

2014

Winged seed songs: 32 poems in musical forms & musical moods

Glen Phillips
Edith Cowan University

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WINGED SEED
SONGS:
Poetry in musical forms
& musical moods

La musique avant toute chose—Music above everything... Peter Sculthorpe's motto
from a poem by Verlaine.

Glen Phillips

2014

Edited with an Introduction by Kenneth Gasmier

International Centre for Landscape and Language

Edith Cowan University

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Winged Seed Songs: Poetry in Musical Forms and Musical Moods

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Cover design by the author from his photograph of Lake Ballard and the Sculptures of Antony Gormley

Editor: Kenneth Gasmier (b. 1949) grew up in the wheatbelt and country towns of Western Australia, including Bunbury. A former teacher and gold miner, he has also worked for the Library, University of Western Australia, and was music librarian at the Western Australia Academy of Performing Arts (Edith Cowan University).

Gasmier's short stories have been published as *Stars in Nights to Come* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1990) and in Australian literary journals. He is a reviewer of the arts and music for newspapers.

PREFACE

(TO BE SUNG ON THE WATERS)

Professional musicians will often scorn the notion that music may text an inner message.

Recalling rehearsals with the posthumously famous Georg Tintner, a hard-boiled West Australian Symphony Orchestra player lamented to me: “Hell, he’d lecture us on Beethoven, Nietzsche and philosophy when all we wanted was to move on, go home, have tea.”

Nevertheless I think also of Thomas Mayer, a conductor now likely to be famous only in heaven, if at all, but violently displaced like Tintner from his home landscape and for the same cruelly senseless political reasons. Mayer was fond of quoting to audiences Beethoven’s user-friendly remark: “Music has higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy.” I’ve noticed too that in heartfelt reactions to music, people often say it *spoke* to them and in similar reactions to poetic text they are moved to say it was *music*.

Glen Phillips’ poems in “Winged Seed Songs” live eloquently between such contradictions. Many of the poems inwardly rehearse European music, carried forward into an Australian landscape. In some poems, and cycles of poems, musical forms have suggested poetic ones. Others are of music as it newly presents in landscape: *when you stop the car ...noise of silence/ is as sudden as thunderstroke.*

The graces and refraining patterns of music too, will hover us across ancient, magic terrain, as in “Roebuck Bay”: *The way to the sea is across the sea...*

Adding to richness, poems set in China, Spain, Denmark or England run a different landscape where Australia itself may be carried inwardly like a haunting tune.

But of course for me, many of the poems are as sprawlily Australian and familiar-threatening as Patrick White or Peter Cowan in their “Down at the Dump” or “Red Back Spider” mode: The knottiness of Webern, for example, runs for Glen in the barbed wire entanglements of human incursion into bush. The ‘singing’ of these internal/external landscapes, even their smells, is enviably masterful.

In “Twelve Etudes” I am powerfully drawn to the Slessoresque of *In the chalk dusted/ schoolrooms left behind/ a dog eared pad/ where perfected lines/ earned the coloured stamp.* Yet I am even more drawn to the abrupt transition here, again a musical one, to *Now streets seem full of avatars-/ gold painted, bronzed or white washed/ they spring from hinged treasure chests...*

The suburbia we love/hate also gets a classic serve: *Afternoon hours shuffle by in heat/ the human arises, discovers a yawn/ when shadows begin to lean out on the street.*

There was an Ivesian time in the Australian landscape, sadly gone, when musicians regularly played on the march, or in park rotundas. Distance lent enchantment then (at least for Hal Porter) to “the Shire Band despairing its way through *Melodie d’Amour*”.

Porter was referring I think to how a musical ear will inwardly correct the pitch and rhythm of a bad performance if the external acoustic signal is sufficiently faint to become a series of mere cues.

I think also of another WASO musician who told me that as a boy working long hours on an isolated farm in the Lake Wakatipu district of New Zealand, it was the sound of a dance band on a pleasure steamer wafted across the water that spoke of an exhilaratingly different world—one he ran away to, to learn the double bass.

Nowadays we travel the distances in a car listening to recorded music. Thus in “Baandee Cimbalom” the flattish twang of the instrument mirrors for Glen, the salty flatness of the ruined lake land and (perhaps only for me) evokes as well the many Slavic men and women who settled it, working on farms or the railway.

Returning to Beethoven and the hardboiled professional musician or singer: The latter must in performance get on with the job, tumbling forward in a formidable array of skills and mind/body memory co-ordinations, some of these painstakingly learnt in a training period longer, crueller, than that for a surgeon, and some of them mysteriously innate. In the hurly-burly the professional might miss Walt Whitman’s insight, that the listener is the final part of any performance.*

We know Beethoven ended as a person able to communicate only through his art, and that may be why his art is so developed. His revelation must be different for us all, but it gives out to us all from the same depth of humanity. In the extremes of the musical landscape Beethoven fearlessly traverses, Mayer perhaps meant that he is saying to us, *Do not worry, I, like you, have been there too.*

Like us, Glen is a fellow traveller in this rich world. Sometimes he comforts, sometimes he questions, often he tactfully keeps the mysteries. His best work for me fits lovingly into a high tradition of Australian writing. If I seem to have dropped names it is because his work will often resonate within that tradition, yet also venture freshly beyond it.

KEN GASMIER.

**All music is what awakes within us
when we are reminded by the instruments;
It is not the violins or the clarinets -
It is not the beating of the drums -
Nor the score of the baritone singing
his sweet romanza; not that of the men's chorus,
Nor that of the women's chorus -
It is nearer and farther than they.*

— Walt Whitman: *Leaves of Grass*, 1855-

Author's Note

Winged Seed Songs is a special selection of my poetry written over the last forty years or so. These poems were inspired in the main by listening to some of the world's greatest musical works often performed in our remarkable Perth Concert Hall. Incidentally, I once recited my own poems here as part of our internationally successful poetry reading group, *Poetry in Motion*. The notion of a poet ekphrastically mimicking or responding to music is probably as old as poetry itself, but I have always felt somewhat chastened by the poet's achievements compared to those of the composer. The immediacy and universality of music's appeal and its power to instantly induce very physical responses must make the poet envy this art form. The other qualities of music that are there to admire as well—formal patterns, narratives, imagery and deeper themes, linked with the emotional states evoked—may well be shared to some degree with literary and visual arts, yet I continue to crave the power to induce audience or reader responses as immediate and strong as those that composers and musicians seem to achieve effortlessly. That is not to suppose writing and performing music is any less exacting than the other artistic endeavours!

To that end, I have experimented with poetic forms that owe much to certain classical structures in music. At other times I simply have sought ways to evoke the kinds of lyrical and passionate responses which humankind is capable of experiencing when listening to music. After all, the origins of song and poetry are assumed to be one and the same. Additionally, I have included some of my poems inspired by works of particular composers.

The title of the collection was suggested by Ken Gasmier from a phrase in one of my poems which in itself was an allusion to Katharine Susannah Prichard's well-known novel from her Goldfields Trilogy: *Winged Seeds* (Australasian Publishing Company, by arrangement with Jonathon Cape, 1950). In her trilogy, the tragic character 'Kalgoorla' was a Wangai woman she named after the WA 'woody-' or 'silky-pear' (*Xylomelum angustifolium*). The pear-shaped nut from this tree, common in the Yilgarn area, splits open eventually to release two wing-shaped seeds which can thus more easily float away from the parent tree to germinate with the next desert thunderstorm.

I dedicate this book to my wife Rita Tognini, who led me to listen to most of the world's greatest music.

Glen Phillips, 2014.

Acknowledgments

A number of the poems in this book were previously published in *Sacrificing the Leaves, Lovesongs; Lovescenes, Spring Burning, Intersections, A Nanjing Threnody, A Spanish Suite, Morning Star to Evening Star* and *Wordhord* (ed. Dennis Haskell).

The author acknowledges the Nyungar people millennial caretakers and traditional owners of the south west of Western Australia

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MORNING STAR TO EVENING STAR

(a trio sonata)

I

SALT GRAINS

(for Donald Stuart)

When you see the morning star across ridge
after ridge of ironstone and in between,
on lowlands of salt shallows the dark bridge
of sheoak growth, dense paper barks and lean
mallee clumps, you know you are in homeland,
can join new day where the salmon gums stand.¹

That star wanes in the western sky, the sun
throws its raw crimson rash across samphire,
saltbush and the human footprints that run
toward line of rotting fenceposts, tangled wire
in the red mud; where hieroglyphs uncouth
are tracks of Arctic terns from China's north.²

Here, after the war-to-end-all-wars, the 'dusted'³
miners were given wheat farms, since the gold
had run out in old lodes of quartz-crust
Fraser's Mine⁴. These dry-land farms they'd been sold
were healthy enough places if you were hale
and hearty, and a young hot-blooded male.
But these were men who'd share dugout and trench
at *The Nek* or *Le Somme*⁵, gassed some of them

or carrying shrapnel wounds. Still with the stench
of dead comrades in their nostrils; phlegm
in their throats as they coughed and coughed
in frosty dawns hunched over as milk frothed

in the zinc pail from the one cow they owned.
The wife boiled up for food their wheat sweepings
from the bagged sheds where she'd groaned
humping grain with her husband, her weepings
punctuated by his cough as they stretched out
at day's end on sacks, wracked with pain and doubt.

Another dry year. And she fell pregnant too,
so they walked off the property, shifted
in with her city mother; while he in queue
for the jobless waited hopefully. Drifted
to another queue, until at last found
'lift attendant'⁶ work as the years turned round.

But others stayed on—the larger farms
running enough sheep. Some went back
working underground at Frasers, out of harm's
way, perhaps. Except for choking dust, lack
of sun or fresh air—only seeing starlight
coming up after a long shift at night.

Towns tottered on and, with water supplied
for the 'goldfields scheme'⁷, even bowling greens
and public gardens were installed. But relied
on government workers, bank johnnies for means

to survive in the main. But still each day
morning and evening stars showed briefly the way

in the wheeling universe. Country folk
maybe in springtime when kunzeas⁸ bloomed
on Yorkrakine Rock⁹ drew water from the soak
and climbed to stand, arms outstretched, groomed
by the streaming wind, picnic baskets in array;
beside a rough cairn, saw hats blown away.

II

WHEAT GRAINS

(for John Kinsella)

The Great Southern¹⁰, they called it—
farm lands once the scrub was cleared,
with the best soil marked by salmon gums
or blackbutts. Still, the sandplains at first
produced well, especially when winter storms
blowing over the great granite outcrops drenched
newly-seeded ground, leaned the telegraph posts
and filled long lakebeds with shimmering water.
So then, standing on the veranda at evening,
a break in the clouds letting the weak sun
send gold shafts to suffuse dryandra¹¹ groves,
the ranked roadside jam trees and wodjil clumps,¹²
these farmers saw prospects that wool and wheat
might bring. But children in country towns also

found time to be happy at play by the salt lakes,
riding their bikes on bush tracks, climbing
high among tors on drenched monoliths to glimpse
brisk-turning windmills in paddocks, or silos
for storage of the brief flush of winter feed.

New to the towns the motion picture shows,
brought by the 'picture man' in his motor van,
had heads whirling with wonder of 'Land of Oz'¹³
and its enticements of the yellow brick road.
And when brought home to bed, well-wrapped
in blankets, from the front porch they glimpse
the evening star's ascendancy. Before sleep
entices to dreams of witches and coming war.

III

WOODGRAIN

(for Kim Scott)

My first sawmill was a revelation—
among those karri trees¹⁴, tall as towers,
and palms sprouting their green elevation
above grass trees, ferns and forest flowers.
But the spinning discs gouted blood of trees
in violent vivisection; sickly breeze

of sawdust piles fresh with the sap that once
drove upward the weight of that great shaft,
mixed now with the pungent smoke of tons
of burning waste-wood, stink of steam draught
from donkey engine, winding fresh logs apace
from their forest felling to the execution place.

You hardly ever saw the stars here—canopy
of the forests shading all below. Sure there
was sun on the river pools, panoply
of spangled reflections everywhere
when breeze riffled surfaces. But winter's stone
cold brought valley mists chilling to the bone.

Until the hiss of weather fronts, lashed
forest crowns, flooded granite outcrops grey,

and joined every brook and creek, splashed
down to the river in its deep trenching way
on a seaward course with a sound so dread—
a low sullen roaring in its turgid bed.

Summer too served these stern coasts, where
sluggish tannin-stained streams insinuate
their way to the Southern Ocean's patient care,
via blackwater reaches and dunes, to the great
white breakers pounding these tumbled rock stores,
last land before Antarctica's sheer ice shores.

When white settlers came, the forest paths here
still served man and yongas¹⁶, western greys,
as they had done for many a thousand year.
Nyungar¹⁵ greeted in friendship, but found it pays
to treat Djanga¹⁷ cautiously. White diseases
laid generations waste as they sought treasures

in glint of certain stones, were frenzied to embrace
materiality. Whites fenced off waterholes, cut lines
of trees, or ringbarked swathes, sought to replace
Nyungar hunting lands with farms and mines.
All my life I have lived here sharing three zones:
salt lakes, wheatfields, coastlands—they're in my bones.

So, these days quietness is reward—evening wind
along beach sands. And in the western sky one
star glimmers first. It is Venus, of course, blind

with love and to some appointed herald of the sun.
A love of this land and hauntings of human lovers
is like coming of day or night with the star that hovers.

2013

¹ Salmon gums are a tall Western Australian eucalypt (*Eucalyptus salmonophloia*) with vivid pink bark

² Arctic terns from Siberia and North China migrate annually to WA wetlands

³ ‘Dusted’ miners were those who had been afflicted by silicosis from working underground.

⁴ Frasers Mine was the major goldmine of Southern Cross in WA.

⁵ The Nek was a well-known section of the Gallipoli battleground in World War I, while the Somme was scene of trench fighting in France in the same war.

⁶ Lift attendants were once common in elevators which did not operate automatically as today.

⁷ The Goldfields Water Scheme designed by C Y O’Connor in the early 20th century brought fresh water from a hills reservoir near Perth to Kalgoorlie, some 700kms distant inland.

⁸ The kunzea mentioned here (*kunzia baxteri*) is of the hardy myrtle family with distinctive red flowers growing in outback rocky habitats.

⁹ Yorkrakine Rock near Tammin, WA, is a typical large granite monolith in a nature reserve

¹⁰ The Great Southern is the wheatbelt area located north of Albany WA, and stretching north to Narrogin and east to Hyden.

¹¹ Dryandra: a prickly-leaved shrub species of the protea family related to the banksias. Sometimes called parrot-bush.

¹² Jam trees are a species of fine-leaved wattle (*acacia acuminate*). Its wood has the smell of raspberry jam. Wodjil (*acacia beauverdiana*) is the term for this bush which often forms a dense thicket.

¹³ The 1939 Hollywood movie ‘The Wizard of Oz’ was a favourite with children all over the world and ranked one of the best 10 films and the most watched of all time. It was based on a 1900 novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L Frank Baum.

¹⁴ Tall WA hardwood eucalypts resembling in size the Californian redwoods.

¹⁵ Nyungar and Bibbulmun are local Aboriginal names for the indigenous people of SW Australia.

¹⁶ Yonga is the Nyungar word for the kangaroo species known as ‘western greys’.

¹⁷ Djanga was the Nyungar word for the first white men encountered and originally meant ‘ghost ancestor’.

From POESIE BREVI

VI

San Gimignano

There is music among these towers
of avarice and enmity.

By the stone well in the courtyard
a flute flutters its utterance.

Under the arch, under frescoed saints
a harpsichord trembles into life

and under spreading canvas
of the *festa dell' unità*

the folk group furiously
sets the feet of the *contadini* free.

1991

TWELVE ETUDES

(Somewhat after Chopin)

1/12

Looking at stars with a friend
you must go a long, long way
from the night light of towns.

You must leave behind glow
of street lamps, the blood-drop
of a railway signal's denial;

You must drive country roads
past silos and granite rocks in waves,
down and across samphire lowlands;

Must put that ridge of ironstone
between you and the lights of man
till you come to a fork in the road.

Away from the telegraphic hum
of wires, a dead tree's skeleton,
you can lean back, look on high.

Only your heart's pulse alarms
the silence, as panoply of night
is spread before peering eyes.

Diamantine shawl of our galaxy
is balcony to this universe—
see Sirius, Aries and Crux of course.

And so, standing together, tourists
to stellar continents, blood subsides
and thoughts of worship subdue ecstasy.

And indeed reverence is right
for remembrance of this night
is like a handshake for the rest of life.

2/12

There is rich smell of dry wood
freshly sawn or cut; when blood
of the sapwood augments
in furious spring time the scents
of fresh raindrops on dry loam—
another memory of home
in distant desert places. Here
the manna gum in great clear
clusters sprang from trunk and bough,
was gathered to taste, to endow
in curious children's jaws long
afterwards its legacy. And song
of attendant birds; wind's breath
too in trees. And no scent of death.

3/12

Lines of lament can
haunt us even now.
From distant discard
of a rag doll or bear
that played out its part
in nursery incidents
before the press of the world
demanded we never
suck a thumb again.

In the chalk dusted
schoolrooms left behind
a dog-eared work pad
where perfected lines
earned the coloured stamp
of merit. Honour board
of athletic prowess still
records junior champ
of the school, Grade VI.

Later, party dress
worn for the first time
with bra beneath; or
perhaps a boy's first
proud pair of long pants;
a first friendship ring;
a red-ribboned high
school diploma. Late
lamented lines leading back.

4/12

Now streets seem full of avatars—
gold-painted, bronzed or white-washed.
They spring from hinged treasure chests,
suddenly blow on a mouth organ, strum
stringless guitars. Then chocolate-coated
lovers embrace for aeons; shining silver

knights totally encased like the Tin Man
pose as if still presiding in castle corridors.
What does it tell us of our own reality? For
there they are in Times Square, Wilders Plads
or Piazza Garibaldi, Place de la Concorde;
in Plaza Mayor, Martin Place or Pall Mall,
begging for rewards—for here reality holds
no value any more. All avatars are maybe
latter-day Saint Peters or a Cerberus reborn—
gatekeepers to worlds well beyond ours
where Fate has no governance; where
genes know no spontaneous mutants;
where rather than standing still, time
has gone, gone completely away. Soon
we too will stream past without a blink.

5/12

When the moment of touching arrives
and capillaries bring up their reserves
like ships with living heat in chilling seas
moving torrid blood alongside to unfreeze
the loneliness of long voyages, the crews
come stumbling along grained decks, their jaws
agape and hot white smoke of human breath
keeping words warm across space, while beneath
them the narrow span of glittering waters waits.
This is touching? Collisions where skin grates

on skin? Exchange of danger—till storm subsides
and the separate sea passage of each ship rides
on again to the furthest reaches of the seas
perhaps. And memory of the touch recedes.

6/12

Nobody wants to be branded a bachelor,
score no more with the chicks in the bar-room,
tower over newlyweds, then have to fade.

Could bachelorhood be other than sad?
Cot in the nursery empty, the male line marred?
Too soon it's over, so why have you stayed?
Look to your jeans, man, take to the track,
moan of maidenheads and leave your door ajar—
soul-mates are scarce as hen's teeth they say.

Goils ain't goils where the Mafia trims its sails,
women are women, backbone of a nation;
mother is a another doing it too tough,

though a good cigar's no longer a smoke.
Fired by gratitude we resolved to buy for rouged
winner after winner among cheer leaders,

lime milkshakes and candies. Nor erred
trying to assert that victors lead the way,
while the world wields motherhood like a sword.

7/12

Follow the wind's coursing:
it rises from the sea, disturbs
the spare dune grasses in passing,
then snakes its way by river's run—
bays and sand spits and sheoak groves—
to the open waters of lakes, swamplands
and strewn alluvium of the Scarp.

What language is this which
the wind speaks ? What has it
picked up over the ocean miles
from its family of gales and breezes?
I think it longs for ease
after countless centuries.
So much has rested on its shoulders.

This wind has borne gossamer
insects on threads, powder of
pollens disturbed, and has nudged
aloft the poised wings of the albatross.
From more distance still, gunpowder
smoke of battle, fumes of factories
and the stirred dust of workers' towns

Over flatlands the hot morning
air can hoist a bunch of leaves
and paper a hundred meters aloft
in devilish vortex; or preen into
rage grassfires to take farms and towns
then explode mulga and mallee clumps
with ferocity of Ching Ming fireworks.

Somewhere in deserts inland
air begins to swing back in the heat.
Burning breeze in salmon gum
canopies blows ever brisker from
nor-east. Impatient as sirocco
it sweeps wheatlands and wandoo forest,
from granite monoliths to coastal lagoons.

Until, far out to sea, where passengers
in steamships used to sniff in the air
winged seeds and eucalyptus smell.
All night the easterlies pound
down valleys of stone fruits and vines,
slam doors and windows, disembowel
trash; till noontime sea breezes prevail.

For in the end the oceans tame the land,
continents face typhoons; cyclones in their
fury humiliate forests or cities; tsunamis
inundate the insolence of lowland dwellers.

Once winter storms leaned so hard on west coasts
that streams ran bankers through childhood days.
Until drenched we'd hunker down to wind chill.

8/12

No, Mr Voznesensky,
that first frost *is* also the last
most often. Just as the antelope
paralysed by the lion's crunching
bite drags itself that last short
journey of its allotted life;
so you convulse in sweating pain
wilder than you will know again.

My friends, what is this moment then?
It's when you are gripped and forced
with unwilling eyes to regard
the instant of your summoning
by pain; that frosty road to death.

9/12

'You make love my burden
and I cannot lift it now
with all my strength.'

So often Love is imperious, wilful
fickle, as some great Khan become
mesmerised by his own power.

Then he turns this way and that,
hurls commands to quell
imagined legions of assassins,
whole hordes of scheming plotters
of his phantasmed overthrow.
Or lays waste a bemused tribe
of petty advisers and officials
simply because he knows he can.

‘How then can this be love?’
you ask, when accusations
of faithlessness are followed
by protestations of love, ardour
and servitude.

 These lunges of
the old emperor toss you
up and down like a small boat
in the rapids of the Chang Jiang
and make your head reel with
the lurch of its swinging prow.

Is this how imperious Love
becomes a burden to mortal
lovers and robs them at last
of strength to serve that god?

10/12

Tonight at dusk I saw a wild west-wind
tearing at leaves of spindly trees,
rolling clumps of dead grass past me
in the street, wrapping paper wastes
around standing weeds in vacant lots.
Rain was on the way as your intercity
bus droned down freeways and you
read your book avidly. I, at last
sheltered at home, heard the rain come
in a cloudburst. Like that buried sentence
you sent me. And like the dry earth eagerly
I drank it up, and thanked you much.

11/12

I hate to be thought of using someone, she said.
But still the worst words clamouring in my brain
were: forget the loss forever. And I was insane.
For sooner would I forget the moon will rise
or set, all my life, however long or short.
Sooner would the waves cease to break
again and again on rocky shores. Sooner

would the wolves cease to howl in frozen
wastes, or serpents cease to writhe and bite
in all the hells of all the world's holy writ;
sooner would vampires drink all my blood,
than I could forget forever cherished loss.

No, there is no way I can let go the light
that showed me all my world was new,
every landscape detail under the sun never
could be the same again. Even the sun
itself would have to go down red as blood
and never shine again. And still before my
eyes would be every single detail of that last
hope of happiness of mine. Forever? No, never.
Under the rubble of this palace I have pulled down
I will search forever with blistered fingers
until I find the broken body of love.

12/12

I'm off now, will tell you all about it
if and when I get back. The parabola
paused—this is the point of interference,
the perfection of the secant's cut-away.

I see a yellow dirt road—sandplain
country hedged by hakea and heath
that will blaze out with the next spring.
Now it is waterless and the way leads on.

Beyond are threadbare pastures fenced;
and in the hollow a turning iron windmill.
So there is water to suck down there. Sheep
come to a brackish trough. An eagle aloft.

It is good to get away in this metaphor
that exists for an hour, for a day, to embrace
the dreams of solitude, independence—far
from the slinging arrows of the fortunate.

At home there, among herd of loved ones
we are crowded into folded hours;
we fetch and tend in the home pens with
press of fleecy eyes and cloven hooves.

So away here, sand road running under
clouds, we travelled far off for a time;
stood upon rock domes or peered into
open gold mines. Then thunder and rain.

So at the furthest point where salt lakes
stretch out on either side of culverts
and roadsides over-arch with salmon gums,
we have to turn the car—to be back later.

2009

SINGERS

In my head, in my heart
the haunting songs travel on
with me through the long hours
that now we must spend apart.

All those singing throats
the same responses seek
with each listener in the crowd
faithful to the given notes.

In my head, in my heart
the haunting songs travel on
bringing the blood of the budding rose
the fire and death of art.

Yet still at the moment when
my eyes flutter at the first
call of sleep's flood-tide
your music in me stirs again.

In my head, in my heart
the haunting songs travel on
and like winged seeds of wild plants
thrust in my flesh for a fresh start. 1985

PREDICAMENTS

QUARTET IN THE SURVIVAL KEY

And the ground swell, that is and was from the beginning

Clangs

The bell... T S Eliot

I

They have laid me here in hideous darkness... William Shakespeare

Here

looking out

at the world this day in January

of a year,

fifty feet from the flags

of the floor

I cling to the keyhole

blinking through

into the wonderland

giant world

at which the rest of you

preside.

Fee fie foe fumble

I smell the blood

considered by you to be

expendable.

My land

is an ancient one;

there is no abraded tableland

has survived longer;

but it disturbs —

out of joint tree-trunks

bush flowers shaped like

paws of kangaroos —

because into my head it puts

the thought of survival.

And when I open the door a crack

or look through the keyhole out

I keep seeing

what you, my fellow man, have done
against your mortality.

So I turn again

to this flatland homeland;

descending fleshy vine

that sometime I had climbed.

Let us begin with the shore

the jaws are worn, fretted

where the salt sea and old rock have met

in agony countless times;

the fine grains blow in flurrying sweep —

cloud shadows flying across dune grasses.

This has been such a silent land

up until now.

You would think perhaps

 this is a place

where a man might stand alone,

 gaze at the blooded sun

and, as it sinks in that broken sea,

 easily with his utterance

scribble the silence

 smoothed by each successive wave.

And he may even discover what to say

 having the time and space

to consider.

But even despairing tears

 will not come;

the wet rocks cluck their untoothed gums

 receiving unresisting

the upswelling of brine

 in stony palates.

Yet here I stand: the sea breathes

 and breathes again.

II

Blind he all things saw... George Chapman

The shortening shadow flees before
each speeding human cargo borne:
into the brassy sky he sweeps —
sunvisor up he meets the morn.

A freshminced cat's corpse thuds underwheel
and instinct twitches the driver's brain;
survival is buried four fathoms below.
He yanks down the visor, wipes out the stain.

Morning rush hour traffic passes,
the land's hot breezes flick through the pines,
paper stirs in fumeblackened grasses,
drink tins roll under hoarding signs.

Afternoon hours shuffle by in the heat.
the human arises, discovers a yawn;
when shadows begin to lean out in the street
it's time to dispose of the day that's outworn.

His key slotted in, he recovers his power
as hammertone sky brushes out to a sheen,
and with knob of the gearlever moving in hand
drives from his shadow, peers through the screen.

III

The way ascends not straight but imitates

The subtle foldings of the winter snake...John Webster

Funny how images will linger
like scent under the fingernails.

*'Then why to fall to weeping?
Yonder stretches the whole vast world of past time;'*
it is surprising grey and dim;
I could swear, almost it is fading away.

What spirit moves; moves within me what?
I doggy go to my dirty straw to rest.
Why do you follow? Turn away, turn away.

*'But it is a melancholy of mine own
Compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects:
And, indeed, the sundry contemplation of my travels,
In which my often rumination wraps me
In a most humorous sadness.'*

So turn away, turn away. Unclean
these leprous hands, feet, lips.
Not deserving to be washed, even by you,
most of all. Straw
and the shadows mingling on the cell floor.
In the cell door the key stirred. Was it for you?

The end might be viewed: you to be taken out
of my hands by strong, sane sons
of justice. Somebody is always left
to feel, in exacting the punishment,
a sense of righteousness.

Blurred vacuity, grey-mouthed
as mosquitoes' vengeful choirs.
strange how the far-off pursuing sirens
sound like that.

Twist and turn, lingering
sand-track ways: '*Life is full
of predestinations*'.

Peering at my panic, my lust,
the quiet and innocent trees
shamble close.

I thought something stirred at a window
of my cell. A hand? Something to help?
There, it is gone now.

Retribution comes
ordered and arranged: what I have
written need not have been.

But having been
survives.

IV

You cried for night; it falls: now cry in darkness

Samuel Beckett

Lingering

I am

on the eve

at the shoreline,

as words shudder in,

where the strong-scented sea shrubs

move softly beside me.

The darkness invades

the image recedes.

Heart of light

yields only

involuntary gesture:

hand raised

visor-like to shield

glistening sockets.

So I turn in the straw

and discover my smell

this part I have played

in creating my cell.

Yet lingering

I turn

hand half-raising.

1972

BAANDEE CIMBALOM

*("The mind's reflection coldly noted
The bitter insights of the heart" Pushkin)*

This music's twang is bittersweet –
cimbalom's salt strumming in my blood.

By salt-lake margins, dirty-white,
I sniffed spent tide-marks of the summer days
and saw marooned the bleached spurs of trees.
Words are like sandbar trails of salty scum.

Music's twang is bittersweet –
cimbalom's salt strumming in our blood.

I see here cleared creek beds, stony ground,
all desecration of these latest lands
we think we've conquered with our restless hands,
territories marked out with post and wire.

Music's twang is bittersweet –
cimbalom's salt strumming in our blood.

When will this beating blood burst
from chambers of its pride
and follow the long healing road
away from places where we sowed our death?

Music's twang is bittersweet –
cimbalom's salt strumming in our blood.

Territories marked out with salt are lines
away from places where we planted death.
Trust that, as long as you draw breath,
your words make better trails than sandbar's scum.

This music's twang is bittersweet –
cimbalom's salt strumming in my blood.

1972

NANJING THRENODY

I

(for Lily Liu)

I Am Guided

Walking distracted those dusty streets
 to the massacre memorial hall
it seems I did not sense at first
 your falling spirits by my side;
but when we entered at last
 the great sombre paved square
with its graven Bell of Peace,
 by the blood-stained city wall,
with part-interred head and hand out-stretched,
 standing for those innocents
by the massed sons of heaven buried alive
 in obscene lust to dominate; where
above hand and head, dread numbers
 stand tall, 300,000 in all; it was then
I knew you suffered only too well
 fall of your countrymen, every one.

And so felt honoured to share
 guidance of that day with you there.

II

(for Meira Chand)

The Bared Teeth of Men

When I look now upon the bronze
form of Minnie Vautrin, set here
where Ginling Women's College
once stood, and where she helped save
ten thousand souls—elsewhere
three hundred thousand townsfolk fell,
I see the greatness of one human heart—
the brave rock in a black river of deeds.

Sometimes humankind has other faces
to show: here were once bared teeth,
thirsting for blood, imperious sacrilege
of each rapist's thrust. But no tears
shed for man's darkest acts can purify
defiled river mud, rank effluent
of this human history. Despair then,
until you see even now beside the plinth
someone has left a small white pot

of feeble flowers. See also a few brown
autumn leaves, now wind-strewn
at the foot of the smiling bust
of a woman, who briefly fought
for all womanhood; and shamed
blood lust of men to take up arms.

III

Three Stone Trees

What is such desecration of human mind
and what of the body that brings it on?
A parched courtyard, desolate and lined
with broken stone: stone corpses prone
and three stone trees. Recall a race of men,
glutted with certainty, but of demon kind,
each empowered as Heaven's chosen son
with raised sword to sever flesh and bone.
Don't think just of evil ones with power blind;
think of three hundred thousand confined
to their graves, lives unfinished, every one!
My fellow human, what have we done?

IV

For it is a story of such crime and horror as to be almost unbelievable, the story of the depredations of a horde of degraded criminals of incredible bestiality on a peaceful, kindly, law-abiding people...I believe it has no parallel in modern history (George Fitch, YMCA Secretary in Nanjing, December, 1937)

Panay Incident

These Yangtse reed-beds
were more than man high
and so dense a small army
might hope to be concealed.

But it was here navy crew
and fleeing passengers
spent freezing nights while
bombers dived and strafed.

This was an act of war,
the sinking of USS Panay.
It was wilful provocation,
an assault designed to show

Americans and other western
nations were bound to be
replaced by Japan—as the new
self-chosen Asian colonist.

But still darker motives lay
concealed—foreigners there
witnessed amongst the worst
of a century's mass rapes.

For evidence lay buried
in the riverbank mud
among creaking reeds:
the fifty three spools

of film witnessing
atrocities Nippon
could not deny. Vile proof
of Panay air attack,

and bloody bestiality of
other acts—beheading,
bayoneting, burning,
abduction and rapine.

The sinking of that river
gunboat, though momentous,
beside other atrocities, now
almost a random act.

V

(Everyone became a demon within three months...

Tominaga Shozo, Japanese soldier)

Thirty Seven Wounds

From where Sun Zhongshan* looks down
from brooding heights of Purple Mountain
on to that city walled once like no other,
see restless swarms of these armed men
moving north from sacking of Shanghai
in khaki-clad resistless deadly plague
over the freezing Yangtse's wetlands.

When Chiang Kai-shek fled his capital
and General Matsui Iwani rode his chestnut
from Mountain Gate to the Metropolitan
six days of raping had already passed.
And Li Youying lay weak in hospital with
thirty seven stitched-up bayonet wounds:
her baby miscarried in welter of blood,
her both eyes stabbed, nose torn open
and teeth all smashed. Yet she had fought
for her life, avoided rape by seeming dead;
only at the graveside her father saw life
in the running blood bubbles of breath.
And so she survived those thirty seven

thrusts in her small victory for women
of Nanjing; for women of all China then.
But now for all the women of the world.

2012

*President Sun Yat-sen

FUGITIVE'S TAMBOURINE TUNE

A Prelude

Rattle of death is in the tambourine
and then you hear the beat of snare drum's
volleying fire, played by skeletons, who march
with mocking smiles--leather trappings creak,
black banners flap on jutting staves--and this
rutted road is knived by wheels of carts.
In dusk ahead, red fires among ranked tents reflect
as blood in puddles that the troop stalks through.

Humped behind iron gates of a graveyards,
the already dead peer out like barred inmates,
strait-jacketed now in their own cadavers.
From holes that were their mouths they
clamour aloud to the marchers passing
by. With scabrous claws they rattle the bars
and rave. Indifferent drums maintain their
rate, equipment clanks in the marchers' wake.

At the evening shore, the wash of waves
subsides and the failing light is caught
by bubbles around decaying blubber and
soft trail of weeds. In the foam, immense
crabs, like huge damp spiders, nudge and
scatter among body parts. Smoke from
clustered fires of camps drifts down with
stench of something cooking. Sea birds swoop.

And so you conclude, fugitive crouched
among clammy reeds, that you are the last
one left. After you, Earth will be rid
of this sapient species willed to war and lust.
So wrap your rags about your frame.
Too soon to deliver up your flesh
to the cooking fires? Yet, can one
make war alone? On whom to lust?

And so you advance towards the fires:
await the rattle of trap, the swish
of bludgeon, crunch of bone.

1968

SONG CYCLE FROM INNER MONGOLIA

1. THE JADE SCREEN

Green as spring grass that fine travelling dress
you wore as the train
rambled through brown mountains; sweet corn valleys
curving right to left
like some strange green tendril that searched our way
to Chingis Khan.¹

2. THE WOODEN SCREEN

On hilltops *ovoo* stones piled one by one².
Dry tufts of brushwood
surmount each cairn, like helmet plumes; remind
that signal fires
can tell of danger flaring up. So love
burns sacred at night.

3. THE MARBLE SCREEN

Shang-du³, is where Kublai Khan indeed built
in rare marble his
*Hall of Great Stability*⁴, with its six
wondrous meeting halls
to flank his summer palace, dream city.
Here I walk with you.

4. THE SILK SCREEN

On her carpet the trader spread fine wares:
bracelets, necklaces
of silver and gold, leather bound bottles,
purses and silk scarves.
We want to choose our precious gifts of love
bound with silken threads.

2008

¹This spelling is more accurate than 'Genghis' or Cheng Ji Si in Pinyin. ²Ovoos are cairn-like shrines topped with brushwood beacons. ³Known in the West as Xanadu. ⁴A palace rather than 'pleasure dome'.

KIMBERLEY QUARTET

(for Perdita)

I

CROSSING TO THE FITZROY

Beautiful the light here at sunset, soft pink flame;
but more beautiful always at breaking dawn,
when over the lily-dressed lagoons of the Ord
the fruit bats are fuming out in one long black
trailing shawl to their feeding grounds.

We have taken the road to the south
three thousand kilometres or more,
to run the slick of bitumen to cities
where there are more people than bats.

By this long road where red-tinged euros
stand indolently, the small birds that
wake early, whistle and call to brethren.
And the fat-bellied boabs make shadows
even longer than us, sharing the redness
of the lazy sun hanging in the eastern sky.

II

FINDING ROEBUCK BAY

The way to the sea is over the sea,
over what was once the Devonian sea here,
which is now prickled with boabs and bauhinias,
eucalypts and grevilleas and great grassy plains.
For the monster limestone reef of that ancient sea
can wreck no more. We follow its grey ridge
of crumpled forms but it is land-bound now
like a broken-backed python coiled forever
over this top end country endlessly. At
the Fitzroy it is sundown and the cliffs
flame tangerine above scarcely rippled
blue-green water. Here freshwater crocodiles
slide silently in, to fish the shallows. And we
stand back and contemplate antiquity.

So this seaway leads us on to seething blue
of Roebuck Bay. Mangroves cluster there,
and the hulks of luggers which no more
set to sea to make their lustrous harvests
of the rolling pearls in shells, born each
of an irritant grain of this seabed's sands.

The sense of a sea song coming on the land breeze
is like the crafted pearl in the oyster's maw,
promises of fortunes to go round smooth throats.

III

GOLDLINE TO SANDFIRE

One hundred and sixty kilometres
or one hundred miles. Fifteen lay-bys
and the same number of yellow bins
each with its mesh against crows
or dingoes or other predatory types.
Here may be observed the predators
of leisure: the Winnebagos and converted
charabancs, the Baravans and Jaycos,
and the 'Brits on Tour' in their white
rentavans checking out the colonials
under the coolabahs and the cajuputs.

See the missus trotting coyly like a fox
going to earth, making for the corrugated
iron closet while he, pendulous
over belted knee-length khaki shorts,
checks out his gas bottles or his 'Pat. Pend.'
special one-man-operational tow hitch.

Leafless and silent, swollen as if in grief,
drab boabs squint at fellow sentinels
of the savannah: termite mounds, red sphincters,

of the desert, or rotund, squatting in phalanxes.
The boabs wrinkle ruined noses even more
and underground the termites seethe
as whole convoys of departing nomads,
grey or silverback tourists, stir red dust
as they spurt across the lay-by to the tarmac.
Next stop 200 kays, for a chicken roll,
a tepid coke and a tank of fuel.

IV

HEDLAND TO OPHTHALMIA RANGE

We couldn't have known to expect
those two lines scraped across highway
at journey's end, when we crept out
at dawn across the dark breathing land
eyes fixed ahead for the slightest spectral
glimpse of euros browsing close to the road.
Or stumbling cattle heading doggedly toward
waterhole or windmill or the hope
of greener grass. Strain dissipates as eastward
the sky lightens from pumpkin to lemon peel;
the west sky loses its bands of watermelon
and steel blue. Now the hazard remains

road trains: cattle or cables; ammonium
sulphate or haulpak tyres; new cars from
Korea or railway trucks; and loads
of god knows what rare ores for armaments.

Through rocky range after range and boulder
strewn flats and ridges freckled with spinifex
we are coming at last to the end of two
others who had set out at dawn like us,
That was their last one, of course, last dawn
over this whole sprawl of a country. Two lines
scraped across bitumen to point to where
the red dirt-encrusted crumpled beer can
of a four-wheel-drive was flanked now
by a pristine police car. No point any more
even in evening shades to watch for ghostly roos.

1996

JOHN CAGE GOES OUTBACK

Metallic plink plonk of struck keys
hesitates. Then runs on in unwound notes
as toy piano brings back sounds
of childhood in remote arid home-place
where one house stands dark among
mallee and saltbush on clean red
dirt. A tankstand bears weight

of last winter's rainwater. Here you can
tell that store, as you ring on rungs of iron
of that round tank with a child's knuckles.
Like playing keyboard of a toy piano
with your hands wrong way round.
Well then, if those rungs were seasons,
years even, you'd be too young to think
that water of your life, your suite, runs out
all the way from such beginnings to the end.

2005

THEY LAUGHED WHEN I SAT DOWN TO PLAY

(Theme and Variations)

I

When you stop the car
on a sand road –
hakeas and mallees
rising head high or more
on either side of you –
noise of the silence
is sudden as a thunderstroke.

II

Stepping out of the moving stream
gives a delusion, perhaps,
that you have gained wisdom
and power. And the rest

of your fellows live on in dreams.
While instead, you are gifted, blessed
with second sight to perceive atoms
dancing! Or brimming of sap
in branches. Strange other humans seem
so unaware of your power to move unguessed
among them? But angels still may come
with sound and light. Maybe it's best
you stay concealed. Go home
and greet them as if you've never left?
Then surge of the wild flowers' fume
sweeps you along, alone, bereft
of the great powers you once presumed.
Foolishly you cherish memory of your priceless gift.

III

Emperors are among
those who have concealed
themselves, to know
what citizens really think.
In love we pause
between passionate
embrace, torn by doubts
that our subject's love
matches our own servitude.
Crippled as Lear or Othello
wracked as Casaubon,
we wish for the stealth

to observe unseen,
to verify the truth no ague
of the loins can assuage.

IV

Small birds come
to a garden fountain.
They take turns, somehow
respecting each other's
claim to sustenance
with deft decorum.
Yet now and then are moved
to plunge and fly out
in scatter of bright spray.
We see them next
high on a branch
ruffled with pleasure
stolen in this sudden flight.

V

Listening on an empty road
you hear sound
of the engine ticking. You hear
bird voices calling
each to each. Wind in the trees.
Your own blood
whispers like a distant drum.

1985

YENYENING LAKES EVENSONG 1949

This opalescent-streaked horizon
is what you saw across
a bushlake where you had swum.

It was sweetwater, unaccustomed,
and treading water here you awaited
the hushed rush of wild ducks landing

unheeding of the waiting shooters' guns.

But still it is not yet time. Eventide's
reddened bandage scarcely wraps

this lowland of lakes and woodlands
and the skies in darkening mauve.

2012

SUN MUSIC

Beginning
is a red dawn on level scrubby plains
when the mulga tree bursts
into bright Mosaic flame
and the small birds

in the Spinifex hop for seeds
when the brown hawk
makes her first pitiless dawn patrol.

Climax

is deep afternoon's shimmering breath
on monadnock's ancient
summit of stones
on the desert pavement's
hammered metamorphic sheen
in the white intensity
of the salt lake's glare.

Resolution

is the blooded socket of the fallen sun
speared by branches
on a gashed quartz ridge
haemorrhaging across
these sintered flatlands
leaving mullock heap
and saltbush clump
stained with its crimson touch.

1972

UNA SERIE MUSICAL ESPAÑOLA¹

ISLAND OF CALMNESS

(for Caty)

Descending into transfer halls of the terminal
we had little sense of Barcelona, like one grape
tasted from the whole bunch draped on a street stall
in Majorca an hour away by short-haul Aeroflot.

So unsurprising really, hearing the sweet call
of one tourist to another in that island place,
flocking from Bremen or Bonn. In dale and dell
their Raybans and knapsacks flashing where
Robert² strode back from *La Cala* to the tall
house on the slopes, *Ca N'Alluny*, by *Deià*,
after his daily swim. Goodbye to all
that! Exorcised on his island of calmness
the war to end all wars. Still we recall
those limestone ledges when, back in Barcelona,
amid cram of yellow and black taxis, sprawl
of *tapas* bars, we prepare obeisance before
Mirós or Picassos on gallery wall;
or the archly crafted apertures of door
and window in each Antoni Gaudí hall.
Until sated with the throng of art recall
amid Las Ramblas³ hordes the words
of Robert of the streaming hair, a bard's

Welsh curse: at each step withal
may they catch their feet and fall!

¹*A Spanish Suite* ²*The poet Robert Graves was a long-time resident of the Island of Majorca* ³
Major pedestrian walkway in Barcelona

EXHIBITION AT THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

(Barcelona, 2009)

Schoolchildren were streaming out
of the gates of *l'escola primària*¹
and the last visitors were filing into
the *Museu d'Art Contemporani*.
But in the wide courtyard strenuously
skateboarders still strove harder
than Gaudí or El Greco or Lorca,
it seems, to perfect their leaps of faith:
pirouettes and caballerias, their acid drops.²

When they fell, got up once more,
stiffly, limped to the sidelines
for respite. But again and again
made civil war across barricades
of brick escarpments of *la Plaça
dels Angels*³, their stairway to hell
or heaven. And all the while
the worshippers, the pilgrims of art
pushed past.

Evening at last.

In the plaza the chairs and tables
of restaurateurs are brought out.
And perambulating purveyors
of *gelat*⁴ or *castanyes rostides*⁵
pass and repass. But still,
though remote now in darkness,
the clatter and clap of the skateboards
percolates the tinkling of glassware,
the scrape of forks on plates. Mute
you might ponder the day's question,
is there art in perfection's pursuit?

¹primary school ²various skate board 'moves' ³Angels Plaza is outside the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona ⁴icecream ⁵roasted chestnuts

OBSERVING THE TIME MACHINES

I

(El Museu de les Ciències Príncipe Felipe)

Despatching its despatches like a noonday gun,
Foucault's pendulum performs for visitors
to Valencia's *Ciudad de las Artes*
*y de las Ciencias*¹, poised for reflection
in the riverbed gardens of the diverted Turia.
Here the swinging demolition ball knocks
down one and then another hinged post, displayed
like some strange animated transformation
of precisely arrayed Stonehenge. And we

watch and wait as our allotted years fall
behind us while we hurry on through all
the wondrous science we artful humans
have conspired to fill this hall of fame.

¹City of Arts and Sciences situated in the former bed of the diverted River Turia

II

(Valencia Estació del Nord¹)

Those great years of holiday travel in trains
when historic wall tiles welcomed them:
the families from many lands, after
they'd steamed through endless orange groves.
The ticket hall plaques say "Pleasant Journey",
"Buon Viaggio—where peasant girls hold fruits
and flowers, bright sails drift limpid streams.
In that age of steam, it seems Iberia's wall tiles
offered Eden. And windows in stained glass
cast warm gules of light on marble floors.
This was the first coming of time machines
that, nowadays transformed, write signatures
of millennium travellers in vapour trails
high up in these chill autumn skies.
And electric intercity behemoths slide
silent in and out. We wait and watch.

¹the North Railway Station, Valencia

THE WAIT WAS OVER

Madrid histórico.

Suddenly running of runaway notes
called me across paving stones
of Plaza Mayor¹. Might I at last stand
before a maestro of these strings?

Sure, I waited all those years to find
the adroitly hammering hands
of the player of my lost cimbalom
in its ancient tremulous demands.

Around the square, hosts of performers
tried with fierce intent to draw crowds—
be-winged gold-painted angels, armoured
knights, dictators, ghosts with shrouds.

Inanimate they sought to amaze
and only an eyelid trembled as coins
occasionally were dropped in hats.
But spurning stillness I turned to tones
while indifferent diners, spread out
at restaurants tables, clashed
their cutlery over plate after plate.

But I had no time for tapas, paella,
*cocido madrileño*² for I meant to hear

again my cimbalom's strummed notes.

In darkness that was quite enough to bear.

¹Grand Plaza in the historic centre of Madrid

OLD GOLD AND TOLEDO STEEL

(Visitar la Ciudad Imperial¹)

Steel of Toledo comes to mind now
as I mount in memory the steep steps
from *Puerta de Bisagra*² to the city, poised
on its pinnacle above the River Tagus' bends.

From out the Iron Age, steel in weaponry
was learned in live wounds and their blood
debts to Berbers and Visigoths, the secrets
of swords so fine they can shave heads.

And on that "Day of the Pit"³, who was left
to mourn the five thousand unsuspecting—
those dressed-for-dinner guests? Their heads
rolled into the deep pit in *El Alcazar's* walls.

Bodies followed, despoiling finery
with bright spray of blood. Bin Yussuf³
sated no doubt would dine alone that night;
and so the steel upheld its promised might.

El rio Tajo still coursed swiftly on
round Toledo's feet to carry away
remnants of that crimson stain. We stand now
on *el Puente de San Martín* under Alcazar⁴.

But fresh clean waters rushing past our feet
cannot be the same. Nor this bridge also
where in the deep of night, a loyal wife
destroyed with fire the new-built edifice.

Her reason? Husband, builder of a new span
had come home distraught to tell he'd erred—
its complete structure doomed to fall. So she
ensured another would be built, unflawed!

Strange that, in one way, failures are atoned,
while in their magnitude gross evil actions
reveal where wielded steel still shames;
as those who cried: '*El Alcazar no se rinde!*'⁵

Departing Toledo, pilgrims are sometimes shown
artificers who lay gold-leaf upon
finely wrought medallions of steel; and stamp
the gold as if the steel is better dressed.

2012

¹ Toledo was known as the Imperial City ²the usual tourist gateway to the city ³9th century ruler of the city ⁴imposing ancient palace of Toledo ⁵We will never surrender El Alcazar

AFTER CHAMBER MUSIC

(Una serrata musicale alla Villa Fabricotti¹)

In a summer's garden long ago,
 (lute cradled by a handsome youth)
young girls gathered all aglow
 wanting to sing to their hearts' loves there
in this villa garden; the flow
 of floral life frozen in frescoed art
(even terracotta of the Duomo)
 all in a Tuscan summer's blaze of light.

And we, stumbled out into night
 on this winter evening, in topcoats, scarves
around our throats held tight,
 inhaling, exhaling the same crisp air
as had trembled there in flute's slight
 shaft; as had sprung from well-bowed strings,
as had made clear harmonies in flight
 through that throng in the frescoed room.

Fog crept up from the city's womb
 in narrow streets and sculpted squares,
from Arno's dark, past tower and tomb;
 its whiteness touched our faces, lit
by the risen moon's burning bloom
 and met our outward breathing steam;
so down we went in garden's gloom
 by step and stair with that music's air.

Though still the late trains clashed below
our faces coursed with blood, alight,
and music wove us in its loom. 1991

¹an historic villa in Florence used for music recitals

RAIN IN THE AFTERNOON

Fit Subject for a Fugue¹

("I have loved truth...where can I find it?")

Le Rouge et le Noir)

Tamarisk, your fine dark winter webs
are waving softly against a cold grey sky;
idly the large wet drops are flicking down
roughly pasting concrete flags with carmine leaves.
Across the dumbly waiting lines of scrub
ragged shadows of drenching showers march
in; darkening the boughs and boles and bowing
the over-burdened shrubbery to homage.

In gathering evening of early winter
the hearth fire intrudes the coil of thoughts
as arching canes of glory vine suspend their
red papery leaves against palings dark with rain.

Across the attitudinising shuffle of years,
taken back to the sap-strong struggle of youth,
I remember us standing with heaving lungs,

reclaiming the spent air lost as we cycled hard;

and into our eyes the sweat ran with the rain;
red clay clogged our sodden boots where we stood—
the great fire-charred trunk of a tree, chosen
in haste to shelter from that all-quenching shower.

Air, fire, earth and water then
injured us not in our juvenescent days;
tired but insatiate we always found the strength
returning; mounted our machines and rode away.

In the glow of light which the window throws
acalypha leaves edged with fire are hanging
trembling at the impact of assaulting rain; and
resistless mind is showered with memory's grains.

Tenuously the images come sidling back:
rabbit-trapping in the drenching valley mists.
In yellow glow of the lamplight swinging,
a row of rabbits, silent now, dripping their dark blood.

Across a valley of sparsely granulated rooftops
in the foggy spring of nineteen forty five,
receiving the longed-for news of pricey peace,
the wet red roofs and darkwood walls steamed in the sun.

Remember that schoolday? Running amok
in only partly comprehended paeon of joy
a schoolmate banged the air-raid siren 'til it stuck.
Tolling of churchbells mingled with shrieks of trains.

Incessant roar of the dark river—rising where
the liquidambar disassembling its florid cone
reared autumnal branches over racing waters;
and we stood in the rain to watch the logs float down.

That river, it slowly sank in late summer,
into the receiving sand banks between washed stones;
retracing those dwindling waters, we sought elusive sound,
a whip-bird, cracking melodious lashes all the day.

Thinking of the peaceful circle of the evening meal
interrupted by a frightened fugitive from the next street
and see again annoyed distaste showing in all of us at
red blood matting already her long black hair.

Injuries we suffered in such ways as these
regretting the interruption of our measured ways,
alone in no-mans-land that distraught girl.
Too late for shame at our pubescent jibes?

Rhus that sweats its fronds of scarlet tears reminds
a rainless time there was. For then great sheets of flame
interred the paddocks in black ash of burning grass,
tipped the still burning boughs of trees at night with coals.

Taking a timber mill in its indifferent path
a fire will still the triumph song of spinning saws,
raise to the memory of the forests burning on the pyre
idle chimney tombstones of another sacrifice.

Assembled in the righteous path of peace
the conscripts served the nation's gallant old men;
red glow of cigarette-ends gleaming through the rain.
In the verse-inscribed sentry box I yawned my hour away.

Recalling the propaganda films they showed
to prove the world at war's a glorious sight;
although, those shots of charred arm-bones worked,
I went outside trying to retch away those wounds.

Red flame: a hibiscus flower gleams
through its dark leaves and softly slanting rain;
insight as suddenly illumines the dusky cave
and shows new shapes on memory's shadowed walls:

rending of dreams where swart enemy pursued
as I twisted and turned in helpless flight,
the great and glaring flashes of the guns became
ictic blossoming of towering fission clouds.

I walked out in the dusk as a motorcycle passed—
ruby brake-lights clustered in the dark ahead. I
tried to hold him as he twitched and cried
and asked his fruitless ‘whys’ on impassive stones.

Indifference is not an easy stance to hold,
as waiting in Casualty for the one you missed,
receiving him with the unfamiliar blood not dried,
taking him out again into uncomplaining night.

The dark scratching claws of rain
ripping at shaking windows in nights of storms;
always our world is lit again: its darker places
into fresh scarlet wounds will blossom once more.

Returning like inevitable lines of showers,
insufficient in their first advance to drown,
taking me unawares, proving me weakly human,
are multitudinous memories bleeding in the brain.

1972

¹ *The first fugue subject is set by the initial letters of the title (happening also to spell out my wife’s name) and each stanza introduces another variation, or ‘subject’. An additional leitmotiv is derived from Stendhal’s novel.*

FINGER PRINTS ON THE PIANO

When you place fingers
carelessly on the hollows
of the ranked keys, you
mimic in a way the two
curves, concave and convex
that lovers happily give
each to each. But keys
and fingers produce crude
calligraphy if you compare
what is printed lip on lip.

2007

FOUR QUARTETS

QUARTET ONE:

HILLS

(for John Blakeley)

PART I - Coming Down

Earliest painters showed them as a blue smudge
on the horizon, beyond that river bend
where an unlikely black man posed
with a handful of spears and air of a friend.

But I first knew that range of hills
coming down through dark-boled files of forest,
down the old snaking ribbon of a road
from wheatbelt country, where the eye sees for miles.

Then the Lakes Corner at last. And soon
grandfather slows the Buick stately and square;
at Sawyers, swings into the gravel
in front of the tearooms there.

Dutifully we 'stretch our legs', trooping
into the table-crowded room, ordering 'Pass
me more scones!' Outside at the garage
a thin, old man cranks up amber petrol in the glass.

This was 'the Hills' our Darling Ranges
where the road looped under a railway line,
down through Mundaring's mists,
through Mahogany Creek with its faded sign;

Parkerville, Stoneville well behind,
we see the fat Glen Forrest bus
in butterscotch and cream that has roared
all the way up the curving hill to meet with us.

And now we are leaning forward in our seats
calling to grandma, 'Aren't we there yet?'
Then we come to the crest, Darlington
on our left, and see the coast before us set.

Here at last, our journey's end in sight,
we descend through Greenmount's green hills
in search of the scents of the sea.
Behind us the whole skyline fills with a blue range.

PART II - Summer Holiday

The house was a baker's oven
in that summer sun.
We crawled under splintered floors,
collected strange tarnished jars,
made 'coffee essence' concoctions
to drink in the stifling hours.

When night came with gelid air
blown in from the glittering sea,
we saw, like a soft reflection
of stars on the coastal plain,
dim beads of street lights
and the distant city's glow.

Then the east wind raked across
the swaying forest crowns
where we camped on verandah beds -
its restless nagging probed our dreams
as would the wartime searchlights
seeking to destroy our haven of night.

Picnicking in the hills, collecting wood,
we rattled on tracks that led to the Weir,
its clear green of waters worth their weight in gold;
saw honeymooners gone out from quaint hotels
trooping back with mounting appetites;
our beady children's eyes took note of adult life.

A city seen from its flanking hills
seems almost slumbering in its power;
and yet all roads lead down there
where commuters earn their daily bread.
A child counting the holiday span already
finds each day has left with the 'workers train'

of those scarlet omnibuses
toiling down the steep-pitched grades.
Vacation ended, then we left the hills
and the bush closed in behind us.
drawing to itself the mystery
of its secret places and its hidden streams.

PART III - What did they really think?

And D H Lawrence said: 'I often think
of Darlington,' writing from Mexico,
'Can see it in my mind's eye
as plain as Lake Chapala here.'
But what did he really think?

And Molly Skinner said, 'Just over the fence
the summer bush crouched down,
acid and harsh, with great granite rocks
thrusting between the prickly shrubs.'
But what did she really think?

And Katharine said, speaking of
Greenmount of course, 'Dark in the forest
under the redgums and jarrah,
the wood-carter's track a cicatrice
of an old wound through the bush.'
But what did she also think?

And Judah Waten said, looking towards
these hills: 'The shrunken moon sailed
high in the sky: round me the trees stood
like rigid sentries, their lips sealed.'
But what did he really think?

And what do I say? I recall
fording a swart pool that hardly rippled,
leaving only my two drying tracks
on the gravel road. It's all the trace
we ever leave on our own patch of land:
that's what I really think.

PART IV - Darling Range, Darling Range

We may see the pattern of these hills -
the smudged horizon stroke glimpsed
by the immigrant, climbing high dunes.
Or the neat and private backyards shown
to the descending aircraft, so many with
their tiny sapphire shapes of swimming pools.

But the real shapes are like
reversed images of a camera plate:
these ragged trees, these cunning
valleys with their hidden creeks
and the grey tor boulders poised -
the antimatter of this antique earth.
That's why the first of us who came

knew we'd be possessed and
called this scarp the Darling Range.

1985.

QUARTET TWO:

AUTUMN

(Birthday wishes for 2007)

I

Copenhagen, where I stepped for hours
on cobblestones, protruding skulls
of baby dinosaurs, round old town
streets. And sadness for lost life
swept through me as the crowded
canals quietly moved their tidal
waters, passing in straight lines.

I did miss you by my side, for
I had imaged moments
when we might have paused
before the little mermaid—
one who (as it's told) embraced
impossible dreams of a dual life.

II

Florence, and I saw goldsmiths
bent over crowded benches on
the Arno's aged bridge. Stone
arches reflected in the flat green
water to become full circles
like the wedding hopes of bride
and groom. I could have sworn
I felt then your hand swing in
search of mine, seeking maybe
certain assurance of fingers
looped. And then the crowd
flowed on, down narrow streets
into city squares towards rich
domes and towers where the bells
of a baptistery rang out. True
believers were hid now behind
great closed doors, safe from
the hedonism of the infidel.

No longer was your arm
linked in mine. The gates
of one sainted church after
another clanged shut while
the stalls of the street-sellers
of florid trinkets were folded
and wheeled away as cafés lit up.

I looked at the grime-marked steps
that climbed to the central station;
and the tumbled detritus of part-built
carpark ramps and portals in the piazza.
Just then you were away in distant
destinations flying from my circling thoughts.

III

In Weston-Super-Mare's morning murk
I woke to tripping hooves of donkeys
outside on road metalled promenade
that leads to the once Grand Pier—still stretched
out to advancing waters on its strait-laced
dark Victorian wrought-iron palisades.
The beach sands are dun khaki where
donkeys will load up with coated kids.

Later in the chill wind of morning
paddlers might try the grey gelid
ankle-deep sea, while gnawing at lollypops
of holiday rock as large as pingpong bats.
Clowns in soiled costumes may come
to tumble slowly, balance on planks
across star-spangled barrels. Dylan
could have known such a beach
with 'cricket on the sand, and sand
in the spongecake'. At the squared panes
of the hotel, I hold the curtain aside
as middle-aged Bombay-bloomered

runners pass on the pavement with
puffed chests and joggers immense
as seven-league boots. It is still dawn's
grey light in the street where a man
from West India swings plastic sacks
into the back of a panting council lorry.

In a week your birthday will come
round again. So three hundred or so
more dawns will have followed
regular as tides which have seethed
and retreated on the world's beaches
time after time. When I turn from these
salt-caked British sands, I think of you
far from me as some signal light
across seas. And that always
open arms can encircle love.

IV

We have seen moths dart around
a candle's searing flame in dark
of night. Calls to difficult new
numbers in foreign lands, emails
frantic to and fro. So we lunge
still at that ardent lamp, to cross
and recross closer and closer
to its blaze of light. Two moths
blinded, we must circle into night.

QUARTET THREE:

AGEING

'There is only one truth about life: we come from dust and will return to dust.'

(un-named Indian Guru)

I

My grandfather's legs were parentheses
so he looked like an old time cowboy
bowed at the knees; but maybe it was
a touch of rickets from a boyhood
of poverty-farming on marginal lands
around Balaclava—saltbush country.

Day in day out he trotted to chores
on his Bally Bally farm, too impatient
to stroll from stables to forge, or back
again to the hayshed, or out fixing
a windmill, dragging silt from a dam; he
was always on the run, even feeding sheep.

I only knew him as an old man, upright
in his Chevrolet car with grandma beside;
wire-framed spectacles were pulled out
in the fading electric light some nights
as he pored over the accounts swearing
at the 'guvmint'—"Put 'em all up against a wall..."

Much later drove the Chevrolet into
a york gum tree. The setting sun blazed
in a western sky and just there the dirt road
swung away and some say a farm boy
driving a tractor at that moment came
of a sudden from a farm gate. And he was done.

II

Someone told me they couldn't write a word
for a year after a parent died. It was that vacuum
when of a sudden, there's nowhere in the room
to speak your love for a mother you adored.
So this gulf is what nature really abhorred,
dependencies you thought you'd overcome
which haunt now, entering an empty home.
Memories come crowding as a spectral horde;
the curse of childhood is discovering shame,
discovering evil, for finally we are all the same,
and even to those we love we have been bad.
The curse of age is more and more those sad
moments to recall; clearer they'll become
as present time dissolves in growing gloom.

III

Waking half frozen like a castaway
spread-eagled with the covers thrown
aside, I rolled back under the edge
again. Beside me warmth beckoned
to be embraced in foetal crouch.

IV

We know accidents are part of life
to begin and end the piece of string
that marks the ragged length of time
allotted each. Ancestors of mine
who met by chance on a steamer's deck
or fell before a bolting automobile
in turn produced the accident of birth
granted my house. Those who have
strayed in my path and maybe tied
one knot in my life cord, then moved
on, were themselves as accidentally
hewn from the clay and return, who
knows when, to the welcoming dust.
The world's great cultures know that.
And we should all sweep the graves
of forebears tenderly. So those older
or younger than I, whose rope span is
loosed already, the knots untied, do leave

a gulf of grief as the string trails through
my living fingers. Reason cannot re-tie
the slipped knot. Memory fashions its
monuments of past lives most of all,
for we do have them when we wake
in a freezing night staring into dark
yet find our coverlet is still warm.

2010.

QUARTET FOUR:

LOST ITEMS

I

At first I thought of dense forests,
some wild place, gullies deep,
full of dry rocks, dryandras and
grey-green bull banksias. You creep
through these clusters of zamia fronds,
and squeeze between rough burnt bark
of marri trees haemorrhaging gum
that drips red as wounds. Stark
whitegum groves bring us to hilltops
from where we can see more signs
of ironstone ridges, stretched ahead
as slate-blue shadows, marking lines
or barriers set to entrap, to spread

out and separate us until love's death.
But the ground here, the forest floor
opens to bare scars of granite, grey
as the wind-flensed maelstroms or
storm waves of oceans. Hillsides may
confuse us with tor tumbling, lose us,
leave us bereft of home fires of young love.

Yet these were lands where Nyungars
walked barefoot through every shadowed vale
of their six seasons, aeon after aeon.
No, not here, we did not lose each other here.

II

I walked over
the brown lake floor
to where a rock island
stood alone. Climbed
a well-worn trail
past kunzeas with
withered, twisted wood
and paused on the last
quartz-strewn ledge. This
salt lake stretched for miles,
past headland after headland
bordering it. Someone
had built a fence part way
across it. Distance beguiles

the eye in such wastelands
in these cruellest months
with just a smudge of smoke
above the distant hills—maybe
from some mining plant—
leaving in this clear sky just
an upside down tear-stain.
Yet even at night here across
the lake bed, whisper of wind-driven
wild seeds in play tells
even in such darkness
we could not have lost our way.

III

Maybe a mountain landscape
miniatures us; shows us
to be so small in regions
where peaks, alps, mountains
rear up so high? Where a boatman
is belittled, turns back under
the lee of the land and from
the safety of the shore senses
forms huger than he knew.
Here, where mountain mists
descend, tempests wrack
the talus slopes of sliding stones
and snowdrifts melt slowly,
early in spring. Here you can

lose your way, walkers may
separate even among banks
of stella alpine, spring pasque,
columbines and clustered snow bells.
In the groves below the tree line
where rain pelts and torrents surge,
all can grow dark in minutes,
the landscapes turn monochrome.
Yet there aren't there mountain refuges
for travellers; marked trails of
bi-coloured poles to surmount
snow banks? This cannot be
where we somehow lost the way.

IV

So it must be some other
continent, some other world;
perhaps another dimension
of time where the decades
stretch out as railroad ties
and in their inching progress
play vile practical jokes
between those who were lovers;
who travelled so long in fond
parabolas that they became
mere avatars each to each.
To be afflicted so, or cursed,
suggests our span of time was

merely plaything to the gods—
just as a sated animal aims
playful blows to toy with its weakened prey. 2010

HOMAGE TO OPHELIA

When you sang a sad song, humming:
'Down-a-down, an you call him a -down-a',
you thought of when you were a child
and how you looked on the wide world
in the grey half-tones, but with outlines clear.

Strange how sharp these images—
you even stopped your murmuring song,
'Down-a-down, an you call him a-down-a',
did grief touch those dry grass strands
with flame of images in your hands?

By barren hills an old home waits:
verandah floors of fluted boards, that lead
to brown Victorian doors.
In parlour there you now will find
the shadow woman half-reclined.

That perfumed couch she splays upon
is carried off on a muddied stream,
a bunch of wildflowers in her arms.
So then you sing the sad song humming:
'Down-a-down, an you call him a-down-a'.

1975

FANTASIESTÜCKE

(After Schumann, Op. 12)

I

Des Abends

Shadow are long at dawn and dusk;
then long for dusky dawn light,
for soft and downy dusk.
Perhaps beneficent are shadows?

Dark lines on the land
at dusk or dawn are
attenuated shapes subtly drawn
of tree and fencepost and the windmill's metal flower.
Strange that flesh slept in
takes on these folds and forms afresh.
The shadows of the creasèd sheets
Remain to witness toiling dreams.

Early I learned to love the shadows
giving the land its folded forms;
mind has shadows too.

II

In der Nacht

Shadows dissolving to darkness,
their coolness cast through
burning catacombs, lulling
malevolent dreams of despair,
taking by the throat wide-eyed passion,
startled from slumber in terror.
Easing shaking shoulders back
on to the cool receiving covers,
smoothing to quiescent slackness,
to enfolded peace, the flames of images
redolent of the fevered blood.
Embers cooling dwindle to ash
as grey as shadows. Shadows
that are, perhaps, beneficent.

III

Ende vom Lied

Cast across silence of the land
shadows are only mirror images,
crawling behind and before,
of rearing monoliths;
and such thin and dusty trees;
and of the stalking presences of mankind.

So, if you should prefer the image to the form,
longest are the shadows at the dusk and dawn.

1970

SONATA No 2, Op 35

(Chopin's 'Marche Funebre' played by Vladimir Ashkenaz)

This piece on the piano's slick keys
stroked so assiduously, oh yes,
strikes down into the listener's heart.

Eight minutes closer to death, we
end the pounding threnody, eight
measured minutes disposed,
tugged closer by a skeleton hand
at the graveside. How submissive
is that, then, dear friend? Chopin
and Ashkenazy each take an elbow
of us and ease both onwards for
eight minutes and twenty seconds
(to be precise, my friend), steady
beside us mentally measuring
the weight and length of us
recumbent, unresisting, as notes
pound us with the music's spell.
And you, my time traveller, were
taking the eight minutes as well.

2008

FIRST MOVEMENT/LAST MOVEMENT

whirling skirt of the dancer

 rises and falls

 rises and falls

patter of drums supporting the song

 rises and falls

 rises and falls

pulse in the throat of a crying girl

 rises and falls

 rises and falls

the dry summer wind coursing at night

 rises and falls

 rises and falls

crazed moon in its angled grief

 rises and falls

 rises and falls

salt sea embracing the sands

 rises and falls

 rises and falls

scythe of the reaper near the end of the field

rises and falls

rises and falls

1985

TWO HUNDRED AND SEVENTY THREE SECONDS

A SILENT SONNET COMPOSED ON THE SHORES OF LAKE BALLARD AT
DAWN ON THE FIRST OF OCTOBER 2004

(I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry—John Cage)

Octave

Sestet

2014

IM BUNTEN ERDENTRAUM

Durch all Töne tönst

Im bunten Erdenraum

Ein leiser Ton gezogen

Für den, der Heimlich lauscht.

*(Through all the notes
In earth's many-coloured dream
There sounds one soft long-drawn note
For the one who listens in secret.)*

(Schumann's Preface to 'Fantasia in C Minor')

Do not wonder that impassioned men
have been impelled to kneel upon muddy shores
honouring this earth with lips impress.
Yes, meet and right such gestures now and then.

At end of many a faded summer when
thin weeds wave at edge of fallow fields,
children, scenting reviving earth, run in the rain.
Yes, meet and right such gestures now and then.

That dusty cemetery and the new grave open;
and to the fresh earth-mound advancing
with rustle of footfall, pallbearers and mourners.
Yes, meet and right such gestures now and then.

Snouting the dust, his boots will span
boundaries of self-appointed lands;
and stumbling, find earth has measure of its men.
Yes, meet and right such gestures now and then.

1999

THE WALL

The wall: mossed over, except where
sharp with old hard hand-hewn stone,
mellow with crumbling lichen's richer flecks.

In the deep woods I found the wall
seeming to run under the moon so many
many miles, as in some Mongol night.

Beyond such walls strange to discover
forgotten childhood's sacred wood of dreams;
but you have recalled to me how many walls I build. 1969

IF CHOPIN CAN

(for David Morley)

Is there no theme enough for rage
once more in a stew of lines across
a manuscript? In history has blood enough
flowed in massacre after massacre

where lopped heads rolled with the eyes
staring still, lips twitching soundless screams?
Or bellies laid open to spill blue-grey
guts of life's ending in welters of blood?
Or eyes turned back in sockets in the head
of the girl-child split by a rapist's thrust?
Yet music, terrible again can play in death-
march these terrors until ears are deafened.

Or in a turning of the page, now the notes
sound sweet and low, woo our senses
with another arpeggio? And bring further
kinds of tears to flow? Then can't the poet
heat our blood as well, so that each word
moves our moods like the rising flood
of desire with its piercing pain, promising
deliverance in brief release? We have
known that fiery touch of love opening
treasuries of fiercest desire that music
may rage or soothe subsequently in flood.

But the words here, even as they take form,
bleach in intellect's bold glare. So should
poetry try violently to resist? Turn back the tide
of reason like some IED laid across the track
and then with its fraying fuse of passion
sunder the nets of syntax, pluck apart logic's
pacifying order, the amplitude of argument,
and negate each didact's stultifying prose.

This world is not to be made meet and right,
its disorder, bloody misrule hidden from
regard and citizens kept safely calm.

Oh, I wish to walk alone in rhythm sprung
and find somewhere in the hills a stone wall
by the dry bank of a stream. Shelter under
the arch of some weathered bridge and seek
to find the buried feelings in my words
once more. For we were born to rage at times,
leap high for joy, or at midnight fall to
weeping. Find embraces in our families
to be returned with fervour; and seek out
strangers to welcome freely into our fold.

Yet subversion, shunned into printed words,
stuns the stillborn songs, neuters them safely
on white text pages pert with intellectual
sneers while we all sit primly guarding what
we hide perfidiously between our thighs.
Made safe and above all privates. Oh yes,
improperly at ease, dismissed from parade.
Yet you could do so much more had you
strength and courage to set words on wing
like blazing arrows singing as so many
insane Chopins or Beethovens. Or even
simpler tunes of shepherd's flute, herdsman
plucking a domra, sounding a dulcimer.
The intricate bowing of twin strings

of an erhu plaintively in some green
bamboo grove might free those secret
markings, hieroglyphs brushed or letters
littered across page after vacant page.

2013

LONGING JUST FOR YOU

(Beethoven's Violin Sonata No 5 in F Major)

The taut strings' bowed strokes of love
set my waiting heart to song again.
And these are the notes I send to you,
so far from me now that I feel
torn by the storm that blows this night
outside in the tall trees. This song
I make is of life's sweet growth
rising in the grass blades, in stem
of the crimson rose, in green cable lengths
of the bamboo grove, in the lily's fresh
stem that bears the purest flower.

Oh my love, so far away, don't leave
me listening alone this raining night.

SHARING

(for L.P.)

Suffering: it is a real woman's task
to take finally the harder road
while someone listens to the pipa
far, far away from that music's home.
They say such tunes are food for love.
But what sustenance is this? When
thousand after thousand ocean miles
drown out the singing of plucked strings
with sea's rough work of waves and howl
of driven salt winds across the crests.

After the song has ended you walk
on broken paths in the desert silence.
Over granite rocks air shimmers as heat
rises. Strange mirages show plates
of darkness like the shapes of demons,
dragons, avenging spirits of torment.

But the light changes over the land
and rain showers follow. Then in
warm sun brilliant desert flowers bloom.

2004

A FEW BARS, A FEW BARBS: Webern Op 28

(a homage to Thomas Gleghorn)

This fence wire beyond barriers of sound, as a
fast-forward silver-strung bullet train, hurtles
through posthole tunnels, ducking at points
curving round bristling coveys of upright tree
growth. Up and down stooping with hill and gully
slopes (as telegraph lines seen from a train) each
hitch/sag, hitch/sag, post after post after post.

At last at stopped right-angle of fence's
corner post, the strainer, there's and end to it.

This is the virgin wire unreeled on battlefields:
curled around trench parapets, ammo dumps,
even quarantine stations, deathly concentration
camps, where they have buttressed posts, sirens,
lights. And, yes, loose coils glistening, almost
pretty under rimless glint of moon. Threaded,
looped, these twinkling stars direct intrepid
navigators, who choose or are chosen to donate
to its barbs their trifling shards of flesh.

My boot stubs rusty wire at dusk in the
rubbish tip of my grandfather's long lost
farm. Memory pricks from point to point:
the axe he bounced off a tough white-gum bough,
near went through his foot; a carving fork in
a dinner-table fight that pierced palm
of his son's hand; the knife point that lacked
compassion to spare another's startled eye.
I wasn't part of all that. This barbed strand

of my blundering boot brands me
interloper. Not welcome on property
that's changed hand. May as well
be one of the band of illegals,
come in leaky boats to find that
in this land of ours storm trooping men
have put up well-braced
barb-wired fences round a one time
friendly nation's bloodied heart.

2009

THE PERFECT INVERTS

(Sarah Hopkins: 'Cello Chi')

If you had the right ear for it
you'd hear thunder of pristine
mushrooms emerge with autumn.

The bunkers and silos open to nose
cones angled to take reverse thrust
of the seeming lethal lithosphere
of the Earth's restraining crust.

Before the crunch of the clay
impacted makes way to sweet
sanctuary of moist night air,
these beauties had perfection
of a pod of pygmy whales
ready to be stranded, keening
on some Southern Ocean beach.

But with their superhuman strength
these bobbing white caps do insist;
nightly to lift-off. In the morning
show as mighty flotillas landed
to wink in the autumn atmosphere.

2013

PLEASURE BOAT AT NIGHT

(in memory of SS *Zephyr*, a Swan River swaggerer)

drum bang and blare of saxophone
and clumping chords of piano
carry to us across water on the evening's east wind

the sound flaring
and fading
and fading again
with the glow of strung lights
as the steamer threads black outposts
of the river's salt bays and shallows
now near
now far
across the dark waters
passing and repassing shrouded banks

while thrilled parties stamp the decks
and whiffs of coalsmoke
mix with the swamp-reek
of river reeds coming to us
out of light and dark

laughter in crescendos
shouts and breaking of beer glasses
the steam-whistle's toots

of festive human-kind

now fading into the night now surging
closer again with party voices

again
and yet again
the swirl of dancers
navigates estuarine waters
time after time

the onlookers on the shore
this oppressive summer evening
sit under the overhang of riverbank trees
endure the crush of human wishes
each ache of jealousy
doubt or desire for deliverance

if only trees could twist and fall
and sand-dunes slide down
to close over stifling lives
and deliver from unfeeling daybreaks
still to come

but jangle of piano notes
floating across water
interrupts again
and panting engine cruises
the lighted ark close to the watchers

one more time

insistent as the gusts of warm east wind

this heedless riotous press

beckons us to join

the dancing throng

and everlasting waiting arms

come back in

come back in

1971/2014