

These poems go back more than 40 years. They are mostly dedicated to particular people, some of whom were lovers, some the mothers of my children, some simply friends or even slight acquaintances. Some of the recipients were amused, some annoyed, some miffed, some apparently even horrified. One or two may have been pleased, or at least too polite to say they weren't. The fact that I wrote a poem for someone does not indicate that my affections were reciprocated in any way.

I have put them in approximate date order as far as I can remember the dates, sometimes the dates are a little bit vague. In a couple of places where there are things in the poems which might baffle someone hitting them cold I have put a little note at the top.

Ben Thompson February 2015

Kodacolour
for Maxine Northwood

This is of someone I remember.
We lived together in a small house
With a painted yellow door
Overlooking a meadow.

Through four winters, three summers
We kept cats,
Planted trees, grew potatoes;
Hedgehogs raided the garden.

Now, fixed in Kodacolour she stands
In a white cord frock
Radiant, wifelike, secure
With a man in a black suit

As though this were somehow her arrival
On the solid shore of hope,
Power of ritual or desire
Raising sun in a winter sky.

Is this you, this stranger?
I hear news of your life in the village
Amongst people I hardly know,
Remembering the green field and the yellow door.

On a day like that
for Maxine Northwood

Travelling to the country slowed me down.
Expecting to see a stranger, I had no
Difficulty in recognising a lady I lived with
For four years,

Expecting a distance,
In no time at all
There was no distance
At all between us

And we walked out holding
Tom's little hands
While he laughed his head off.
It was just like stepping

Back into a river
I'd only just crossed
And letting the waves
Close over me for a while, again.

Then we lay down in a field.
You seemed to vanish
Into the earth and the sky.
Tommy played with the grass

Not noticing this natural event.
You stung your bottom on a nettle,
And when we were safely back in our clothes
You put some sloes in my pocket.

"It's nice in Suffolk on a day like this"
I might have thought
As we walked back to the house,
But then the skies opened,

Seemingly out of anger,
Perhaps out of relief
And it was sudden rain and sleet,
Heaven must have joined in what was going on,

And then came a tractor
Pulling Christmas logs,
And Tom said "Tractor! Tractor!"
Till it looked exciting, even to me.

Then it was all over,
Reality interfered. You said

“Don’t hate me for what I’m doing”,
I set off back for the city.

But I still had the sloes in my pocket,
It’s nice in Suffolk on a day like that.

1977

Nature Poem
for Maxine Northwood

On a birch tree
Behind another birch tree
Did two doves alight

To rest awhile
On two different branches
Facing each other.

Then they took flight.
Gently ascending
They rose in two circles

And, passing once more
Going opposite ways
They were lost in the sky.

It was quite something to see
But compared with Jane Fonda taking her clothes off in 'Klute'
It was nothing.

Woman
for Nicki Shaw

1

You were looking for your father
He was looking for his mother,
Your mother was looking for her father, etcetera.

Which came first,
Mother, daughter, son?

There have never been any!

2

Nothing behind, before, nothing.

But wander in the garden awhile,
Taste the flavour of existence

You can
Measure the oceans with your love.

3

The clouds are fed by the oceans,
Ocean-fed is the cloud of our lives

Earth-fed the stooping
Figure with the plough.

Cloud ocean
Earth figure

Woman.

1978

Vanishing

for Cathy Porter

(note: the poem was written during the Euromissiles crisis in 1982 at a time when we thought nuclear war in Europe was a real possibility, hence the apocalyptic tone)

There's a door half open
By a small cave where incense burns,
I stop in the dark

(Strange day in another country)

Orange light flares from the hearth
And I know this incense
Through years of sleep

A flame almost beyond desire
Burning against the immense
Perfectly still breastbone of space.

The staircase descends before us
While around the air sings "mystery lives"
It's bread among stones, I take it.

Although it snows now so fast
We no longer leave prints,
There's still something to be gathered up
In this ecstasy and given

Although small houses
Sleep under snow
And ancestors lay flowers
As though we were already dead

There's still the difference
"Vive la difference"
Between us and them,
Between me and you

Between silence and the great cry from beyond silence
That folds into silence again and again

If only they knew! Between empty space
And two people holding hands under it
What a difference!

Small houses, dying lights,
You mark out a cross for your first-born
But the angel takes you all

And the great laws
And the great thoughts vanish,
The sad small houses
Vanish into the snow.

But coming back to my day in the country.
You, my love, you were so good –

Even without saying or thinking anything
We were there

Two creatures feeling awkward together
Because our own kind was vanishing

Out of such a universe,

With so little thought,
After so little time
Just vanishing.

Day Trip Hampstead Heath
for Cathy Porter

Here snow blankets the trees around
Like still kingfishers under eiderdown.

Flower of the vineyard, you and I,
After so many days
Climbing the white hill
On such a day.

Ascending amongst the toboggans
We were painted into a Lowry,
Two watchers, out of time
Walking in a landscape of children and dogs

The sky thoughtful over the frozen lake
Silver rising in the depths
We walked out into the emptiness

And the trees had gone. Emptiness
Inside and outside mocked our mortal beliefs
Their emptied images
A last wave to the material world

Flower of the vineyard, the snowflower
Held us in his cup, passing again and again
Through death's door, without fear
On the stem of the flashing flower

Not a shadow between us,
Child, woman, poet, rose.

Rosemary
for Maxine Northwood

It could be a woman
Or a girl child
Or even some small town in America

But in this,
"Rosemary is for remembrance"
It means simply a plant

That grows by your door.
Woody to the touch,
Pungent when crushed

As, indeed, is memory
Which gives, as the plant,
A perfumed bolt which strikes and grows.

It seems the nearest to enduring love
That I will ever know
Is that we two now, though careful not to touch

Still speak warmly to each other
And that seventeen years ago
We brought a boy-child home together after such

Traumas and searchings and sullenness.
Root stem and branch were we three then
And still there's joining somewhere deep below

We dare not talk about,
As though the woody stem had changed its name
From purest oak to sparest rosemary.

Perrier
for Nicola Meecham

While we were guzzling wine and coffee and hand-made cigarettes
You drank Perrier and camomile tea
On our behalf

And when the conversation touched "L'Isle Joyeux"
You observed a diplomatic silence

So that by the end of the night
Without knowing how
Our hearts were swept clean.

1993

For Sheila
for Sheila Rowbotham

Your hair
Is still as soft
As desert sand

And I am a teenage wallflower
Clutching a red guitar
Waiting to go up on stage
In a dance hall that smells of your hair.

Your house has moved
To a one way street
I can't seem to find my way into,
Your kitchen is full of spice bottles,
Some dusty
But none of them hidden.

You have a dog,
Some extra fillings in your teeth,
And you can't get a half fare on the bus,
That much has changed between us

But your hair
Is light as desert sand
In the empire of Ozymandius.

The executioner
for Sherry Tolputt

There's a universe not far from here
Where light wanders, year on year

Ferrying news from countless stars
Girdled with life and with death's snares

And it's not the stubborn beating of the heart
Or the Higgs field or the strange quark

That holds it all in place, it's this:
That in this universe we've never kissed.

There stands the executioner, no less,
Not in a hood but a blue dress

Look on her brow, the air grows still
With guillotines set cocked to fall.

Step forward now, and with one blow
Bring this old cosmos to its death throes.

Ah, but alas, her mercy holds its place
Whilst, from her eyes, in anxious haste
King's messengers with pardons race.

Fell Walking
for Alyson Brien

On the heights the eye paused
Above the horizon's vanishing point
Where raptors float and plot their routine kills

Nudging the clouds, the sun leaned
And scattered a bunch of keys into the hills;
Each unlocking a different shade of green.

The maker slipped his chains,
(The point was never that any two things should come at once
But that one single thing could be so strange).

And yet we kept on walking the fells
Because we knew the day would have to end
The raptors stoop, the night descend

And that the winds which freshened us
Were never ours, but rather
Passed over us, making for unknown shores.

We walked, and where there was a beacon or a monument
Rested a while and felt its weight
And the history in it, or the light.

The keys dropped,
You picked them up and
Each unlocked a different shade of gold

I went fell-walking again, almost to the top.

Abschied
for Cathy Porter

Abschied der; ~[e]s ~e parting (**von** from); farewell (**von** to); ~ **nehmen**
take one's leave (**von** of)

Frozen grief
Too deep to be unpicked
Kills everything
And so can't be unpacked.

Autumn leaves
Caked with snow
Litter tracks which run
Out on a pinched horizon.

Strangers in a waiting room
Blowing hands, passing the time,
A single case at our feet
Packed with winter clothes, some favourite books, and . . .

And we wait for the distant bell
Of a train we know will come
Bringing its passenger, Abschied
And then somehow words will have to be found
And will be found, such as
There was never anyone like you that day in Milan
When we woke in a borrowed flat to find snow on the roofs
And take good care now, and (yes), auf-wiedersehen.

And one will help the one who has to go
Up the steps of the impatient train
With that one bag,
Winter clothes, some unforgotten books
And everything that might have been.

bleiben *inr. Itr. V mit sein a*) stay: remain;

For a while
One of us must
Although our whole
Enterprise is dust.

Stern der; ~[e]s, ~e star(s);

When we are just
Pictures on album leaves
Our children will gaze at them
And wonder at the vast
Ungovernable spaces which were us.

Sandals
for Chen Yuanyuan

1

All night your sandals slept in the hall
Like country footprints left by young feet eager for the city

Today you came to make amends,
Beg their forgiveness and I found

By dreaming of your face I had forgotten it,
The stillness that you brought and still could bring:

We sat and talked, it was as though
A strange, wonderful bird once glimpsed through glass

Suddenly alit in my palm
To eat poor crumbs and find them good
I would not close my hand

And then you were gone again, taking your shoes
Your atmosphere, your sun
To be a young girl alone in a new land.

2

Faint in its perfume as aged sandalwood locked in a chest
Yes, it's true, it was you who
Wandered away all that time like a lost child;
Wonderful untouchable unsurpassable love.

2006

Joanna
for Joanna

There were yellow flowers on the mountain
And peach blossom, speckled pink
Presided over by the lofty trunks
Of a few arboreal antiques

You, beautiful when angry
Are always angry, therefore
Always beautiful, you sat

On the top of a wall like a cat
With your little red shoes
Pulled tight against your hips,
Toes towards me

As if to say, "look,
My feet are still bound."

No Promises
for Zhang Qian

1

Missed her this morning
All night her dream-self held my hand
When daylight came
She went, whether from within she saw my eyes open, or whether
She tripped their latch before she slipped away
I do not know, but

When I awoke she was gone
Leaving me to wake up clutching air
And the warmth of her having been,
Of breathing her breath,
Touching her hair.

By the gate of Haidian Book City,
 There she was, suddenly, walking towards me,
 My reconnecting angel.
 She put her hand on my arm,
 I noticed, slightly amazed.
 When we parted I kissed her ear,
 Her nervous silvery laughter
 brushed me off.

Then somehow she was beside me,
 Paging me through my hardest year
 Like an angel of life, or, perhaps
 Of death, a sweet angel of sweet death,
 Helping me through a gate in myself
 Which might be new life, or, who knows,
 might be forever.

And somehow we stood by the house where I was born,
 Walked the path I used to walk to school,
 Me seeing those things as for the first time,
 Those huge old churches shrunken, ripped to stones,
 Lit by her gaze's
 shifting light of eastern skies.

Between shuttered pits and fallen miners' houses
 We wandered streams I'd followed in my youth
 Her curious gentle eyes led my gaze
 toward old familiar mountains

With her by my side
 Long dead memories became flesh,
 Were lived again, cashed in
 Or perhaps retained but bequeathed to another;
 Her gentleness buffered me, twisting in gales of change
 Like an old gate about to slam shut
 or fly angrily off its hinges

At night her black hair, scented,
 Sprawled on my pillow
 Her body, washed and perfumed,
 Opened, her arms opened to me
 Fanning forgotten sparks
 to flame within her flower

She always surprised me
 By giving me more than I knew how to ask for
 As on that day walking out of Tsinghua when she calmly
 Picked up my hand

And held it as we went into the street
As if to say,

No promises, here I am now, here is my hand
Just holding yours, but beyond that fact
No promises.

And then she was gone.

Even my winter days
Became Spring
When you walked into them,
Your gift of flowers, trembling on their stems,
Turned Winter to Spring for me
And now those summer days
Walking by rivers,
Through valleys and mountains,

Those few special summer days
Hang in the sky like brilliant moons
Against a dark patchwork of remote constellations
And the clinker of neutron stars

Waiting for imagined future Edens
To cast their lights upon.

In my dream I was coming down an escalator
The train to Tiantongyuan was in the station
Doors open, jam packed,
No hurry, I thought, I'll get the next one

Then there I was at the top again
Coming down and there's the next train
I'm going to miss that too
When, on the up stairs

You passed me, young, compact
And full of love,
Leaning towards me, like an apology
And a farewell

Wedding Cake

He's dressed in black,
Proud, erect, top hat and tails,
Plaster head thrown back,
On his plaster face the hint of a smile
Dint of the cautious painter's knack.

She's in white from top to toe
With a gauze veil, her face
Left blank, in her hands, like gathered snow,
White flowers which, if they were real
You'd have to say were withering;
Roses, perhaps, or white chrysanthemums,
Without a glass it's hard to tell,
And with a glass they'd just be wire and wax.

And so they stand, two proud mannequins,
To celebrate a union, as it were,
Each alone, she with her dream of him,
He with his dream of her,
Beneath their feet, it seems, firm sugar ice
Encases enough providence
To underwrite eternal happiness

But that the case is hollow, on display
In a shop window, under glass.

Together

He sits by the fire in a distant place
Nodding off to sleep, hair gone white
Eyes dimmed by the processions of grief
That passed before them. She,
In the city, stares through her window
Then back to the mirror, seeing no face.

They grow old together, miles apart
Him nursing his hurt, her a withered heart
Not really together but never separate.

2013