

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