

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 shiningly 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.