

*Scottish Selection: poems*  
Akros, 1998

#### THE CITY WE LIVE IN

You are on my skyline  
as high as eye is lifted  
nothing is beyond you

I approach and  
come up against  
walls  
your rock defences

You bridge my extremes  
lead over, across  
between one level and another

I pass within the shadow  
of your arches  
and walk the colonnade

Crescent and high terrace  
would not entice me but  
for sudden vista:

statue, campanile  
pearl of sea, jade of hill,  
well-proportioned temple

more than these  
I try the narrow steps  
tunnelled wynds, wrought-iron gates

that lead me where  
an inner court  
holds itself secluded

#### NOCTURNE

It is raining on Lewis in the night;  
darkness has brimmed over the hills  
spilling upon the moor

and dropping into circles of inland sea.

Last night the moon was wildly shed  
by mountain and cloud to reveal a sheer  
countenance at the window  
and blending with the water in bright festoons

but tonight the dark is raining on Lewis  
on the black-house with its hunched thatch  
on battered abandoned buses  
derelict cars and stacks of murky peat.

Boats are plying under the rain  
and enormous eels under the boats  
and fishing nets are lifted  
up and under the tide like diving birds.

For thousands of years of nights the stones  
have loomed in lonely communion  
beneath the moon, the rain,  
ritually aloof, cleansed and illumined

and the white schist of my lasting self  
safe and awake yet exposed to love –  
its darkness and shafts of light –  
takes up position in line with primeval wisdom.

## VIEWPOINT

*Why can't they give these damn mountains  
proper names? Their names are  
in our language; the mountains  
understand it and know each other  
by these proper Gaelic names.*

*Why can't they be spelt so we can  
pronounce them – like Ben Nevis  
or Ring of Bright Water?  
The spelling is the way it works  
and makes everything real.*

*I can't remember these names:  
what does 'sgurr' mean?  
Steep, high, impenetrable peak*

that divides our minds, our speech  
and our understanding.

*Here's one I can say: Ben Tee;*  
and here's Gleouraich, Gairich,  
Spidean Mialach, Sgurr na Ciche.

(Mist and clouds are swirling  
as an eagle soars and falls).

*What is that range called that  
you see and then it fades?*  
Knoydart. It means Rough Bounds:  
dear, far, near, fearsome  
rough bounds of our being.

#### DRIVING THROUGH TWEEDDALE

To drive through country is not to belong  
and yet a sense of belonging grows  
season by season, year by year. Some  
horses will graze in the same meadows.  
Coated in winter they droop and hang  
their heads through rain and snows  
but in April they put their heads together  
then startle, shy, suddenly canter.

A foal spreads out asleep in the sun.  
Nearby a cutter scoops up grass  
and it falls like rain, green,  
sweet. The foal will wake and prance.  
Cattle are resting deliberately in  
the mud they've made near the watering place.  
Lamb life outplays a cruel April,  
a hard rain, to bask in May and revel.

Two oyster-catchers nest beside the burn;  
uncamouflaged they catch my eye quickly,  
and a kestrel carelessly performs, turns  
in his balance, keeps it, keeps it perfectly,  
but I've passed before he drops. Hawthorn  
is a gleam in the green with lilac  
and yellow broom and bluebell-patches  
beside the water's silver, and silver birches.

Plovers rise and settle their crested  
heads among humps and tufts,  
and wagtails flicker bright-breasted  
across the road. But where are the swifts  
and sand martins? Sky is dull, quiesced,  
solid without them, the river bereft,  
for they arrived in demolishing rain and cold:  
sandbanks flooded, nearly all died.

To drive through country is a kind  
of treachery. My mother had a pony  
at most, but ambled downhill to find  
cowslips by the weir, or cycled stony  
footpaths. Protected, I'm trapped inside  
the car. I cannot touch. Only  
I am touched. These presences flow,  
groove into me deeply, even as I go.

#### FIRST THAW

Hills lie quilted in snow;  
the river runs black and harsh;  
sheep are fed by hand.

Next a flicker of doves  
streams over the rooftops, the church  
and circles down the river.

A sprinkle of snowdrops beside the flood  
and a pair of dippers play dive and seek.  
The heron flies low upstream.

A cat crouches on the wall  
which sparkles with favoured moss.  
A girl leads her pony along the street.

We walk slowly arm in arm  
over the bridge, along the river  
and imagine ourselves in the picture.

#### ROUGH BOUNDS

Leaps and bounds as the river  
as sure-footed mountain deer  
as rock forms barrier

Rough and ready as hill track  
as long standing drystone dyke  
as stepping stones surely mark

The shallow place we cross over  
the pass worn by wayfarer  
marking the natural order

Bounds and bonds we shake loose  
forsake or must sacrifice  
on the destiny we choose

Universals of our planet  
circumference to starry orbit  
perfect each within its limit

Out of bounds we take the risk  
questions each one has to ask  
to go beyond may be our task

Boundless as in exaltation  
the lark sings, or lamentation  
that brooks no consolation

Silence then, free of words  
forward then where is no guide  
rough bounds within my head

#### WINTER DAY IN THE BORDERS

Leaves are falling singly in the mist.  
Grasses still unwithered, on the old hill fort  
are decorated separately in frost.

A dog treads water in a pool of leaves.  
A motor-cycle growls in the forest,  
its rider clad for jousting against the gradient.

Above the bristly hill a cool moon.

The river fiercely tosses white water backwards  
over rocks and seething stoic depths.

The dipper dances on a fallen log  
in syncopation, chirping to its mate, loud  
above the skimming surface of the flow.

The wide moorland circles round the village  
protected by its cold, covering wind.  
An owl flies, crying in the dusk.

Pines lean against the snow-dark sky.  
Stiff with silent fishing, a heron flaps  
into their high branches. We turn home.

JULY 1st

from *Shadows from the Greater Hill*

Shadows from the greater hill  
in early eastern light, project  
upon the lesser slope, to fill  
with dark its curves and hollowings –  
as suddenly, without remark,  
white gulls open huge black wings.

DECEMBER 24th – Apollo in the north

from *Shadows from the Greater Hill*

Apollo winters here,  
strings his lyre like stars  
through clouds, like swans  
brightened in the wind;  
practises his geometries  
scaled to our particulars:  
arcs, crags, promontories.

A coiled constricted formula  
translated into sections of our landscape,  
our city-weathered hill,  
reduced yet refined  
from Delphic drama, grandeur  
or golden Minoan harmony;  
his circles here, triangles,

his proportions re-coded  
in our alpha rock,  
our liquid sky, diagonal,  
and huge, cold omega, winter nights.

JANUARY 1st – time made new  
from *Shadows from the Greater Hill*

We have crossed the threshold  
into Time made new.  
We make it new by stepping  
bravely from the familiar  
to proceed into a circle  
narrower but higher  
bearing with us  
what we can  
all that ringed us what we are  
but opening this horizon  
in each other  
for our neighbour  
by the truth of our endeavour.

JANUARY 5th – Turner water-colours  
from *Shadows from the Greater Hill*

As daylight dims the stars  
so consciousness is wakeful over dreams.

Turner's water-colours  
are not exposed to view  
except in Scotland's  
month of darkness  
when no strong light destroys them.

Winter discovers  
what summer hides:  
dreams, ancient magic,  
fragile water-colour feelings.

HOLYROOD PARK AT NIGHT

Snow and solo, Holyrood park at night  
flakes so brittle footsteps can press no print  
    sky reflects the earthly pallor  
        shadows of evening are blanched of darkness

Star nor moon, no break in the haze of white  
outline none to sharpen the lion crag  
    wide terrain of hill and parkland  
        empty of creature beside my walking

Round the frozen loch sleep the ruffled swans  
geese and lesser fowl in their sheltering  
    dogs and humans huddle safely  
        lights of the city for hibernation

Days are dark in winter and nights are pale  
blankly folded into each other's sphere  
    even gulls are muffled, humbled  
        silently I alone travel forward

Far ahead I see by the gate the trees  
hardened branches blurred by the pallid light  
    nearly home I find beneath them  
        circles of softness where earth is warmer

Friends grow distant lost in their own distress  
each of us alone bears what winter brings  
    stiffened frosted leafless upright  
        yet unawares we make fonder patches

#### MOONLIGHT OVER ARTHUR'S SEAT

Tonight the mountain has laid aside solidity:  
    earth that has jutted and cragged its way into sky  
with trapped molten intensities pushed to their utmost reach  
    then cooled and folded, crumpled into shadows

Those massive columns now dissolve again in light  
    wanly drawn about their huge shoulders  
concentrated in an act of illumination  
    with here and there a shaded boundary

Such exchange of substance noiselessly continues  
    comprehends each separate, weightless leaf



each sweep of wilderness, each casual broken stone  
that shinningly betrays the eyes of gods

From their intimate gaze we seek a sheen of protection  
yet as they probe our levels of hidden light  
we wager another moment towards our destiny  
and wrap ourselves in the sleep of our own courage

#### WINTER SUNSET IN EDINBURGH

The sunset at teatime is everywhere:  
it gets under the averted eyes,  
strays between grey thicknesses  
of cloud,  
in and out of branches and chimneys,  
dashes itself against windows and walls,  
and plays with children  
on their way home from school.

The sunset is like a bright old lady  
who puts on her old-fashioned finery  
and makes a sudden sortie to  
the library;  
in and out of acquaintances and friends,  
dashes her smiles against strangers and dogs,  
and chats to children  
on their way home from school.

#### PURITY

*seen on the Meadows, Edinburgh*

When I make a picture  
I will put a black man  
in bold headlines  
running full-scale across the Meadows –

beside him a white dog  
husky and blurred  
in wavy outlines  
skating the grassy surface in circles.

Sharp edged, bright-back  
tropical man . . .

snow-soft, stark-white  
arctic dog . . .  
superimposed on the antique Meadows.

Trees are tense to the roots,  
grass stretches, stones stare  
from medical buildings,  
as these two in their extreme purity  
cut across Middle Meadow Walk.

#### WINTER SUNRISE IN EDINBURGH

The huge pale sun behind the Braid Hills  
rising  
glints on the city in wands of slanting light

The threadbare half-moon hangs above  
Corstorphine  
where winter branches stretch and silhouette

With sunrise in her hair the girl Queen  
Mary  
rode to dying Darnley out at Kirk o' Field

On such a frosty forenoon Cockburn left  
the lawcourts  
experienced the New Town, memorised the Old

Singing a cold cadence Fergusson  
the poet  
shivered down the Canongate with rhythm in his feet

And citizens of Edinburgh on this very  
morning  
set to partners, join hands and skip down the street

#### IN THE ROYAL BOTANIC GARDEN, EDINBURGH

*after the sculptures have been removed to the new Scottish  
Gallery of Modern Art in John Watson's School, 1985*

'That was Henry Moore's *Reclining Woman*' –  
He pointed out a shape of yellowed grass

where the large recumbent stone  
had welcomed clamb'ring children,  
tentative caresses.  
'And there stood Epstein's *Christ*  
Christian soldier-like  
sentinel of the city  
watchman who never slept.'

I turned toward the trees beside the path  
where first I saw that figure,  
the city spread before him;  
and always, looking up,  
I'd know a stab of stern respect:  
he could have bowed down  
to have the kingdoms of this world.

'Once a girl rose from the lily pond,  
a nymph with head inclined,  
as all below her and around  
diverse fishes glinted.'

These figures now have been transplanted,  
plucked as no gardener would do,  
no soil taken with them,  
no attentive placement  
to placate their genius.

We feel their absent presence  
where once we used to meet them,  
sense the exile they must know  
in having left their Eden,  
and the loss we find  
in this unpeopled garden.

## CROFT

*The grazing place of cattle*  
on the rounded seaward slope  
*The passing through, gateway*  
between rocky outcrops

The brow of the hill, *suncatcher*,  
and marshy burn below  
make feeding grounds for sheep

The place for corn to grow is  
    in *the minstrel's gallery*  
where lark and curlew call

The fallow-field with hens and pony  
    waits for seed to fall

These pieces from my land  
    parts that I make fit together  
strength of hoe, scythe and spade  
    bank of peat against the winter

Children gather dulse and shells  
and swim around the *place of seals*

Love of folk, place, work  
names that make light in the dark.

#### ELEGY IN AUTUMN

Rain like rays lit by pale sun  
at evening by Loch Ness beneath the cedar tree  
beside the Abbey fort once built by Wade  
to quell the clans

    Rain so fine  
you see it only in this haze of light  
that shimmers over deep water where  
motor launches circle at the base  
of ruined Castle Urquhart, its towers  
and rowanberries, drops of blood,  
blood upon the *sgian* before it's put to rest

Rain so delicate we feel it on our faces  
like the brush of tears and let it rest  
there for sorrow of the story, for rue  
of it, for songs and valour, for  
pipes and ardour, for centuries endured  
Of callous cruelty, for every casualty,  
for dull poverty amid outrageous beauty

Rain so soft it clings like memory  
of those who had to sail, starving  
and dispossessed, away, the sons we long for

and girls who wove the patterns of our work  
in colours of our speech, gone, gone

Rain so cold it trickles in our blood  
and turns our humour to a wheeze or moan,  
to leave us dour and laughterless: leaves  
lost, loosed, withered, sun-struck, windswept

Rain that slants like Autumn in us now.

## WATER WEST COAST

It seems as though the principal element  
from which all things derive in the west is waves  
    is water, water, water, only  
        water the ultimate end of substance

The quartzite vein that runs through the mountain rock  
becomes a cataract in a night of rain;  
    the road a river; rocks and trees are  
        manifestations of water's essence

And sunshine seeps, distils from a molten core  
displays through rainbow seaward in slanting rays;  
    the moon is ice, is crystal hardened  
        blanching the ocean and dwindling shoreline.

Our very breathing knows itself born of mist;  
our limbs and fingers flow into coiling streams  
    whose current courses through the body  
        thickens to densities when we waver

The boats, the houses, shops and the wooden pier;  
the heron, oyster-catcher and dipping swan;  
    the curlew's cry a floating ripple;  
        water, the soul of the land and people.