

POETRY AND A SENSE OF PLACE

John Burnside

Introduction

In this paper, I want to discuss the function of the lyric in poetry of place. I will suggest that the lyric poem is the point of intersection between place and a specific moment or moments; that a lyric can, in effect, act as a detailed map, not only of topological, (and meteorological), features, but also of any possible response to those features. It may be a very idiosyncratic and personal view, but I would maintain that the purpose of the lyric is to stop time, by somehow conveying the timelessness of the chosen place: paradoxically, this attempt to break the flow of linear time is achieved by focusing very specifically on the moment, (i.e. on transience, which is the space in which linear time disappears).

I would also maintain that the lyric is concerned with identity: the poem of place always contains an implied observer, whose identity is inextricably linked to whatever is being observed; indeed, taking into account the views of eighteenth century Scottish philosophers, such as Hume and Reid, lyric poetry reveals that the identity of the onlooker is indistinguishable from the things perceived; the fact that we are "bundles of sensations" is not a pessimistic or reductionist view, but a philosophy which allows us to transcend time, to belong entirely to a place which can be categorised as "home", and that this "home" can be found anywhere. The enterprise of the lyric is, in fact, to identify home, and to locate both speaker and listener in a space of their own, whether that space is a shared home, or not. In discussing the lyric, I will make a distinction between place and space, suggesting that lyric "poetry of place" concerns itself with specific locales, not to create a sense of local colour, or for any Romantic effect, but to set up a kind of metaphysical space, which is essentially empty, a region of potential in which anything can happen. Paradoxically, though the lyric can be seen as a map which contains the responses of the observer, this is not the map of a specific response, but of all possible responses. The "I" of the lyric poem is neither poet, nor

Poetry and a Sense of Place

reader; its space is only temporarily inhabitable. Personal experience is transmuted; in the lyric, poetry is a form of alchemy, that is, the poem becomes a region of near-infinite potential, which anyone can inhabit. Or, to use Emily Dickinson's description of herself as a poet:

I dwell in Possibility -
A fairer House than Prose -
More numerous of Windows -
Superior - for Doors - ¹

Identity

The psychologist, Nicholas Humphrey, has said that "Everything that is interesting in nature happens at the boundaries."² It might also be claimed that everything that is interesting about the human individual is what happens at the boundaries of his/her perceptions and transactions. The question, What is identity? is most profitably examined in this space between the individual and the world: that is, as the question, Where does "the self" end, and "the other" begin? It might be answered that the defining line exists at the borderline of their transactions, that we define one another, that without "Thou", there is no "I", or rather that "I" is a short-lived singularity, destined for chaos. Experiments in sensory deprivation have shown that, when external stimuli are withdrawn from a subject, that subject effectively disintegrates, losing all sense of self. Identity, in other words, can only be sustained via transactions, whether with other human beings, or with a living and changing environment. In other words, to speak of "the isolated individual" in this context is quite meaningless. On the other hand, the very fact of individuation depends upon a separating out of one's self and the world that is not-self: to exist, the person must maintain his/her bounds, both in order to exist as a separate individual, and to have a space in which transactions can occur.

The spaces between the "self" and "the other" where everything takes place have long been a source of fascination for poets and myth-makers. To take one example: the Celts, or at least those Celts who once inhabited the British Isles, and informed much

of what still remains as an identifiably Scots/Irish/Welsh/Cornish culture, recognised a space which they called, (in Irish), *idir eathara*, that is, a boundary that is neither one place nor another, but the space between the two, that space which Humphrey has identified as the point where everything that is interesting in Nature happens. This, in Celtic myth, is the magical space where anything can occur. In one story, a fiddler enters this space, and passes through it to the world of faery, where he stays for a single night, playing his music to the Fairy King. When he returns to his own world, twenty five years have passed: his wife and his friends have died; no one in his village recognises him. In other tales, this space is the locus of transformations: humans become birds, or animals, the old are rejuvenated, the human and the faery are indistinguishable. This gap is also the space in which several versions of a place, or a person, can exist simultaneously; depending on the choices made by the protagonist, one or other of these possibilities emerges into the temporal world. In other words, this magical space is where identity unfolds, and is capable of transformation. It is the boundary between one state and another, where magic is possible.

The legacy of this myth can be seen in much recent Scots and Irish poetry in particular, where a boundary is commonly the specific locus for lyric. This locus may be geographical or topological: the border between one place and another, (in Northern Irish poetry, for example, the boundary between the South and the North), or it may be temporal. Key moments in the calendar are Lammas, Halloween, (the old Celtic New Year), or New Year's Eve, or certain times of day, such as noon or midnight, dawn or dusk. These are the points at which one thing becomes another: the old year becomes the new, summer becomes autumn, day becomes night. They are, in our experience, the moments when the person is susceptible to change, where being is raw, as it were, where identity is less fixed, more open to possibility. Indeed, we might even say that magic is nothing more than the recognition of potential. To illustrate this state, I would like to quote my own poem, *Halloween*:

Poetry and a Sense of Place

I have peeled the bark from the tree
to smell its ghost,
and walked the boundaries of ice and bone
where the parish returns to itself
in a flurry of snow;

I have learned to observe the winters:
the apples that fall for days
in abandoned yards,
the fernwork of ice and water
sealing me up with the dead
in misted rooms

as I come to define my place:
barn owls hunting in pairs along the hedge,
the smell of frost on the linen, the smell of leaves
and the whiteness that breeds in the flaked
leaf mould, like the first elusive threads
of unmade souls.

The village is over there, in a pool of bells,
and beyond that nothing,
or only the other versions of myself,
familiar and strange, and swaddled in their time
as I am, standing out beneath the moon
or stooping to a clutch of twigs and straw
to breathe a little life into the fire.³

Of course, one question raised by the existence of this boundary is, "Can there be such a thing as no-place or a no-time?" The question is reminiscent of the old pile of rice paradox: if I place one grain of rice on a table, then another, then another, I will eventually end up with a pile of rice grains. But what is the point at which the pile comes into being? Do fifty grains of rice make a pile? Do thirty? Do ten? There is no rule which applies in this case: somehow a pile of rice grains comes into existence, but the point at which it begins to exist cannot be determined. In the same way, one thing becomes another, and each thing defines every other thing, but the locus of the change, or of the definition, cannot be traced. While time only appears to flow, one moment into another, it is a cliché of poetry

that no single moment can be fixed and held in place, that we cannot, in our actual experience, stop time in its tracks. The only way in which this linear flow, through a series of indefinable points, can be evaded, in fact, is by artifice: the lyric seems to break time's flow, not by freezing it, as a snapshot does, (or seems to do), but by celebrating transience, by acknowledging that the moment is, in itself, outside the limits of our description of existence, and is therefore the very matter of eternity. The lyric says, in other words, that the flow of time is an illusion: the reality is that things change, things unfold and decay, in the standstill of eternity. To resort once again to cliché, time does not move, it is we who move within time. Similarly, just as linear time melts into eternity on examination, so place - the defined, the fixed, the mapped - becomes space - the fluid, the shifting, a region of unexpected potential - when it is considered within the context of lyric.

Community

By living together in a place, and calling it home, we give rise to community. This may come about by sharing resources, by identifying ourselves by way of a common location, but it may as easily arise from shared difficulty, for example from the binding effect of "weathering" some event together. In David Clewell's poem, *Storm*, for instance, we are given, not only a superb image of the Wisconsin landscape and climate, but also an insight into this binding effect, into how kinship and community life are perpetuated by shared experiences, of danger and difficulty, of joy, even of the small, slightly crazy moments of day to day life:

We unfold napkins and bolt down dinner.
The radio's full of the storm
and we know the twitch of electricity
here out on the porch, waiting,
iced tea sweating in our summer hands.

Hosing down a lawn giving up to brown
a neighbor yells this'll be a real clapper,
he can tell, we should have seen the walleye
hitting hard all afternoon.

Poetry and a Sense of Place

When we came to Wisconsin they told us
about the summer storms thundering
across the lakes and through backyards,
washing weeks of heat down the gutters.
We'd been through rain before,
never realizing how polite.
In this open land, miles of no relief,
the Elks scatter home with their softballs.

Tonight in dark circles around our eyes
another storm gathers. A year of plans
folded into maps stashed on the dashboard.
This house packed up behind us
shifts its new weight in the dark.

Maybe we need the sky falling in once more
to yell *no turning back*.
So let it rain,
drops giving way to sheets of water.
If the roads wash out we'll make it anyway.
If lightning strikes
we'll jump into each other's arms.

We know it won't be long now:
someone with a newspaper full of rain
running down the sidewalk, running home.
This time it will be for everyone's sake
when we hope it isn't far.

Tonight if a tree falls we'll still be here
to hear it, to leave the porch
and dance in the branches
until we're soaked to the skin
and what's underneath comes up to stay alive. ⁴

So it is that all poetry of place, while it appears to concern itself with landscape, is as often about identity and community. Identity is revealed by relationship, by kinship even: the poem of place speaks of the relationship of the individual to a specific place at a particular point in time, and invites the reader to share this

relationship. The lyric invites its reader to identify, not with the poet, or with the poet's experience, but with the space in which that experience unfolds. The best lyric poetry creates a magical, or metaphysical space which the reader can inhabit. For this reason, the poet must resist the temptations of glamour, on the one hand, and nostalgia on the other, because the space of the successful lyric must be, in one sense at least, empty. The reader must replace the poet as viewer of the landscape; the poet must remove him/herself from the scene. In this sense, the contemporary lyric is essentially classical in its enterprise: what the poet seeks to create is a mythical space, from which the personal and the ideological have been carefully removed. This mythical space, it may be noted, belongs not only to the living, but also to the dead and the unborn. In the lyric poem, place is, in a sense, nothing less than a matrix upon which all time may be mapped: there can be no distinction, here, between the living and the dead, both exist as part of the continuum which the lyric celebrates and makes, for a moment, visible.

Language

The sense of community, (that is, of belonging to a place), is cemented by language. In my own country of birth, (a country I left as a child, and to which I have only recently returned), the importance of language in determining the sense of self, and of community, has become a central political and aesthetic consideration during this century. It is not a new phenomenon: Norwegians, for example, passed through a similar phase, in their progress towards full nationhood. A specific landscape and way of life gives rise to a specific language or dialect: Scots have found that English is insufficient to describe the land in which they live and, given the fact that Gaelic was deliberately eradicated, as a matter of policy, by the English, the people of Scotland rely on Scots - which some would describe as a language in itself, while others would define it as a dialect - to delineate their world. The use of dialect is, of course, a political act at present, in a country where the people's sense of belonging was deliberately undermined by another, dominant culture, (England), a culture which for centuries denied the validity of Scots speech, insisting that the only language

we could use to describe and define our place in the world was English. The English rulers and landowners decided that Scots - or, indeed, Gaelic - was inadequate to the task, that it was vulgar and crude, lacking in the necessary finesse. As recently as 1994, a Scotsman was fined for contempt of court, after using the word "Aye" instead of "Yes", when swearing an oath in a Scottish court, (presided over, it must be said, by an English judge). Scots became aware that, no matter how faithfully we believed in a given world, the world *we* inhabited was determined by the way we described it.

Thus, the common experience of Scots, till relatively recently, was that a Scots language description of the world was necessarily inferior to an English language description. A good illustration of this sentiment can be found in William McIlvanney's novel, *Docherty*. Here, the younger Docherty, Conn, is being disciplined by a teacher for fighting in the school playground:

"What's wrong with your face, Docherty?"

"Skint ma nose, sur."

"How?"

"Ah fell an' bumped ma heid in the sheuch, sur."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Ah fell an' bumped ma heid in the sheuch, sur."

"I beg your pardon?"

In the pause Conn understands the nature of the choice, tremblingly, compulsively, makes it.

"Ah fell an' bumped ma heid in the sheuch, sur."

The blow is instant. His ear seems to enlarge, is muffled in numbness. But it's only the dread of tears that hurts. Mr Pirrie distends on a lozenge of light which mustn't be allowed to break. It doesn't. Conn hasn't cried.

"That, Docherty, is impertinence. You will translate, please, into the mother-tongue." ⁵

Conn duly recants, and is duly punished. A bright child, who has enjoyed school till now, he begins to understand his brothers' contempt for the world of learning, mediated as it is through the English language. Mr Pirrie's attitude is that of many of his time, a man who has bettered himself, who saw his own father as "a pig walking upright", who can say things like, "No wonder Livingstone

left Blantyre. Africa was an easier proposition." Later Conn makes a list of words in Scots and their equivalents in English. He soon fills a side of paper. Then:

He didn't start on the other side because he now wanted to write things that he couldn't find any English for. When something sad had happened and his mother was meaning that there wasn't anything you could do about it, she would say, "ye maun dree yer weird." When she was busy she said she was "saund-papered tae a whuppet." "Pit a raker oan the fire." "Hand-cuffed tae Mackindoe's ghost." "A face tae follow a flittin'." If his father had to give him a row but wasn't really angry, he said, "Ah'll skelp yer bum wi' a tea-leaf tae yer nose bluids."

Conn despaired of English. Suddenly, with the desperation of a man trying to amputate his own infected arm, he savagely scored out all the English equivalents. On his way out of school, he folded his grubby piece of paper very carefully and put it in his pocket. It was religiously preserved for weeks. By the time he lost, he didn't need it.⁶

I've spent some time on this passage because it illustrates one of the quandaries of Scots - a people who prize education and learning, a people known, for example, for their technological skill. On the one hand, there is the desire to "better oneself", a desire driven by poverty and isolation; on the other, a stubborn - even, as above, compulsive - will to assert one's own cultural and linguistic identity. With more recent literature in Scotland, I would argue that that desire is at the fore of the enterprise, either in the direct use of the Scots language, or in a concern with specific aspects of Scottish landscape and culture. This can be seen in Duncan MacLean's marvellous description of the game of curling in *Blackden*, or in the explorations of Scottish myth undertaken by many of the poets, such as Kathleen Jamie, W.N. Herbert and Robert Crawford. More importantly, the lesson of the Scots experience is that any attempt to deny a specific culture and language is, in effect, an assault against all culture, all language.

In my own case, loss of the Scots language coincided with the loss of the landscape it described. Another way in which Scots have

traditionally “bettered” themselves is by way of migration: my father, with only limited employment opportunities in Scotland, moved south, into the camp, as it were, of the linguistic enemy, to find better-paid employment in England. Many Scots moved further afield: to Canada and the United States, to Australia and New Zealand. A whole separate paper could be written on the effects of this migration, (or on the combined effect of Scots and Irish migration), on the literature and music of those countries. Oddly enough, while they made every effort to integrate with the cultures in which they found themselves, migrant Scots were freer to express themselves culturally than those who remained in Scotland. Only in the last seventy years, perhaps, beginning with Hugh MacDiarmid, has there been a conscious, political movement to renew, or perhaps, revive, Scots as the language of poetry. Alongside this movement, there has been an increasing interest in creating poems of place that describe the real Scotland, (and not the Romantic, “Monarch of the Glen”, heather and tartan Scotland of Queen Victoria’s fancy). A marvellous example of such poetry is Robert Crawford’s *Scotland*:

Glebe of water, country of thighs and watermelons
In seeded red slices, bitten by a firthline edged
With colonies of skypointing gannets,
You run like fresh paint under August rain.

It is you I return to, mouth of erotic Carnoustie,
Edinburgh in helio. I pass like an insect
Among shoots of ferns, gloved with pollen, intent
On listing your meadows, your pastoral Ayrshires, your glens

Gridded with light. A whey of meeting
Showers itself through us, sluiced from defensive umbrellas.
Running its way down raincoat linings, it beads
Soft skin beneath. A downpour takes us

At the height of summer, and when it is finished
Bell heather shines to the roots,
Belly-clouds cover the bings and slate cliffs,
Intimate grasses blur with August rain.⁷

Landscape and the maps of childhood

Crawford's poem speaks of "us", and somehow suggests a communal experience of Scotland - an "intimate", "erotic" experience. This commonality should not, however, be confused with the idea of social existence. Indeed, we might oppose the "communal" to the "social" in this context: forgetting the ways in which right-wing ideologists have used the concept of "community", (and, in fact, if the lyric has any political function, it is to redeem language from the ideological uses to which it is put), we might say that the "communal" is what we experience as a group of like-minded individuals, whereas the "social" is what we experience as an undifferentiated mass, for example, as voters, or workers, or citizens. The communal is the space where we belong; the social a negotiated arena of structured transactions, modified by courtesy and a sense of propriety. Members of a community can be seen as a network of extended kin; members of a society, as a gathering of self-interested individuals.

As I have already suggested, the lyric works as a map, one which is far more detailed in conveying a topology, and the experience of that topology, than any other. Most importantly, the lyric poem, where it deals with childhood, raises the most interesting question of all concerning the world: that of the person, of the identity of the individual, based upon a notion of continuity. This question is at the heart of community: what we know about ourselves is the key to what we know about others: I am defined by my relationships with what surrounds me, which may include landscape, or the means of production specific to my locality, but is also the realm of others, of similarity and difference, and what we accept as "common knowledge". In this context, the lyric poem sets up a space which anyone can inhabit - or anyone, at least, with whom the writer imaginatively shares at least some history or experience, (features, as we have seen, which might be no more than a rain storm, or a change of seasons). Thus, a poet like Seamus Heaney can speak, in the poem, *In the Beech*, of

My hidebound boundary tree. My tree of knowledge.
My thick-tapped, soft-fledged, airy listening post.⁸

At its best, the lyric poem works on this mythical basis: imaginatively, every child is capable of reliving the story of Odin, (or of Adam and Eve), by inhabiting, no matter how tentatively, the "tree of knowledge". The experience Heaney describes here is a universal: the act of tuning in to the world, of becoming more than ordinarily aware of place, such that a single tree, somewhere in Derry, can become the centre of the world.

I said at the beginning of this paper that it was my intention to present, informally, an idiosyncratic view of the lyric poem of place. I have used more or less random examples from the work of other poets, to illustrate my view that the work of the lyric poem is to stop time, in order to root the reader in eternity, to suggest, in other words, a sense of the continuum of being, as opposed to the contingencies of everyday existence. The lyric poem, for me, is the arena in which questions of identity and time, individuality and communality, seeing and believing, may be explored, but never resolved. The lyric poem allows me to locate myself. Most recently, this has involved a return to the place where I was born, and a re-exploration of the maps of childhood which I have carried for so long. At the same time, I am forced to explore the limits of identity: just as I am defined by my relationships with others and with the land where I live, I am also threatened by these things: love can reinforce my sense of myself, or it can invade and undermine me; belonging to a community can give me a solid foundation, or it can swallow me up. The act of locating oneself, central to the enterprise of lyric poetry, must be infinitely repeatable and modifiable, otherwise, the sense I have of my place in the world becomes a static, meaningless *fact*. These tensions inform my most recent poem sequence, *Epithalamium*, which I attach as an appendix, and which arose directly from the considerations of the place-poem outlined here. Perhaps, more than any exegesis, the poem itself will convey my conviction that, while the poem of place creates a metaphysical space in which the reader may move and be, such a space must be hard-won, will demand constant renewal, and may never be taken for granted.

* * *

Notes

¹Emily Dickinson, c. 1862

²Nick Humphrey: *A History of the Mind*

³John Burnside: *The myth of the twin*, Jonathan Cape, 1994

⁴David Clewell, *Blessings in Disguise*, Penguin Books, 1991

⁵William McIlvanney, *Docherty*, Allen and Unwin, 1975

⁶William McIlvanney, *Docherty*, Allen and Unwin, 1975

⁷Robert Crawford, *A Scottish Assembly*, Chatto and Windus, 1990

⁸Seamus Heaney, *Station Island*, Faber and Faber, 1984

Poetry and a Sense of Place

Appendix : Epithalamium

Da kam ich auf einen breiten Weg;
da kam ein Engelein und wollt' mich abweisen.
Ach nein! Ich ließ mich nicht abweisen!

Des Knaben Wunderhorn

I Shekinah

I've heard how the trawlermen harvest
quivering, sexless fish
from the ache of the sea;
how they stand on the lighted decks and hold
the clouded bodies,
watching the absence form in those buttoned eyes
and thinking of their children, home in bed,
their songless wives, made strange by years of dreaming.
I've heard that seal-folk drift in from the haar
through open doors,
the cold that strokes your lips while I am gone,
probing your sleep and stealing a little warmth
to mimic love
- so, driving back, it's always a surprise
that coming home is only to the given:
old gardens in Lochgelly, thick with privet;
still-pools of oil and silt at Pittenweem;
lights on the Isle of May; the low woods
filling with salted rain beyond Markinch.
It's always a surprise: the stink of neeps;
the malt-spills of autumn fields, where floodlit tractors
labour and churn;
the last few miles of wind and scudding clouds,
or starlit silence, hung around the house,
as vivid as the angel who attends
all marriages.

Its shimmer on our bed
is subtle, but it keeps us to itself,
learning the make-believe of granted love,
and this is all we know, an angel's gift:
that weddings are imagined, love's contrived
while each of us has one more tale to tell,
the way you feel the turning of the tide
beneath the house, or somewhere in the roof,
or how I sometimes linger on the stairs,
listening for nothing, unconvinced,
less husband than accomplice to the dark,
beguiled by the pull of the moon
and the ley lines of herring.

II Heimweh

Remembering the story of a man
who left the village one bright afternoon,
wandering out in his shirt sleeves and never returning,
I walk in this blur of heat to the harbour wall,
and sit with my hands in my pockets, gazing back
at painted houses, shopfronts, narrow roofs,
people about their business, neighbours, tourists,
the gaunt men loading boats with lobster creels,
women in hats and coats, despite the sun,
walking to church and gossip.
It seems too small, too thoroughly contained,
the quiet affliction of home and its small adjustments,
dogs in the backstreets, barking at every noise,
tidy gardens, crammed with bedding plants.
I turn to the grey of the sea and the further shore:
the thought of distance, endless navigation,
and wonder where he went, that quiet husband,
leaving his keys, his money,
his snow-blind life. It's strange how the ones who vanish
seem weightless and clean, as if they have stepped away
to the near-angelic.
The clock strikes four. On the sea wall, the boys from the village
are stripped to the waist and plunging in random pairs
to the glass-smooth water;
they drop feet first, or curl their small, hard bodies to a ball
and disappear for minutes in the blue.
It's hard not to think this moment is all they desire,
the best ones stay down longest, till their friends
grow anxious, then they re-emerge
like cormorants, some yards from where they dived,
renewing their pact with the air, then swimming back
to start again. It's endlessly repeatable, their private game,
exclusive, pointless, wholly improvised.
I watch them for a while, then turn for home,
made tentative, half-waiting for the day
I lock my door for good, and leave behind
the smell of fish and grain, your silent fear,
our difficult and unrelenting love.

III After the storm

The wind has sealed our house with a thin
layer of dust;
study the landing windows and you'll find
tiny particles of leaf and shell,
insect bodies, crystals of salt and mica.
The radio's playing; you've put the kettle on
and, standing in your winter coat and gloves,
you listen to that song you've always liked
the one about love.
Somewhere outside, in the gradually stilling world
a bus has stalled, the driver
turning the engine, over and over again,
and someone's dog is barking at the noise,
guarding its phantom realm of bricks and weeds.
All over Fife, the roads
are blocked with fallen trees and stranded cars,
the tide keeps washing wreckage to the shore,
splints of timber, fishnets, broken toys.
This wind has blown for days across the fields,
so now the silence feels unnatural,
as if the storm is what we really need,
the sound of it, its small, forensic pleasures,
ribbons of silt or birchseed in the hall,
a feather on the bedroom windowsill,
and what we might discover of ourselves
and one another, as the night begins.
So much that moves around us in the dark
is ours: the smallest shiver in the hedge
a knowledge we have waited years to learn,
and something come inside, in that one
moment, when you hold the door ajar,
more than a gust of rain, more than the wind,
more than the Halloween ghosts we might imagine.
Those animals that figure on the walls,
those creatures we imagine on the stairs
are real, and we must give them shapes and names,
feed them with blood and salt, fix them a bed,
make shift, make good, allow them this possession.

Poetry and a Sense of Place

IV Borders

A mile inland, foxes begin.
We see them working the fields
like patient farmers,
hunting for rabbits and voles
behind the ditches,
aware of us — strange, peripheral,
almost unre-

By now we belong
to the sea,
to lights on the firth and the sifting
of water and sand.
Our dreams are all of fish we cannot name,
slivers of ice or metal in the nets,
mackerel shedding their scales and becoming
children, like the creatures who appear
when we sprinkle a handful of salt
on a dying fire,
figments of longing,
ghosts from the shriven past.
A mile inland, the guard-dogs and wintered cattle
know nothing of tides;
people go out at dawn, to taste the earth
that clings to their walls and their houses,
pinning them to transience and loss,
gaps in the kirkyard, the lifelong remoteness of stars.
Out here, it seems
the harbour never changes:
cormorants; gulls; the same boats moored by the wall,
Gemini, Sapphire, Reaper, Lucky Strike.
Nothing's impermanent here, where nothing
is ever untouched by the wind, or the salted rain;
though our dreams can recur for weeks, they will still remain
unknowable, repeated in the dark
as everything's repeated: love; regret;
the lights across the water, drawing in
like friendly animals we might have known
from somewhere else, some childhood we have lost
and turn to one another to renew
with questions, dares, evasions, hunted looks.

V Alchemy

We have to drive the length of Fife to work,
moving from sunlight to frost, from brightness to fog,
each fence post and wind-thrawn tree
familiar as a road-sign
or a steeple.
This is the journey we'll make
all winter,
snow on the roofs, the street trees dusted with salt
like Nativity angels;
the land around us silent as a trap;
roads washed with light, pewits and crows in the fields,
the schoolhouse clock suspended in mid-air,
white-faced, exact,
like something achieved,
then forgotten.
This is the winter we'll learn
again and again,
like alchemy, not turning lead to gold, but finding
ways to persist, to go on for no good reason,
choosing our landmarks, finding the best way home.
Meanwhile, the road is clear: the gardens and hedges
glitter with dew;
yewberries melt and leave their fleshly stains
on cinder paths and flagstones in the park;
and here, in the lane, behind the Catholic church,
a litter of small, gold apples, newly-fallen,
wet with thawglass
after last night's frost
- crab-apples, worthless and bright
in the morning sun,
like something that might have been left behind
to signal a transmutation.
We'll spend a lifetime
finding useless gold,
and learning how to read it as a sign:
the angel we've imagined in our path,
a stain on the daylight, as close as I am to you,
closer by far, and far more dangerous.

VI The house by the sea

The light is angelic and black,
the waves lap the harbour wall
like a form of laughter,
salt-laughter, drawn from the depths,
like the names of fishes.
At night, on the swaying deck, in the singing wind,
the trawlerman will find himself alone,
forgetting his thoughts, aware of the moving dark,
and listening to something he can hear,
he knows must be imagined.

When he turns
to call out to his neighbour, no one's there;
but something he saw through the rain, a face, a wing,
will haunt him for years,
the way it shone like home,
so far at sea.
Yet home belongs at sea: that tang of salt,
that smell of flesh and rain

- what little we know
of houses, we have learned
from sirens: how to walk our new-made lawns,
singing the names of flowers like a spell
to make them true,
cornflower, lily, sea-holly, rhododendron,
roses for scent and colour, yew for its fruits,
tubers and pistils, seed-pods and sacs of nectar.
What little we know of houses, we achieve
against the wind, the motion of the tides,
the pebbles and pockmarked stones we bring indoors
at random, for no good reason, and perhaps
against our wills.
The day is angelic; black; but we have fashioned
circles of grey against the coming light,
and sit at home, pretending to be safe,
aware of the siren calling in the bay,
the voice that only enters through the gaps
we leave in this invention of a life,
but enters still, to part us from ourselves
and one another: creatures from the sea
who know how long before the tide returns.

VII Signs

I want to plant the garden with Forsythia;
 not for its busy flowers, the strident
 yellows fading to clusters
 of watered cream,
 and not for the coarse-haired leaves
 that follow, like a clumsy afterthought;
 it's just that I'd have a sign
 to augur spring,
 to come in from the garden, where I've stood
 hanging the wash, or watching the sky for rain
 and tell you:
 the Forsythia's in bloom.

I want to plant the beds with Chionodoxa,
 Narcissus poeticus, Iris reticulata,
 lacecap hydrangeas, peonies, Meconopsis,
 so nothing will be missed: the smallest change,
 blossom-break, first-fruit, leaf-fall,
 coming snow.

I want to know when every lily blooms,
 to read our garden like a favourite book
 and find you, as you step in from the heat,
 clouded with pollen, scented with grain and sap;
 to know you as the locals know
 the names of fields and long-abandoned wells,
 gossip from way back,
 the best place for sloes, or apples.

I want to step out at night, when you're asleep
 and sit beside the pool, watching the fish:
 stars on the water, the orange carp hanging in pairs
 as if they meant to mirror one another,
 making a game of likeness, matching
 shadow with shadow; the patterns of colour and scale
 echoed in the water as they glide,
 so separate, so bright within their world,
 plugged into one tight current of tension and sound,
 and only a notion of difference by which
 to flicker apart, and tell themselves
 one from another.

VIII Beholding

As morning moves in from the firth
I'm sitting up awake, a mug of tea
fogging the window, the bones of my hands and face
shot with insomnia's delicate, lukewarm needles.
You're still asleep. Your hair is the colour of whey
and your hand on the pillow is clenched, like a baby's fist
on a figment of heat, or whatever you've clutched in a dream,
and I suddenly want to ask
your forgiveness, for something deliberately
cruel in the way I see, in the way
all seeing could become: too hard, too clear,
refusing to find something more than the cool of morning.
It's Halloween; if only because the dead
will come all afternoon to walk the streets
in faded hats and 1950s coats,
or gather by the harbour after dark
watching for lights beyond the lights we know,
their eyes like the eyes of seals, their faces
meltwater blue, as if they had surfaced through ice,
I want to go outside and gather
buckets of rain-washed apples, scabs of leaf,
a handful of broken coal, or a yellowed stump
of spindlewood, to feed the kitchen fire,
then watch, as it dwindles to ash
by late afternoon;
or wander all day in the kirkyard, reading the names
on strangers' graves: their plots laid side by side
with those they loved and hated, those they feared;
friends who betrayed them; children who watched them die.
It's what they meant by coming to this place
and choosing to remain, though decades fastened their hands
to kindling and wire, and the dampness that seeped through the walls
all winter long.
Now, suddenly, you're talking in your sleep,
your face on the pillow like one of those paper masks
we used to make in school, for Halloween,
talking to someone you've dreamed, while your white hands
fasten on something fragile or easily lost,
a strand of hair, a ring, a stranger's arm,
the promise you have to remember, that brings us home.