
it was the aroma when the pans came back
that infused itself in the head like a stick
of powerful incense, whiffs of euphoric
goodwill suffusing the mind with the season,
glossing the surface of days dark and troubled.
That scent steeping the room was the reason,
and I was proud of what I had done to bring it.
For though in time the last flake had to be nibbled
and the elation from the cake's bouquet melted
no other days ever had that power again,
ever rainbowed the world a while for us
in a grey perpetual season of rain.
While it lasted that scent kept us happy
and I was exultant at being necessary.

COAST ROAD

Where the northern mountains dive under the sea named after the Caribs, and the jagged coast replicates small coves like pouches, you look down at the thin white fringe of froth fighting the land like a fine white thread running along the shore. Vertigo closes a fist where your heart was and you feel the hurtling plunge to extinction, but ground you stand on stays still and you look up instead, up at the hills behind like a spine that sinks in the west and then rises again in Venezuela. You reflect on the road and before it was built and dead years erupt, the blindfolded years of slums and subjection when smooth roads were closed to those with complexions a bit too swarthy, and their sweat could not earn enough to relieve them from hunger, nor from compounds they lived in like horses in stables.

But there's no history to remember that by, though drops of that time that blow in the spray find a changed country, find the broad satin strand thronged by all the land's races, world-wide faces, proprietors of all roads now, every grain of sand.

You gaze and remember the tears of the crowds at the death of the man who had made us defy the old order, had us pull down packed stables, and flatten the cells gaolers had built. Content, you turn and head back to the city, but pause again at that jutting ledge with the deep drop down where eddies seethe round the teeth of the rocks. There in the sea's restless rush you think you hear a sound like the hissing of hecklers, taunting that man with their jeers, disdainful of the battles he won : the froth of fashion and envy washing off entries made in the ledgers then.

And yet it's all there. Coffee-house ranters who
can build no new worlds, paper potentates,
can now aspire to be professors, bankers, presidents.
Still, just as this coastline bears assaults
testing its claim, so achievement must suffer
ruminants who pasture on some hero's faults.

As the road makes its descent with bends and curves,
past vistas of valleys in pale green saris,
you become reconciled to what time buries
and how much depends on what memory preserves.

BOUNTY

You have looked on this prospect all day
listening to silence filling the huge vault
above it, watching the folds
of the valleys repeated down to the sea.
Hour by hour you have shed more
of the arrogance all humanity
is afflicted with. Down on the plain below
there's a small stage where clowns strut,
a clamorous world of shrill voices
deaf with shouting their own names.
Here the green slopes spew no noises
save from the stone-washed silver streams,
save from the birds calling, calling
from rim to far rim. All else is hushed.
You have searched for the trees
that you know, probing the hillsides,
pimento, mahoe, logwood, ackees,
finding the lilac daubs of lignum vitae,
letting futility go with its make-believe
significance, its mask of achievement.
Ridges of blue peaks recede into mists
beyond the bounty of peace your eyes
cannot leave. But they never fade from
the motley mural behind the eyes,
the mind's montage of images.
This display will stay
unamended by time or distance.
Every secret sighting memory excites
will cause a rise in your heartbeat,
every overheard voice will make you remember
the love for an island that was not yours but
which claimed your faith and reshaped your ends.

STILL LIFE

If I could go back and observe things again
I would draw in moments like a fisherman,
and wrap them in phrases like strands of a seine.
I would watch water making folds slithering,
eddying down a drain, follow flights of birds
surf-boarding on invisible waves, listen
to the wind muttering to itself forced to
make a sudden diversion around the house.
I would turn away from the books that explain
all about such things and attend to the real
glints and gleams of the day's geography. With
my catch of pristine perceptions in my creel
I would start again stabbing at blank pages
with transcriptions. If the lines still slip away
like eels I would angle once more with my hook
of hope, avidly pursuing wily words,
driven by an old naive self-assessment
though my pen's real arthritis cramps my fist,
the fist that I had not used when I should have
keeping a journal, collecting images
infused with feeling. But of what avail now
is wringing the hands over unsaved moments,
over arid attempts at true translations?
What is lost is lost, like any chance of framing,
with lines of a poem, still lifes, portraits, landscapes.