

Of or pertaining to a raven

My throat's a fist that grips a coarse sandpaper song.
I quoth, forever, *Nevermore!* Am something like a writing desk.
DC Comic vixen in the mix with Lou Reed concept album
(gone preposterously wrong). Pebble-eyed, face grotesque;

black-haired beauties go by my name nonetheless. After rain,
Noah sent me out to take the air, but I took fright mid-flight,
and off I flew. To the Cynic Rabbi, pondering, I brought grain,
he crushed it, on shabbat. *Consider*, he said, between bites,

how they do not reap or sow. (Leviticus 11: to eat me is a sin).
To keep old England safe my blackface caws off all invaders
from the Tower's high white walls - I'm nationalism on the wing.
They called me Hugin, Munin perched on Odin's shoulders,

I was John Peel's real name. I perched on Cnut's soggy throne
and watched the waves wash flightless feet. One cry
from me, the gulls all scattered into sky. In Bhutan,
I'm God Mahakala and long before he rode on fire and sky

I fed Elijah meat and bread. I'm trickster and creator god of Haida.
300lbs of heavy tattooed wrestler. Battle standards bore my face
at Stamford Bridge when, at an arrow's point, history was made,
Harold Hardrada fell. In Kamchatka, they know my place:-

Divine Kutkh. Wings that splay with claws that flay; my hook
of beak will tear your flesh. Carrion king: eat eyes out of your head.
I watch your meagre slice of time with blinking, sideways look –
make history with a flap of wing. Outlast all. I peck and time runs red.

The Isles of Dogs

A small brown bag, three unsmoked Camels,
a pocketful of change and moments to spend,
a man arrives at a scattered Southbank bookstall.
An unpromising haul: a creased Penguin, whose loose
pages take flight from chapter twelve, something quarter bound
in French, a satchel-scented Latin primer and another relic:

The Golden Book Picture Atlas, volume four.

Some pages still bathed in the sunset tones of a pink gin,
on others, borders stiffly rise in iron. He flits from holy lands,
past that holiday in Goa, to Granddad's Suez tales.
Then the scattered headline names of this young century,
freshly slid from the cracked shell of Mesopotamia.

Jewelled Baghdad is snaked through by the swift Tigris
in a shape so like our own. A young city,
rising in the west, spreading to a slack-looped noose,
like the Isle of Dogs, as if the Thames had flowed off course;
our cities a double exposure,
Pangaeon fragments, lost continents, that waited

for our seismic age to lock horns and rut;
some bloody paper chain of names and stories
turned back upon themselves. A quiet kiss
alights upon his craned neck, tells him time is up.
The bag takes the book and a hand takes a hand,
two figures wander downstream, to the distracted bend –

past three girls thrilling with terror up the shingle,
frothing in a boat's small wake; past a halted, roofless
double-decker; past a diffident, helmeted man who looks
through last week at loss; past a roadblock; past a quiet shoe
drifting to shore; past a solitary, deep pocketed smoker.
Two waterways, strung like irregular heartbeats

across the tight chests of two cities, roar in the coming dusk.

Stone House Asylum, 1932

He trod, in a way we who were sane could not emulate, the lanes and fields he knew and loved so well, his guide being his finger tracing the way on the map... he had Edward as his companion in this strange perambulation and he was utterly happy... Helen Thomas

Private Gurney, no. 3895, at ease.

Unnoticed, unnoticed by the grinning choir who shriek
and shit, idle through the hours, slack-limbed with slacker minds,
that crack and melt the days. His spare frame,
framed at the window, almost inhabits
the great wit near to madness. Until this bawdy band
strikes up: no romance here. Yet still, some days rise clear
as the bright air above the sweet silt at Framilode
until, like crows at dawn in the scant yard,
terrors arrive upon the hour, whistling down the unseen wires,
with fresh news from the front as clouds roll in.
His green eyes scan the grey imagined skyline for the sniper
who knocked Lieutenant Thomas to the mud.
Round eyes, eager as foxes beneath bold brows,
tap out a morse code in memoriam.
The widow comes, strong, sight failing,
heart and arms wide-full despite the years.
Quietly, she unfolds Edward's packages of summer days
creased along the yellow spines of an old map.
She spreads their youth upon the iron bed
as if, beneath the ordinance of loss, all three can walk together:
cross the byways of their grief, unbrick the walls,
trade back a life, a mind, a love,
and journey to remembered streams.
Geese sound above their heads, veiling the skies
from unheard mortar fire. Bearded barley grows
from the cracked floors of the cell and catches the wind
in a rush of mirth. From Abbleimont and Arras to
Brimscombe, Maisemere, Leaden Banks, beneath fingertips,
inches become acres as the years unwind;
they bound up hillsides, tripping
and whooping down river banks,
under lark song, in the evening's thin bright triumph.

The size of Wales

Half the Red
Sea / 381 Lochs
Ness / Mare Undarum
/ New York / New Jersey / Rhode Island /
291 million football pitches / 39 million fewer
rugby pitches / one hundred and thirty nine Halley's Comets / fifteen
days' circulation of *The Times of India* in a great paper mosaic /
The Falklands and Las Ilas Malvinas / the Amazon
we lost this year / the Haitian quake's trembling
reach / 63 Argentinean lagoons / every inch of
Malawi with little to spare / enough solar panels
to light Western Europe / next year's expansion of
the Sahara Desert / a fifth of Canadian boreal forest
/ the asteroid that did in the dinosaurs / the teeming
Galápagos islands, twice / less than a sixth of England /
166 million Olympic swimming pools / enough coal for 300
years, and never the will to return to the mines / cloth to make the
proud red banners of twenty generations / a great lake of language,
each spoken word that's lost the ears that understand it / India's largest
mangrove swamp / the top half of Botswana / Helmand Province / the lower
half of Botswana / every human ever born / fy ngwlad, Cymru / two
thirds of Belgium / 20,779km² / the seepage from Exxon Valdez / 8,023 square
miles / every pot hole in the western world / the unpublished
novels all needing a break / the things I used to
know / a fresh iceberg shrinking as it sails towards
the southern warmth and none of it sandstone,
limestone, Cambrian gritstone or
deep black peat

Marmalade

Suddenly, between the winter's cold out-breath
and the first warm squall of spring,
my kitchen, on a cold day, is filled with oranges.

The teeming hob's a lighthouse,
sweetly beaming a bitterness to warm
the wintry air. A scent to keep us

from the dusk's faint rocks in the shortened
days. Fruits hop and dance in white water.
We unpeel darkness, shrunken

in our hands. We spit the bitter pips
like crumbled teeth in dreams, knocked out
in the violent embrace of muscle and wings.

We meet the winter face-to-face and live
marking out the days. We have overwintered
our everyday losses, set stones to mark our quiet

disappointments. We pin tomorrows
on the great ships, seasick and hopeful.
We uncrate tiny suns, pitted with promise

and brushed with salt by the waves.
Treasured by hardened hands, dispatched
towards the cold like postcards from the south
and the heat we are tilting ever closer towards.

Sherlock

I traced the cadence of your streets
darting down Threadneedle, Leadenhall
and Fenchurch from a provincial postcard boyhood
by the sea. I traced the crooked back
of your bright river on the grid-creased
yellow street map fogged beneath young hands
to a sepia before bombs, brash blocks and aspiration
drew up a skyline from your gas-lit smog.

The names remain: Aldgate, Bow Street, Endell,
Wigmore and Wimpole; ambered in the mouth,
and chanted to the unchurched litany
of a brisk steam train, like Rotherhithe
and Baker Street and Rotherhithe again.

The stoic city grew from your pages
into the cold concrete of my indifferent home,
blind to my arrival and the passing of your ghost.
I turn a corner, scatter in an urgent shimmer
of pigeon-flurry, east end boys you knew,
or twice turn left on the heaving
scarlet decks of the 432, through terraces
of some late adventure.

I push past your familiar St. Paul's –
towering to another loved, lost fiction –
seeking out a clue from each prismatic day,
trailing through the gap-toothed streets
of the bursting and unanswering city.
But there's no longer any trail
to follow that can conjure a cause
to anchor these uncertain days,
beneath the silent chill of the rolling,
grey-blue dome of empty sky.

Unwound

They counted her minutes down;
her neck flickered light in her throat
to the beat of a clock. He sat, nursing his distress,
waiting, spinning out her tight-wound tale,
against a final word already fully formed.
She lost time, their frail childhoods dandling
in her spindling arms, then he watched that window fade,
starless against hope as the evening purpled out.

In the garden, cleaned sheets fly forgetful of her shape,
unrolled and dancing their surrender as snowdrops
break open freckled hearts. The room
quietly empties itself of her smell as the awkward clock
grows useful and rewind: forget with the hours,
forget with the minutes, remember the seconds, forget.

When you arrive

the years that have passed
pile in all over our faces. We smile
through the shrill air and
these crumpled versions of ourselves.

Somehow, we are smaller;
tumbled out of mind
and into flesh, blurring our neat
remembrances. Fragments

of those years have turned
through my head, like an ice cube
in the mouth, caught between presence
and escape, slipping and adhering

with a quiet thrilling pain.
Your speculating postcard watched
over my desk for a month.
And so we meet to do

nothing in particular. We escape
to a gallery, dodging the hovering
questions, talk easily, of nothing at all.
Your train is due and I collect our winter

coats from the cloakroom where the attendant
has slipped the slender arms of yours
into mine. Like the years, we carry this
still-life out onto the street

and uncouple them, awkwardly. Our touch
is brief as we empty our goodbyes
and button up against the chill before
we turn away onto the street's fresh page

white in the new year's sun.

Swallowed

The first was a chip of stone like a shrew's front tooth
in the bowl of his hand. Tongue-tip, chink past teeth,
disappeared. He licked
at small flint pieces, tasting coolly of sweat: more flesh than earth.

Next was a round brown pebble, an unboiled, unsweet sweet lodged
in the arch of his mouth.

Swallow.

He coughed, felt it shift – a stately jewel slid down his gullet. He raced another, gulped
twice, listened for the clink.

The day clocked on, busied with the empty things of days.
Woke to the humming night: the heating pipes; her breathing and the hallway light.

Raised two fingers as in blessing,
brailled his body for their trace, counting through the schoolroom words: oesophagus and
pharynx, lumbar, spleen.

They seemed lonely turning through his tissue folds.
He stumbled to a plant-pot, glass in hand, prescribed a regimen of grit. Lay back, smiling as
the bile rose up his throat. Slept right through.

He stooped three times between the bus and work, then nodded through the
sliding doors with pockets like a Colditz escapee. *Will you
excuse me?*

he enquired through the day, found secret spots.
Soon, he'd dispensed with water, swallowed fists of stones quite straight.

He waddles, with pockets weighted like a bridge-jump suicide. Hears, inside,
the ring of rubble when he stands: a walking cairn
marking a path he neither sees nor understands.

His heart grows geologically slow. Become tectonic, the clock unravels through his loosened
days. *Upon this rock.* The earth inherits him.

Air comes and goes. *There is no absence at the core of me.* His mouth
cracks open and, with each rough meal, he grows.

The Abbat

Abbat (æ·bət), *n.* [- OE. *abbod* – eccl.L. *abbas*.] **1.** He who or that which abates; beats down, destroys. **2.** Spiritual overseer of the slaughter of animals; see ABATTOIR

A small man in white, he drinks the early silence
and the clean smell of absence, as a prayer.

Later, he stirrups her, one foot first in chains,
gravity easing her sway through the strange angles

of this afterwards, the darkness falling to the swaying
censer of her head. Under her hide, long-dead

flies land again upon the ghost of skin; tiny charges fleck
her hulk. Under his hand her warmth is flesh again,

he's flushed and twitched away the noisy fear
with which she cracked his bright, clean day.

He's grown accustomed to the snapping fat and skin;
unseamed then pulled away, a conjurer's tablecloth:

what's left's a tremor and a glistening anticlimax.
He has already felt the quiet crunch of skull,

the capture-bolt, the cradling crush, the too small
sound, the recoil of a life into his shoulder. Each

time he hears again the childhood jangle of the altar
bell, ticks off the time from crush to carcass

to the count of beads: three decades and one *Glory Be*
will see the job get done. He stands alone at close of day,

quietness restored. Before he switches off the light,
he yawns a mute O of expectant tongue and tastes the fug

of flesh and blood, swung sweetly through the solemn
air. Lights out. He tells himself it's really bread and wine.

The Letters to God department

[In] the Letters to God department of the Israeli postal service... each year more than 1,000 letters are received and once every few months [they are] opened, folded and... squeezed into the cracks of the Western Wall.

The Guardian, December 2009

After twelve years on sector 14B of
East Jerusalem – four bags, a bike, a morning
start at 5 a.m. – this could be worse. In fact,
we're Mal-ach of a sort. Angels. Messengers
at least. The undivine employees of the state,
Jehovah's bureaucrats, paunched overalls

worn tugged across the absent space
for wings. The only angels that this time,
this place, this afterthought of history,
this former holy land throws up. We're
Noah's ravens, hopeless causes – that old
bird could do this job. God knows they need

a way to get some message through, to get
their intercessions checked and stamped beyond
this roadblocked barricade of disbelief.

We wearied years ago of wrestling
strangers through the night and dislocating
hips. We're out of the businesses of scriptural

dictation, flaming chariots, annunciations,
endless cosmic escalation. We gather up these
letters. Don't reply, of course. Just do
our job. Open. Fold them up, almost
unread. Readied, like the hands that wrote them,
for indifference, desiccation. On the bus home;

queuing; in the bath, the phrases glimpsed each
day reel through my mind: *from the depths I called
to you, O Lord... Help me pass this time and
I'll be good... Just take this cup away
from me... Please bless this house... In the name of the
Most Merciful... Dear God, I've always wondered why...*

Insomnia

I lie here, again, counting over and over
my ten toes at sea in the shipwreck of night,
caught between the horizon of quilt

and the black bedstead sky. At the passing
of trains there's a hum in my sternum,
as brittle as sound and the clenching,

unclenching, the thick fist of gristle that's slung
between ribcage and back, like the quiver of frog
at the touch-tip of Galvani's probe.

In thrall to the clock's second hand, drums
my heart as it rows through the waves
of the night and gaspingly lolls like a fish

that's marooned in a boat's wooden belly.
I tap out the tales I've been told of its ticking:
this is where love lives, and dreams now

receding reside. Each old bedtime story
urges us *listen to whispering truth*
in our hearts. I lie here unknitting each limb,

bone and organ, each gible, each gurgle,
the thudding red timepiece, the strange trick
of ears rushed with blood full of ticking

to listen to darkness and spaces between –
and the fish slips the hook, and the line of night
slackens, and something slips out of my nets:

*that the bed I lie and fret and love in
the lines of rhythm learned by heart
the granite hills, the sun we tilt towards
and every synapse, loin and hand that ever was
were once condensed into a coin of nothing
an ovum forged of absence still expanding
into places eyes will never see.*

But still some tiny corner of that endless
unbegotten nothing shuddered into wakefulness
and one brief fragment of that fluke

now lies awake and counts the pulses
of a subdivision of himself: myself soaked through
by night, my hand upon my heart. Without this

glimpse, like a bright white snowdrift
slumped to grey beneath the glare of sunlight –
I am just hydraulics, built-in obsolescence,

and the mind cast forward to the limits
of all reason, dredging the horizon and those
lapping waters cold and black beyond my sight.

It was the trees

It was the trees, lifting their tangled heads above the sea-swell,
heaving the trunks proud again, above the waves, unwinding their roots,
bending, again, towards the light, who told us it was so. The land
slipped beneath the sea, quietly, without warning. We woke
to trace the shifted outline of our lives, slid
unseen into a shadow shape we knew we didn't know. Grown
over us, under us, the wave pins light to the shore, lets it fall
way back to where we once walked. Something drives us
inland, in retreat from ourselves, suddenly new waves - no
more than the mountains that cracked in the sun. We leave homes behind
and all we have known until now. Today, it changed. And we changed, too.

And all we have known until now, today, it changed - and we changed, too;
more than the mountains that cracked in the sun. We leave homes behind,
inland, in retreat from ourselves. Suddenly new waves - no
way back to where we once walked - something drives us
over us, under us, the wave pins light to the shore, lets it fall
unseen into a shadow shape we knew we didn't know, grown
to trace the shifted outline of our lives, slid,
slipped beneath the sea. Quietly, without warning, we woke
bending, again, towards the light. Who told us it was so? The land
heaving the trunks proud again, above the waves, unwinding their roots:
it was the trees, lifting their tangled heads above the sea-swell.

Midden burial

The dying call out with the sea's own voice -
the throat's raven-rattle, a wriggling sea-spray speech.
When the mouth is filled with ocean and light,
blackness follows; like the sea, they are already gone.

In the raven-rattle like a throat, the sea-spray speaks:
shingledrag rings out bells of barnacle and bladderwrack,
already gone, we follow, searching the sea's sound
between the pummel of crashwave and the shrinking shore.

Shingledrag wrung out of barnacle and bladderwrack,
we couch the dead within the carapace of sea -
between the pummel of crashwave and the shrinking shore
we build our fists of shell to beat the surface of the sea.

We couch the dead in the ocean's tear-stained carapace:
Cover us, cover us, cover us, sings the echo of the dead
so we build fists of shell to beat the drum of sea,
watching the water's fingers slip around their own.

Cover us, cover us, cover us, sings the land to the sea:
on it comes, takes generations, dry earth, hills of shell.
The grappling sea reaches, takes us for her own
as year by year we're threaded like jewels into the seabed

taking generations, more earth, more hills of shell
and our mouths are filled with ocean and light,
year by year threaded like jewels into the seabed
and the sea calls out with the voice of the dead.

Succour

We've been doin' this shit longer than you been suckin' air...

Bodie, *The Wire*

• your left thumb, in the purple shadowland before birth • the first razor-wire breath of February air • at 3.27 a.m., a cracked nipple and mute disappointment • a sky-blue dummy • a Farley's rusk • action man's left arm, the collateral damage of the playroom • Barbie's hair, matted with raspberry jam • a woodlouse, in the spirit of scientific experiment • a grape and a cherry, held like a wide smile in each cheek, sitting squattly in the garden • thumb again, the cosmic loneliness of the playground's north-eastern corner • the lick-up spoon of Emmy's first birthday cake, a proper chef • the flannel at bathtime, tasting wetly of a late June day • 17 marshmallows and a ripple of giggles • the back of your hand, under the duvet's magic carpet, training for a hopeful tomorrow • the burning rim of a Tesco Value vodka bottle, laying between the fizzing thrill of rhododendron blooms in Albert Park in the dank dark of August • her finger, brim-full of excitement and absurdity • the brussel sprout rush of a blue Ventolin puffer • a badly rolled rizzla of Golden Virginia and cheap black hash • a fisherman's friend that tastes like fear, in the waiting room • a swelled bottom lip, wheeling a bicycle, its front wheel disconsolately bent • the sickly blue smoke of a red Lucky Strike, the last last fag, in time for your forties • an unexpected name, secretly under your tongue all day long • a gin-scented ice-cube from her abandoned glass, clearing the table to the soundtrack of *Sailing By* • a pen lid • a matchstick • a tooth • a tube • a coin • the slow yield of earth

Veronika

As they watched their chief suspect, a middle aged Mercedes Benz employee in Suarez, Argentina, the Mossad agents knew they had identified Adolf Eichmann when they observed him return home carrying a bunch of flowers on his 25th wedding anniversary.

German cars, his first job that I really knew;
this reliable man made reliable cars,
among the disappointments of the peace.

Our puny lives whimpered beneath the heat,
an ordinary love contracted years
before in mountain air. We sought out mountains,

breathed again the thin air of the fallow years.

Liebl was my name before my love.

I took his name, could *kinder, küche, kirche*

with the best of them; I wore his mark.

Yet when they came for him he signed his name
Ricardo Klement as if mercy could

be snivelled out upon a chequebook stub.

I held on tight, his flowers drying on a
windowsill and raised my children *Eichmann*,

kept that name through decades under ash.

My war waltzed by at the heel of a handsome man
who wept at Schubert lieder, kissed me daily,

harboured silence in his pinprick eyes
and opened them with something like relief
when Berlin fell. And after war, his love

for me would wither like the weaker twin.

He kept a faithful imitation of
his vows, brought flowers, turned out plaster casts

from Eichmann's slackened skin, each smaller renamed
man more scared, more bald and blurred behind
his thick horn rims. He flickered on the screen:

and shrank into the bureaucrat they hanged,
ghosted into Pathé grey. My Eichmann
curled his roman nose, straight back, keen eye,

broad shoulders filled with faith in Fatherland.
Shrunken in his Yiddish dock at last became
his alias, outlived the shine of brass.

I dream of garden walls with high remorseful
gates that shut me in. The darkness sings
of bones, of whispers woven between petals,

probing broken stamen through the empty
nights that howl, *We grew from ash, our blooms
were fed on flame. Grow old, grow ordinary, grow out*

of sight. I empty out the cold grate of
each day, observe the simple rituals of age,
wish by each fretful year unmarked in hope

the dark can shake the taste of him, the half
remembered, hard-forgotten smell of smoke
that lingered in his clothes, of tears, of flesh.

If you see her, say hello

after Bob Dylan

Those familiar minor sevenths unspool
from the wheels of the cracked tape
that motors this small car, wrapping
round the cogs of this long year.

Your voice breaks over this crease of hill
and in this evening a rusted cut throat
pares a slice of improbable sky.
She is not in Tangiers and I've no rhyme

to match up, like washed socks. So I nod
hello, to the scatter of birds, like black
crayon kisses blown across a scrawl of sky.
And here, with Ribblesdale spread

below me like the footprint of Minnesota,
you offer me the kingdoms of the world.

Afterword
for Peter Chappell

Dotting the *I* and crossing the *T*: *INNOCENT* –
dangling by your feet from a bridge, an instant
acrobat, the peaks and troughs of your anger nest

in your regular *Ns*, an earth in each *O*, tainted
by that ache for an end that brings the onset
of another world, begun by daubing your insistent

haiku across the yawning bridges. Each succinct
OK marks out another battle site and sets
an east end army marching on their better instinct.

With the ghosts of Cable Street, you thumb your nose at
blackshirts. Beneath your brush, policemen are sent
scuttling, judges retreat from your conviction. The long ascent,

the quiet loss of living after *George Davis Is In Again...*
Your dream in tall white letters, their defiant present tense.