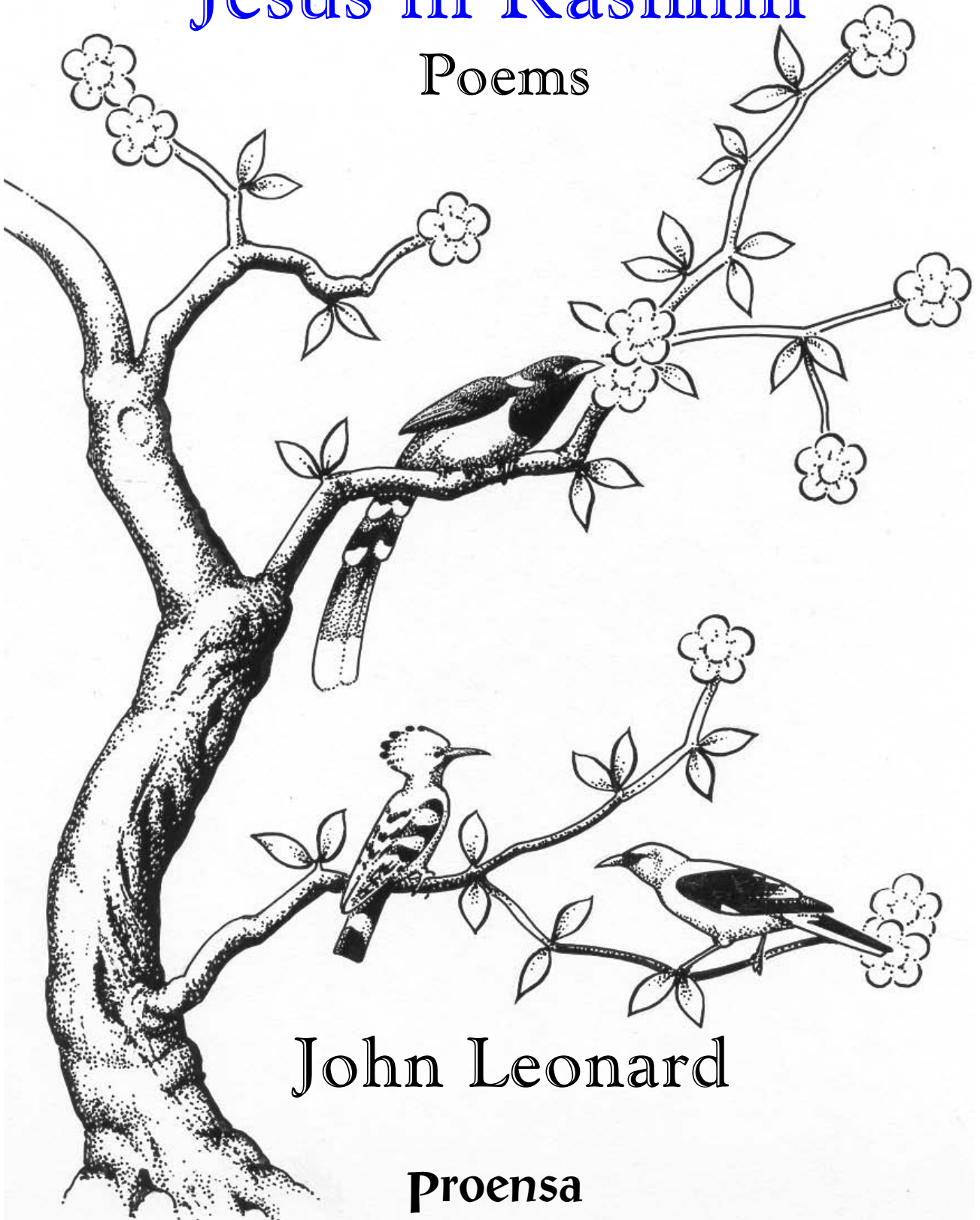


# Jesus in Kashmir

Poems



John Leonard

Proensa



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‘Y el éste y el aquél.’  
César Vallejo (*Trilce* LVII).

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## **'The everyday April weather'**

### **MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD**

I remember that there was no war,  
Yet there were wars somewhere—  
People talked about them all the time.

I remember that there was no strife,  
And yet there was strife  
For people were full of apprehension.

I remember there were no factories,  
But there were factories elsewhere—  
They built the life that we lived.

I remember that there was comfort,  
Yet there was no prosperity—  
People worried at the prospects.

I remember that there was nothing natural,  
Yet there were memories of natural things,  
And books were full of 'woods' and 'meadows'.

I remember that there was happiness,  
And yet there was no happiness  
For there was an emptiness of heart.

I remember that there were questions,  
Yet they could never be answered  
And those who raised them were reviled.

And I remember that there was no childhood,  
Because there never truly was a time  
Before this scrim, these absences.

And I remember that there was no end  
To this experience without experience;  
The life I lived then I live now.

## **DREFT**

If you're cut off from the seasons,  
Cut off from the weather's vagaries,  
Cut off from greenery and wild spots,  
Then you long—bereft.

If you're cut off from the seasons,  
Cut off from the weather's vagaries,  
Cut off from greenery and wild spots,  
Then you wander—adrift.

If jealous scrutiny deprives you thus,  
Of if ignorance, or zealous folly,  
Steals away these things from you,  
Then you are nothing—dreft.

## **YOU MIGHT THINK**

You might think you do—  
Looking over roof-tops at smoky dusk,  
Poking the fire and reading a book,  
But you don't have much time.

You might think you do—  
Driving towards the mountains, the road  
Empty, the heart as full as may be,  
But you don't have much time.

Time's impatience, the cusp of the hour,  
The moment's moment... and savage madness,  
Seeking to protect itself, but leaving  
Behind only blood and ashes.  
You might think you do,  
But you don't have much time.



As a young child, winter nights  
Were very terrible for me, wind  
Whistling in the chimney, buffeting  
The windows. Occasionally I would  
Swallow my fear and creep outside,  
Shivering in the wind, and look up  
At the northern stars, so far away,  
So cold, and so utterly without heart.

Now whenever I hear of cruelty,  
Great wrong, great cruelty, the kind  
That cries out to Heaven, I think  
Of the icy wind, and the cold stars.

## **NECESSITIES**

There are necessary stories,  
But you won't find them in books;  
They are never published,  
Must be found when- and wherever.

There are necessary people,  
But you won't find them easily;  
They are very few,  
To the destruction of hang-nails.

There are necessary things even,  
But you won't find them in the shops;  
They are rarely made,  
And we, rich, subsist poorly.

There are necessary words,  
But you won't find them pleasing;  
Stark and jangling,  
They frighten before they heal.

## A LESSON IN INFAMY

A scholar of the Earlier Han picked up  
His brush to write his History of the previous  
Illustrious Reign. Steadily he wrote until  
He came to the rebellion in the eighth year.  
His brush trembled with indignation—  
Hadn't the General, Wang Shih, been raised  
At the Imperial Court, almost as a son  
Of the Son of Heaven? How unfilial *and*  
unnatural  
His revolt!

He wavered, to name the rebel  
Or not? To damn him to namelessness, or  
To leave his name to live shamefully  
As a lesson in infamy for posterity?

He gulped, and wrote the deadly name.

A scholar of the Southern Sung picked up  
His brush to write his account, his History  
Of the Earlier Han. (He had inherited  
From an Uncle a stack of ancient annals:  
Bamboo strips falling apart, the strings rotten,  
Sections missing, beginnings, endings  
All confounded). He wrote of a certain  
Illustrious Reign: 'The name of a rebel  
Against the Son of Heaven, and against  
The Will of Heaven, Wang Shih, has been  
Preserved for us, as a lesson in infamy...'

Here he remembered broken strings,  
And a missing colophon.

'By a certain  
Unknown scholar of the greatest wisdom.'

## **THE LAST PHILOSOPHER**

The last philosopher rises  
Every morning at seven o'clock  
To shave and don, for the day,  
His stock-in-trade. Then off  
To his labours, their only leavening,  
Coffee-shop wit and badinage.

He is troubled constantly, both  
At his desk and in company,  
By the spectre, just in the corner  
Of his eye, of a clean-cut,  
Young man, disciple-like,  
Hanging on his every word.

He notes with great detachment  
That this apparition, for all its youth,  
Is grey-haired too, and glances,  
From time to time, back over  
Its left shoulder, as though in fear  
Of the noisy, yet unborn, dead.

## **A DANGER**

There is a danger that if  
You wait too long, for this  
Or that to happen, for  
Happiness to supervene,  
You may come to a moment  
When you realise that this  
Or that has already happened—  
That where you wanted to be  
You were, but time has moved on.

## **BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL**

People live muddily in valleys  
With little care for good or evil,  
Beyond the usual name-calling.  
Evil is what fails to provide  
For its own good continuance—  
Good is what does provide.

And from the high hills raptor eyes  
May see much, with disapproval,  
But fail to note the flammulated vagaries  
Of the muddy life they look beyond.

## **THE ONE LOOK**

The one look, shared between two—  
Not a look of recognition,  
For what was, was always known;  
Not a look of desire, of want,  
For there was nothing to desire;  
But one which took in everything  
That had always been, and was,  
And what would always be.

## **SIGNS FROM EVENTS**

Which is the art that tells  
    Signs from events?  
The climate spells it—  
All the moment's weight—  
    A fine insouciance.

If such passes current,  
    Then every happening  
Runs eitherwise. Nothing  
May prevail, for, of a truth,  
    Everything points that way.

## **GIVEN LOVE**

Given love, and given that this love  
Is not just a moment's thoughtlessness,  
Or a lifetime's whim, but is love,  
Beyond all question—

Given love, what does this love  
Entail? What stories surround it?  
What bearings are there? What  
Shall we say speaks?

Given love, we might say love  
Entails what this love implies—  
Any extravagant tale or none—  
The certainty is love.

## **JIGSAWS**

If, when we break each other  
Apart, carefully, lovingly,  
Into countless, intricate pieces  
And range them, in wonder  
At their shapes and colours,  
Out on the grass, midday jewels—

And then, laughing in the face  
Of any danger, slowly gather them  
And piece them back together,  
Is there not a risk that some  
May be lost, others misplaced,  
In our construction, each of the other?

## **LOVE GONE BAD**

You see them everywhere,  
Gaunt, anguished,  
Clutching hands harshly.

Theirs is love gone bad:  
Love, innocent as ever,  
Run into everyday trouble.

Think of it: housekeeping,  
Fights, budgeting,  
The modes of the time.

How they have fought,  
And how made up—  
Fighting and suffering so.

How each has suffered,  
And suffered for the other—  
But mostly for themselves.

And both love too much  
To part, both love so well,  
But never enough to part.

## **WHAT IS CALLED LOVE**

At the time it had not seemed anything—  
Certainly not a life. She had lived  
From day to day, getting nowhere;  
It seemed that she had not enjoyed  
Anything, that she had given scantily,  
Given peevishly, given often of resentment,  
Not of the love she wanted to give.

And yet, as the years passed slowly by,  
It came to be seen that at a time  
When few stayed, few cared,  
Few gave anything, she had stayed,  
She had given. Others looked to her;  
They saw that what is called love  
Is just this, the gift of staying.

Some fall silent of their own accord,  
Having said what they had to say;

They, perhaps, are the happiest of people.  
But others have been silenced, unwillingly:

Some have been silenced by genuine fear,  
Or self-doubt, or self-hate, or perceived contempt;

Some have been silenced by undeserved neglect,  
Or unwarranted success, or riches, or poverty;

But many have been silenced by violent love,  
Few have escaped those exactions.

## **THE CRISIS**

At the moment of crisis—  
Figurative armies hanging  
On her word, 'yes' or 'no',  
Ready for mighty, bloody strife  
Whichever syllable is uttered—

She turns her eyes to the blue  
Yonder; the crisis was not of her  
Making, why should she choose?  
She resolves to try what effect  
Her considered silence would have.



They are wrong who say there is  
A lack in love. Love is a perfect circle  
In which desire, confidence and content  
Meet, and are joined, the one  
Following the other in timeless  
Concinnity. If this unforced round  
Is broken, or if one or other quality  
Is missing from it, then there is  
Something else; then there is lack,  
But then there is no love.

## **GIFT-GIVING**

The trick of gift-giving seemed  
A bounden thing, a stranger to any  
Close exaction at either's hand.  
But where it proved most free,  
There, it taxed harder than anything  
Not given so cruelly *gratis*.

The imposture, these lover's airs,  
Add to them the proud-mute  
Pity shown my ignorance—  
Surely this was a bargain  
Like all the rest, one-sided,  
Unthinking, to the loser's gain.

Now that my hands are emptied  
And your countering of no force,  
Is either's interest set at one?  
And can we meet at last  
In pure emptiness of heart—  
Suddenly all else thrown by?

## WANTING

Not until I can quite  
Forget you, can I  
Want you wholly.

Then this you, not you,  
Becomes a seamless want,  
Fills my days with dread.

Let me forget my want,  
And remember you in part,  
The part for less than all.

From this forgetfulness,  
Scant of all duty,  
Flows an unwonted love.

## IMPOSSIBLE LOVERS

These impossible lovers—once  
Married with each other's hate,  
Now wedded to respective lovers  
In each other's spite.

Although their licit nights  
Are now spent unfaithfully,  
Such is their pride, their need  
Each to fling faithlessness  
In the other's teeth, they  
Are drawn together, in trysts  
Of doubled danger, all  
In honest jealousy.

## **IN CONFUSION**

If, confused at heart,  
Puzzlement figured  
In your eyes,  
You can mingle  
Kisses, less than  
Knowingly, then  
Sweet mayhap.

As if, brushing  
Never so hard,  
You could tug  
Chance away—  
As if, so moved  
In trust, you could  
Scant your watch.

In confusion then,  
Love less than all:  
Chance scatters  
From your hair—  
What we know,  
In your eyes,  
The best of doubt.

## DOUBLE VISION

Is there no way  
But these two  
Of sizing the place?

The one, a grey being  
In a grey place,  
And nothing of itself.

The other, the very  
Pith of misery,  
The *émigré's* lament.

Is there never  
A whole view  
And well-stomached?

With sun and ethos,  
Rain and *Zeitgeist*,  
Happily divorced?

And if there were,  
Could it be  
Spoken plain?

—Not of us, nor yet  
Not all of our  
Self-construction?

Where's the gratitude?  
Instead, doubly  
Housed, double-tongued,

Of hap, of neither,  
Never thus to live,  
Is fulsome hope.

It pulls itself off the floor, bloodied,  
Game for another round, always game,  
Never defeated, always strong in its  
Only strength—pure, brute resilience.

Regardless of countervailing truths,  
Antaeus-like, it recoups defeat—  
Never admitting anything, holding  
Constantly to the same few imperatives:  
Encounter, react, in the end prevail.

## **THESE**

These...whatever, take your pick,  
Why should these be different,  
Any different, from those,  
Or them, yon or yonder?

And yet there is a difference;  
Look close, the resemblance  
Is there, but the purpose,  
The identity, is not.

They lack the natural, just-so  
Excuse; they are just what  
You'd expect, but for the times,  
Not for all time.

Here's the dilemma: these,  
These insistent, at-hand things  
Call their sameness loudly,  
With the shrillest tongue;

You deny them their title,  
Call them impostors, frauds,  
And are accused of blindness  
By the self-righteously blind.

## **SO MUCH**

So much, then, for these things;  
It is not that they lack weight—  
Pain, heaviness of heart tell that—  
But so much, thus far,  
And no further, with them.

So much, then, for these things;  
It is not that they lack importance—  
They appeared so once, and still do—  
But so much, and now  
No further, with them.

So much, then, for these things—  
These attachments that seem so great,  
That they're not of us, but ourselves—  
But now no further with them,  
We are more than them.

## **THE DUMB STONE**

The Stone was discovered by the highway  
Where it had lain in full view  
For many years. Those who discovered it  
Were struck by how perfectly it seemed  
To embody everything a stone should.

Soon many others came to view it—  
Never was stone so honoured—there  
Were festivals, dances, libations were poured,  
Offerings made; odes were declaimed  
To its perfect stoniness, its stony silence.

Then, one day in autumn, the Stone spoke:  
It thanked the people for their offerings,  
It spoke of sedimentation, heat, pressure,  
Of age-long buckling beneath the earth,  
Of its minerals, its fissures, its flaws.

The people were indignant, they had no time  
For a *talking* stone. Quickly their mood  
Turned ugly, and the Stone was broken up  
For metalling. Even the most philosophic  
Could not pity the Stone its loose tongue.

## **YOU MIGHT**

You might stick feathers in your cap  
And go whistling down the street.

You might find an interest in old plants,  
Stock your garden and delight in it.

You might grow surly and refuse  
All requests, except from grandchildren.

You might gather your friends about  
And give an almighty 'boo' to anyone else.

You might learn to love ancient wisdom—  
The more crabbed and dustier the better.

One day you might go off,  
Leave no address, and never return.

Whatever you might, you might  
Do better thus than attend to the times.

## **THE CORNER**

When terror strikes through you  
The stomach thrills to it, tongue  
And teeth ache, the vision narrows  
And you see as through a white haze.

Yet there is a corner of your mind  
Which is always and already beyond  
Your terror, where, in a sunny meadow,  
You sit, laughing and shaking out your hair.

How small the terror, when once  
You turn to the corner, climb in  
And watch yourself as another  
Caught in the toils you have spurned.

## **THE PROGRESS OF A CONSCIENCE**

All too much for one to carry;  
With two a conscience shared  
Is a conscience halved.

Lost in a crowd of three;  
At committee-level it struggles  
To make itself heard.

In the public eye it turns,  
Is twisted, takes on every shape  
There is but the original.



## **IN THE CASE OF A BUCKING TABLE**

In the case of a bucking table  
Go to work with a saw;  
Or perhaps think about looking  
For a house with a crooked floor.

## **PLACES**

There are places where things  
Happened to tear me apart,  
Like a plastic bag caught  
On a thorny tree.

But if you made a visit there  
Perhaps you would not know;  
Perhaps in those very spots  
The greatest of happiness  
Happened to you.

Everywhere is someone's purgatory,  
Someone's Elysium; places  
Have acquired a considerate  
Habit of double-facedness—  
One aspect severe, the other  
Altogether beatific,

And the sensitive soul gets  
Beyond the jump at cold steel,  
The view into the depths, beyond  
The vision splendid, and rests  
Content with janiformity—  
The everyday April weather,  
Sunshine with showers.

## CERTAIN WORDS

Talking politics, talking relationships,  
Talking whatever you like,  
There are certain pointed words  
That cannot be uttered.

Whether reticence springs  
From civility or prudence,  
It is right, these are words  
Which are no words, none.

If uttered, it is as though  
They have never been—  
Discourse is the same,  
The morning kiss as cold.

And yet, if uttered they do  
Make a difference, for an instant  
Time stops, starts wearily again  
As though it should not.

And everything is as always,  
With difference shot through:  
Pain like an aching tooth,  
Pride that sings with the birds.

## **NOT IDEAS, BUT CONNECTIONS**

Not ideas, but connections—  
For ideas are ten a penny,  
Anyone can think of six  
Of them, before breakfast, any day;  
Everyone has them, the foolish most.

Ideas look different in different  
Lights: the cold, conservative stare,  
The fuzzy, liberal glow,  
And antinomies need five-year olds,  
Not Kant, to point their necessity.

Not ideas, but connections—  
Twenty several ideas are fine,  
Anyone can read and assent  
To each neatly-rounded epigram;  
The difficulty is what surrounds.

We value the thinker's jewels,  
The pinchbeck they're set in  
Is deplored; but we commonly set,  
For admiration, yesterday's gems  
In today's base metal.

Not ideas, but connections—  
For an idea, conceived in love,  
Born in concern, matures  
Into cruelty, and serves to excuse  
Every kind of crime.

We need connections to show  
How to arrange our instincts,  
On what grounds to pitch ideas:  
Not in ideas, but in connections  
Are actions founded and found true.

## IN GREYSCALE

We all share a careful outlook;  
We do not subscribe to that  
Censorious view, which has  
The world composed in black and white.

It is to our taste, admittedly,  
But its suasions must be resisted.  
And how much more so that vivid,  
Over-colourful view of things.

Both these, the migraine-bright,  
Chromatic gamut, the stern  
Alternative, yield in our eyes  
To a nice, greyscale sense of colour.

## THE HOME PORT

Tossed weary days and nights  
On the sea, the fishermen long  
For their home port.

But once inshore see again  
That the wished-for haven  
Is not as it was.

The approaches are never dredged,  
The quaysides decayed, the fish-  
Market always closed.

They must barter their fish  
For bread and potatoes, eat  
Much of it themselves.

Cold winds blow papers down  
The streets, hungry gulls  
Whine from rooftops.

The taverns, brothels, even  
The churches do little  
Business these days.

Idle, bored, waiting  
On favourable winds, they  
Curse in corners

And groups; home-sick  
Afloat, ashore they long for  
Brisk sea-breezes.

## **BUTTERFLIES ON DUNG**

Is it the moisture,  
Or the nutriment,  
That draws them to it  
In close-packed swarms?

Opinions differ—  
But there must be some  
Advantage in it  
For the gilded people.

One thing is clear—  
No matter how dirty  
Their feet, or mouthparts,  
Their wings are spotless.

**20/20**

The most unbirdlike things  
Are birdlike at first glance:  
Rocks, roots, a branch-knot,  
A hanging leaf, twisting in  
An unfelt breeze.

And birds too are unbirdlike:  
A shadow moving on the ground,  
A movement far more like  
A leaf's, a pattern not of  
Its patterned background.

To confuse appearances with  
False appearances, or things  
With things unreal, is to  
Start at every bird likeness,  
Root or leaf.

But to fail to recognise,  
Amidst the welter of things,  
The object of your search,  
Is a want of courage,  
Fearful oversight.

## **KNOT**

A riddle of Knot,  
Dapper mud-mice,  
Unravels along  
The tidal shore—

Summer-fat, smudged  
Siberian red, snapping  
At flies, the faithful  
Flock, not seen,

Suddenly, together,  
Resolves its knotness,  
Time and tide  
Conspiring, in flight.

## **BROKEN BONES**

They say that, given time,  
Broken bones heal, that  
Strength returns, the limb  
Regains its use.

In truth broken bones may  
Knit, but never heal,  
Strength does not return;  
The limb feels broken,  
Not itself, ever after.  
And, when stormy weather  
Threatens, a dull pain  
Starts in the bone, to remind  
The sufferer of his one-time,  
All-time, mishap.

## ***DEUX TEMPS***

The first is a halting, thoughtless,  
Scissor-lope, matching stride against  
A shorter pace, so as not to tread  
On any unlucky pavement-joint.

The second is a shame-faced,  
Hurried, mincing kind of step,  
Concerned to plant a foot  
Squarely on each and every crack.

## **TWENTY YEARS AFTER**

It seems that, twenty years after,  
I am getting well used to the life  
I led then—the once empty days  
In the country that never was.

I am finding my feet, exploring,  
Settling gratefully into its comforts,  
Its experiences; every day I wake  
Anew there, and make new discoveries.

And in this neverland, at places  
That perhaps existed, but may not  
Any longer, I dwell on the sights  
I saw then, but with different eyes.

The certainties that sprouted there  
Out of the old walls have withered,  
But what I learnt remains, informs  
The two onces: here and now.

Green hills of then, set to music  
Later—all these improvisations—  
Fill out a life, assemble themselves;  
Here, and there, come into their own.



**SOMEONE DIED  
THE OTHER DAY**

Someone died the other day,  
Someone whose books I'd read,  
Someone who knew right  
From wrong, and tried, as best  
He could, to distinguish them.

And I thought at first 'How sad  
To die now, with nothing  
Resolved, nothing clear, everything  
In a state of crisis, no path  
Through, no way ahead plain.'

But then I thought 'Everyone,  
Except a very lucky few, dies  
Thus, with nothing resolved,  
Neither at the tragic end,  
Nor at the glorious beginning—

At a time when old wrongs  
Masquerade still as new rights,  
And when new wrongs are  
Put forward as the oldest rights—  
Just the everyday nightmare.'

And then 'The strange thing here  
Is that the death was marked  
With even a minute's mourning—  
How many, in this time, remain  
Unmourned, for all their struggle?'

Death is not sad because it is  
A farewell; living is a series  
Of farewells, to people we shall  
Never see again, or get to know,  
Or to things we shall never  
Encounter again, or remember  
With the clarity they deserve.

Death is sad because it is  
The end of greeting; greeting  
New friends, new things—  
Of being surprised, learning,  
Of change, of knowing that there  
Are more farewells to come.

## **MY FATHER'S STORIES**

My father told me his stories  
And I think I often missed  
The point, his point.

I relate some of his stories  
Now, and hope people get  
The point, my point.

In time my children may tell  
His stories, to get across  
Another point, their point.

**M.S.L (†1/4/93)**

I have never mourned your death,  
As some have thought I should,  
Because you have never died for me,  
Whose love embodied I am,  
Whose love embodied my children  
Have become.

**WINTER RAIN**

The country closes down in rain—  
Misty winter rain after long drought.  
Paddocks and woodlands stand deep,  
Rivers spill across the land.

It is still winter, but the rain  
Gently soaks long-parched roots;  
A flush of growth will greet the spring,  
Dusty trees put out fresh leaves.

## **‘It may be time for another war’**

When you see the populace  
Going by the crooked way,  
And insisting that all paths  
Are crooked necessarily,  
Restrain your anger—this  
Is a symptom, not a cause;  
Its original, several curses,  
Curses that will be long  
In their final working out.

### **PAST TENSE**

To move, as always, through  
The understandless present, armed  
With ‘was’, ‘had’, ‘went’,  
And other failed descriptors,  
Is, for always, to throw up the hands.

To move, as always now, through  
This understandable present, armed  
With every past form there ever was,  
These entire and sufficient descriptors,  
Is, for now, to speak rightly.

You have been used to saying:  
'It is the crassness of the citizenry  
That gets in the way of my dreams.'  
But perhaps you should be saying:  
'My dreams are in competition  
With the dreams of everyone else,  
And lose out.' The best you can hope  
To claim is that others' dreams  
Get in the way of your attempts  
To live responsibly.

## **ON OUR SELECTION**

We have poor soil, there's not much  
To go on: the fragments of cultures  
That went before, somewhere else,  
The heritage of mismanagement, mistakes,  
Genocide, the worship of ignorance.

And hope's hope, the global truth,  
The vast expansion of just nothing,  
Gives no real hope—we will always  
Be behind, behind-hand, behind-regard,  
The least of those called to arms.

But beyond hope, beyond everything  
We might imagine, lies a future—  
Of no comfort to present views.  
There may be a time when here,  
We might try just living.

Certainty becomes time's whole cloth;  
But that is what we never can have,  
And a moment more in time shows  
Our time is out of true.

Certainty sees only the straight road;  
Many chapters have been written,  
Many conclusions proposed, all comfortable,  
But we cannot know the end of our story.

## **THE LAST AUSTRALIANS**

The last Australians persisted with their culture  
Without change for many hundreds of years.  
They were a sedentary people—though much  
Taken with the cult of the Car and the Beach.  
Their culture was an exclusively written one:  
Everyday knowledge and religious secrets were  
Passed on from stranger to stranger in books.

They were a very religious people, to them  
All of life belonged to the Economy, everything  
Gained meaning through it, and everyone  
Owed it their lives, their wealth and their minds.  
Everything they did was valued for its participation  
In this spiritual realm—one so rarefied  
We can scarcely conceive of it today.

Although their culture died out long ago,  
Many of their artefacts survive, and ruins  
Of their buildings are everywhere about.  
We still owe them our respect—they were  
An ingenious and truly religious people.  
Their example can still inspire, even though  
Their world has given way to ours.

## **GIVEN TIME**

Given time:

All wrongs tend to right themselves,  
Though never quite in time.

Given time:

Everyone's hour comes around,  
Though never as they pictured it.

Given time:

Everyone makes of it what they can,  
But not what others make of it.

Given time...

The difficulty, the agony,  
For a person, or a people,  
Is to bide that time,  
From moment to moment,  
Or from generation to generation.

Sometimes it seems as though  
We are suffocated with people,  
Stories, feelings, landscapes,  
And furniture of all kinds.

But on closer view what is it  
That we have? Empty streets  
And towns, desert scenes  
With blowing dust, and no trees,

And people who, if they meet,  
Fumble for words, or say nothing—  
Motive, desire, vision  
All blown to the winds—

And to think ourselves hard into  
Something that is not, cannot be,  
Is harder than to do without,  
And content ourselves with lack.

## THE PURPOSE

You have always fought against them,  
Always opposed them, always spoken  
With the utmost contempt of their motives;  
Sometimes you have suspected a conspiracy.

What you have never suspected is  
Something deeper—that all their efforts  
Are indeed co-ordinated, all part  
Of a single purpose long-designed.

And that what neither you, nor they,  
Have realised is that this purpose,  
All unknown to them, and you,  
Is thwart to both your hopes.



If beliefs are corrupt  
Then the people are corrupt.

If the people are corrupt  
Then beliefs are corrupt.

Where does anything break  
Into this circle? or is it that  
The circle breaks of itself—  
Everything confounded together?

## **HEADLINES**

**We must all log on to freedom.**

*The world is an amazing opportunity.*

People would sooner trade than fight.

**War is a thing of the past.**

•The strong will help the weak.

Prosperity will begin to trickle down.

*Flexibility is the key to wealth-creation.*

We are learning to use resources sustainably.

The world is becoming one market-place.

***Information is the key to freedom.***

**Rationality is breaking out everywhere.**

*Everyone is beginning to think like us.*

We have nearly done our work.

In a few years we will be finished.

## CONSUMER DEMANDS

Some think this,  
Some think that,  
Some don't think.

Some believe this,  
Some believe that,  
Some believe nothing.

Some read this,  
Some read that,  
Some read nothing.

Some trust in this,  
Some trust in that,  
Few know anything.

Some want this,  
Some want that,  
Few want nothing.

Some do this,  
Some do that,  
Most do nothing.

Some are pleased with this,  
Some are pleased with that,  
Few are pleased long.

Some have this,  
Some have that,  
Many have nothing.

Some watch this,  
Some watch that,  
All blink at what they see.

Some see this future,  
Some see that future,  
Some see no future.

Some ask this,  
Some ask that,  
Few ask the answerable.

Some die this way,  
Some die that way,  
But all die at last.

## **STET**

~~Anything thwart and ungermane;  
Anything unaccountable and unregarded;  
Anything unquantifiable, seemingly inexplicable;  
Anything sudden and unexpected;  
Anything contingent and not looked for;  
Anything old without age;  
Anything primitive that raises a blush;  
Anything awkward and inarticulate;  
Anything that systems cannot deal with;  
Anything untoward and strangely well-spoken;  
Anything feisty or crabbed;  
Any kind of unreceived wisdom;  
Anything not produced for a targeted market;  
Anything above the bottom line.~~

Sally arrived at our camp mid-morning—  
Our news had broken five days before,  
And she, she said, had begged her editor  
To let her cover the story. She had,  
She said, majored in Archaeology,  
And was so excited, to hear about  
This new civilisation.

I broke in:

‘Well a culture really, or, to be more  
Accurate still, a series of cultures,  
But a series with many interesting  
Features,’ and, with that, I started off  
Telling her about some of our findings.  
Her pencil twirled across the notebook.

After a little I offered to take her  
Up to see the Chief, and as we walked  
Up the hillside, between the rice fields,  
Patiently and silently tended,  
As always, by the local people,  
She told me about her trip up country  
With dollars for travel documents,  
And the last leg, in an army truck  
With ten young recruits, overawed to be  
Travelling with a real American blonde.

At the dig Geoff emerged from the trench  
Sweatily, little pointed trowel in hand  
And began to expound the story the site  
Revealed. I wandered about, amongst  
Earthen clods, letting my gaze wander  
Among the distant, forest-covered hills  
And among the nearer hills, and the brighter  
Patches that denoted cultivation.

Geoff's harsh voice drifted in and out  
Of my consciousness: 'Yes, iron technology  
Is first found here... before are Neolithic  
And Bronze Age cultures, rice-growing, with  
Ceramics... yes, it became an advanced  
Civilisation, obviously a state  
Drawing on a wide area... resources...  
War with the Miao and Han... seems to have  
Collapsed suddenly about 100 BC...  
Here's the break...'

As I wandered back Sally  
Was still noting furiously, Geoff had turned  
But she asked him, 'Oh, just one more thing,  
What's the time-scale here?' The Chief turned  
back,  
Pointing with his trowel: 'Up to here, that's  
The Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures,  
Fifteen hundred years. The Iron Age state,  
About a hundred and fifty years.'

By the time we had got back to camp  
The local Party Boss had arrived  
In his limousine. After many compliments  
On both sides, he carried Sally away  
Promising to show her the industrial  
Areas, and the military production zone.

## **PROBLEMS**

It soon became evident that the Problems  
Were going to be intractable. They were  
Shaggy, they stank. In committee  
They would not keep quiet;  
They burped, they farted, they giggled,  
They threw refreshments about,  
And showed no respect for the Chair.

When Security was called the main  
Problem turned, and swallowed three  
Of them at a gulp, with their guns.  
Clearly then, these were Problems  
That were going to need some work.

## **I COULD....**

I could, for my reward,  
Try to give you  
A new understanding,  
A new message,  
A new truth.

But instead, the utmost  
I will try, is  
To make you fail  
To understand what  
You already know.

**JUNE 1999**

From the frosted trees out back  
A whistler gives a single,  
Clear note; the children play  
Happily somewhere, bills  
Are mostly paid on time.

It's difficult to reconcile this  
Winter calm with a hapless world;  
Difficult to think except that  
My children will be sent in time  
To face some new Flanders.

For those who have fed the Dragon  
These many years, expect  
To ride the Unicorn.... Again  
The single clear note  
Of the whistler outside.

Hardy's darkling thrush  
Hinted at hope to him;  
This bird's call tells  
Of neither hope nor despair,  
Just a kind of continuance.

## ON READING GIBBON

More than a thousand years after Rome's Empire  
Fell Gibbon took up his pen  
And wrote its history, writing  
In a barbarian tongue.

A thousand years hence, who  
Will take up their pen to write  
Of the Decline and Fall of our Empire,  
And in what barbarian tongue?

## THE NEW MILLENNIUM

The people so want to please  
Their masters, but the masters  
Are making it difficult for them.

Everyone wants what they can't have,  
And such wants turn inwards,  
Are expressed as anger, or control.

Every freeing-up, every new choice,  
Is a new impost, a new control,  
And imposition feeds on itself.

The economy is doing fine,  
Everywhere, which means that  
Almost everyone is doing badly.

Nations fall apart, but can never  
Be allowed to, morale is low—  
It may be time for another war.



## **FEVER**

Fever is the body's way  
of killing infection;  
apparent madness may be  
sent to purge madness.

The worst thing to do,  
in a case of fever is  
to fight the body's heat;  
the worst thing to do  
in a case of madness is  
to speak of sanity.

However, if the fever  
is at all prolonged  
the patient may die;  
in a case of madness, best  
pray God it be short  
and is a cleansing one.

## **IDOLS**

It is the very human way  
To worship idols and mock them.

We used to have a God of mercy,  
And worshipped Him with cruelty.

Then we set up Mammon,  
Worshipping him in fecklessness.

And now gentle Nature, what crimes  
Will not be committed in your name?

## THEOLOGIAN

The faithful faithful, of their faith  
Confirmed—in all their words and deeds  
Alike proclaiming the self-same orthodoxy;

No wonder then that, charged to find  
The truth, they should all find it,  
Working its mysterious way through time.

That especially error, honest error,  
In its erroneous way, should proclaim  
The ageless truth, known now first.

Wise policy, to admit only the faithful  
To speak of faith; the same applies  
To those licensed to speak of anything.

## THE MAN OF HATE

The man of hate appears, spitting with rage,  
Just when things start to slip badly,  
Just when thought, consideration and  
New directions are called for, to tell us  
That the old direction was fine,  
That no thought at all is required,  
That what you feel must necessarily be.

Look at him: puny body, cadaverous  
Chest, bushy eyebrows, weepy eyes—  
A marionette, jerking on his strings.  
He's just like your father, or you,  
On a very bad day; he's everything  
You despise in yourself, held up  
So that you're under no illusions.

But the people love him, his vitriol  
They lap up like honeyed water,  
His words they take as treasured wisdom,  
His advice to hate they follow eagerly.  
He travels the world to meet his cronies—  
They love him, he is their poodle,  
And he barks to their tired tunes.

At home he resides in official residences,  
Feted by select groups of people.  
He orders more barbed wire and tanks—  
Orders the young men to go forth, fight  
For cheap petrol, make general slaughter.  
Everyone else he wants to feel  
Comfortable, behind all the barbed wire.

## **THE PLAYERS**

Do not tell us who they are,  
What they do, what they think,  
Or what they think they do,  
Treading the boards of the present.

The roles they play are not theirs,  
The roles they play are not those  
They think they play, and the drama  
They play in has many acts to unfold.

## **TO SURVIVE**

To survive, with your family,  
You are going to have to be lucky;  
You are going to have to kill.

To survive, to get on,  
You are going to have to forget  
Everything you once held dear.

To survive, to get by at all,  
You are going to have to eat  
Human flesh (metaphorically, or not).

To survive, to fit in  
You are going to have to lose,  
Everything you have ever had.

To survive, to be comfortable,  
You are going to have to think,  
Why you would want to survive.

## **SHIT HAPPENS**

Shit happens: tanks enter a village,  
And destroy homes, Agamemnon  
Is hacked to death, aircraft  
Slam into a building, famine  
Rages, and the Government denies it.

And you might expect to see the victims  
Mourn, grow angry, or call for calm,  
And the guilty escape, or be  
Punished, but never soon enough,  
Or with right and sufficient justice,

And always those apart from the events  
To struggle for their lien on them;  
And their responses, no matter what,  
To win the respect, amid the clamour,  
Due to those of the truly aggrieved.

Where in all this is the tragedy?  
The flaw, just desserts, or the search  
For answers to questions never  
Properly posed? Never seek to know  
Or your allotted role will be confirmed.

### **EPITAPH FOR MODERNITY**

At a time when we should  
Have been talking  
Of less and less,  
We were talking  
Of more and more.

### **AFTERTHOUGHT**

To be an afterthought is not  
To exist after, or outside thought,  
It is to matter, to dwell  
At the heart of thought, to be  
Its latest darling.

And so we have lived, never  
Distal, never beyond regard,  
Always judged as the favourite  
Of thought—and so discontent  
Wears with thought.

## ‘Advice to authors’

### TELLING TALES

We have grown used to telling tales;  
They slip easily from our tongues—  
Tales of every length and tenor,  
Comedy and tragedy, seemingly  
Fitted to the occasion.

Prizes are awarded for the tallest;  
We have come to expect anyone  
Who speaks to deal with fiction,  
To produce tales that confirm that  
We need these tales.

Our lives are very highly scripted;  
They follow the plot most convenient  
And most natural—moral fable or  
Social epic—excepting only they  
Falter at every turn.

We have forgotten, in all this,  
The tale; forgotten that beyond  
Hope, or enlightenment, the tale’s  
Best argument is that it cannot end  
As we would wish.

We speak only comfort, comfort  
In the midst of tears, but tales  
Could tell us that we err;  
In the very midst of *these* tears,  
There is deception.

## **THE ACT OF READING**

You read on, sentence by sentence,  
Comparing them to the words  
You have already read, here and elsewhere,  
And with what you know of the piece,  
Of the author, of this kind of work.

And what you find is either more  
Of the same—what you already know—  
Or what you do not, what strikes you  
As new, clever, quaint, or especially bad,  
And which may stick in the memory.

The first sort is not a worry—  
The fate of the disregardable—but  
As for the other, it must not  
In all honesty, be new either,  
Or its fate is just as certain.

## **THE BIRD-DIRT MOTH**

There's a moth which spends the daylight hours  
Immobile on a branch, trusting to its camouflage.  
Few of these are ever caught by hungry birds,  
The species flourishes, is common everywhere.

Yet, few people ever notice them;  
This moth is guise, and nothing more.  
And worse, sometimes we say 'Oh look,  
Here's a moth!', when all there is is dirt.

## THIS OR THAT POET

On someone's recommendation  
You read this or that poet,  
And you find in her work  
Nothing that you have been led  
To expect: this or that point,  
The truth of the moment.  
And so you find her wanting,  
Or read her for something else.

On your recommendation  
Others read this or that poet,  
And they find in his work  
Nothing they have been led  
To expect: this or that connection,  
This or that kind of continuity.  
And so they find him wanting,  
Or read him for something else.

## POETRY LOVERS

They both loved poetry with passion;  
They both wrote and were published—  
They kept a collection of poetry-books  
And taught their children from them.

They both approbated and deprecated poems  
And poets—they each had their favourites,  
Each championed this or that kind  
Of poetry, and their disputes were fierce.

But neither would ever truly say what  
It was they liked, what moved them—  
As though afraid that specifics might  
Reveal them divided by their passion.



## **THE BAFFLED SATIRIST**

Expecting rebuff he polished his barbs,  
Honed his words, chose cutting epithets.

But, astonished, found he had been taken  
Into Society's bosom, without question.

Which should he trust now, his satires  
Or his good fortune, luck without luck?

'Perhaps,' he mused, 'I'll take a *nom de plume*,  
And give the luckless the benefit of my caution.'

## **THE UNSUCCESSFUL WRITER**

It was not that his writing was unskilled,  
Or lacking in interest, or unclear;  
If anything it was too matter-of-fact—  
Cold water, in an age of ginger-beer.

**THE UNKNOWN POET  
(NOTES TAKEN FROM A LECTURE  
IN LITERARY HISTORY, CE 2550)**

If poetry were better-regarded in this age  
The problem of the Unknown Poet would be  
On everyone's lips.

She has been classed  
With various schools of poetry from the Twentieth  
To the late Twenty-first Century. As she celebrates  
Wild nature in many of her poems she must  
Have been writing at a time before the  
Habidomes—  
When vegetation still flourished out of doors.  
Thus she has been seen by many as a Georgian.  
However a certain frankness has led others  
To call her an early twenty-first-century Eroticist.

Her poems mention no other poet by name,  
And no other poet speaks of her, though  
Clearly many owe her an unacknowledged debt.

She mentions many events in her poems  
And speaks of them as contemporary,  
Though they range from the Treaty of Versailles  
In 1919, to the Congress of Kwangju  
In 2236, leading many to suspect interpolation.

The language of the poems is little clue  
To her date, as all editions are from recent times,  
From after the Fifth World War, though most  
Predate the Second Vowel Shift and Great Lenition.

The Unknown Poet speaks in her poems  
Of no remarkable life, she tells of loves  
And of tribulations such as anyone might  
Experience, yet her diction is masterful.  
Her ideas show her to have been a woman  
Of her time; she supports many out-moded  
Social forms, and yet her approbation is given  
With such qualification, such wise restraint,  
To serve as a lesson for all time. Her words  
Are simple words, yet they are words of fire.  
There is no subject she does not treat  
And none which she does not illuminate.

All the poets of our age would give  
Their eyes to have written as she has.

## **IN GREAT AGE**

When he was merely aged  
He did what he had always  
Done, but less well, more slowly:  
He wrote less, walked less,  
Met fewer people, with less patience.  
He grew possessive, but careless,  
Of his memories, which were coveted  
By many greedy others.

When he reached a great age  
He became a stranger to his own  
Life, no longer sharing even  
Its memories—which then became  
The property of others. He retreated  
Into a new world, which was his  
Alone, for it had no features—  
Nothing more to lend.

## THE THREE VOICES OF POETRY

The first is that of the flock  
Grazing contentedly—soothing,  
Bucolic, if a trifle monotonous.

The second is that of the flock  
Being loaded on to trucks—  
Incommoded, querulous, fearful.

The third is that of the sheep  
Arrived at the slaughterhouse,  
When they first smell blood.

This last kind, however, is  
Little written, and read only  
By those whose taste is corrupt.

## A BESTIARY

Five creatures stand before my gaze  
As emblems of the poets and their ways.

The first is the thievish BOWERBIRD,  
Who gathers, senselessly, to please  
His lady-love, a fine array  
Of useless things, all of one colour.  
He ranges them about his bower  
And leaps, prances, cavorts and sings  
Amongst his monochromic hoard.

The second is SEÑOR CICADA—  
A loud stridulation and no more.  
For if ever you draw near the sound,  
Whether it emanates from tree,  
Or bush or grass, there's nothing  
To be seen, no insect of any kind—  
Just an endless, deafening noise.

The third is the HUMPBACKED WHALE,  
Who groans his unending song of love  
Deep in the cold and briny depths.

The fourth is the loathsome VULTURE,  
Quick to smell a meal going free,  
Ever ready to drop by to help  
His fellows tear a carcass limb  
From limb—then to sit about  
In bloated ease, to belch, squawk  
And squabble with the other scavengers.

The last is the ZEBRA—white horse  
With black stripes, or black horse with white?  
The purpose of these stripes is not—  
As once was thought—for camouflage,  
But the way these animals can tell  
Themselves apart. And so this creature,  
Identical to his fellows in all  
But zebra eyes, is pugnacity itself—  
Teeth and flailing hooves—as it battles  
To prove its mettle to the herd.

Five creatures stand before my gaze  
As emblems of the poets and their ways.

## NOVEL READING HABITS

The literal-minded will read  
Every word, drinking them in  
And loving every minute of it.

The lazy will read the first  
Chapter, and the last, to get  
The drift, appreciate the style.

The conscientious will read  
The whole book, except those  
First and last chapters.

## HAPAX LEGOMENON

Deep amidst well-unthumbed pages  
The stern critical eye jolts  
Impatiently, noting the lapse...

But passes by, recollecting this passage  
All too well—an unfortunate *bêtise*  
In a classic of literature.

## **RECIPE FOR A POEM**

First take an issue that everyone agrees on—  
Death, life, love and so forth—  
Argued in such general terms  
That even born cavillers could not demur.

Next insert a quantity of references,  
Gathered from here, there and everywhere,  
Very common places, rags of wisdom,  
And stock in trade of idle thought.

In selecting these, let analogy  
Be your guide—exclude true analogy  
With rigour, it's so out of fashion  
It'll do you no good at all.

Then choose your setting carefully:  
Urban pastoral, urban grimy,  
Rural pastoral, rural grimy,  
Wherever is the same as anywhere.

Arrange the whole in no order,  
Make the thought opaque, as vague  
As possible, leave all the thinkers  
Guessing, but conjure up a *feeling*.

Then add some sensuous detail  
And let simmer slowly; arrange  
Each element so that like goes  
With unlike, to no-one's great surprise.

Finally write out at length, the longer  
The better, and type it out twice;  
Then mail all of the smeary sheets,  
In any order, to a friendly editor.

## THE STORYTELLER

‘Look, over there, surrounded  
By a crowd of eager listeners—  
Do you see him, the storyteller,  
The one they all love?’

‘I see him, I see how  
They hang upon his words,  
How he binds them to his tale,  
And how raptly they listen.’

‘The other storytellers have not  
His gift, and lack his audience.’  
‘And why is that, for I hear  
That his tales are but the common ones?’

‘He is old, and fat and jolly,  
And yet his tales are filled  
With young folk, beautiful,  
Pale, wasted by their love.

He is a drinker, has an eye  
For the wenches, yet his tales  
Are ones the clergy recommend,  
Replete with piety and holiness.

He is a boaster and a coward,  
Yet when he tells of the clash  
Of swords, the people thrill—  
How they love brave words!

The other storytellers have not  
His gift, will never learn  
When he tells them: “Keep  
Yourselves distant from your tales;



Speak of what you never practise;  
Recommend what you don't believe;  
Tell of what you do not know—  
Then you will find attentive ears.”

## **THE PUBLISHABLE POEM/ THE EMPLOYABLE PERSON**

Both these have a curious likeness:  
Editors or employers leap to find  
One of these rare prodigies  
Amongst the crowds of impossible  
Others that they meet.

Both move in the right circles,  
Both have impeccable references,  
And say all the right things—  
Both are always well turned-out,  
And can be relied on.

Yet long acquaintance with either  
Wearies; one could wish both  
Not always to be saying the right  
Thing, not to have quite that sense  
Of dress or style.

But who else is there to choose?  
The impossible others, the incompetents?  
Uncommon qualities are scarcely  
To be relied on, in the common  
Round of business.

## CRITICS

If we leave aside partiality, prejudice,  
Bribes received, or indigestion, it's clear  
That the critics, when they pronounce,  
Judge writers by their fidelity  
To the critics' critical understanding.

Readers, bear this in mind,  
Read carelessly what books  
You like, picking them from  
Here and wherever; but choose  
Your critics with the utmost care.

## THIS/THAT

You think you have cracked it—  
That this will do for that—  
That it's not far off it,  
Near the truth at any rate.

Dissatisfaction is soon replaced  
By gratitude—whatever its success  
It shows well on the mantelpiece,  
Has features which recommend it.

And it's then you find that it  
Will do for that as well as this,  
Indeed better, and you've already  
Approached the event, before the fact.

But then you find that others  
Take this to stand for that, what  
You never thought, and they will  
Continue to do so, in despite of you.

## HERMENEUTICS

You have been given a story to which  
Everything tends, one that stands by itself,  
Except for the awkward dependencies;  
Those pointing to what is apposite, and  
Those pointing to what cannot be.

When you think of this story, there is  
Nothing at all that you can say, either  
About it, or about anything; for the story  
Has spoken, and anything you say is  
Simple commentary, or simple heresy.

If you think of what surrounds, what  
Went before, what came after the version  
You have—counter to it, and all untold—  
You will think, as you must not, of  
The impossibility of what is related.

And you may think that as those in  
The story have never read their own tale,  
And never will, that you can recast  
It for them, so they are acting out  
A new tale, and not the other story.

But expect no applause, *your* tale,  
For such it has become, is new  
And trickish, and though all the birds  
Of the world may clamour in it, it is no  
Music to anyone's outraged ears.

And, at the worst, this story of yours  
Your tale's tale, might in full time  
Come to stand by itself—as one  
That vaunts impossibility, and dares  
Anyone to speak, yea or nay.

## **TRAGEDY AND COMEDY**

If you go to view tragedy  
There's little risk involved;  
All you have to do is pity,  
Just like everyone else—  
Hoping that you are lucky,  
Or else born in untragic times.

Comedy's the dangerous thing,  
For everyone is a joke  
To someone—if you attend  
You may count on laughter,  
But whose, you cannot know;  
The joke may be on you.

## **DOING WITHOUT SCENERY**

Doing without scenery was the hardest:

As for the theatre—wherever fate  
Took them was their theatre,  
A roof was a welcome roof,  
And no roof... was no roof.

Doing without costume or music  
Fed their vanity, they had now  
Found their true selves,  
Their real voices, at last.

Doing without scenery was the hardest:

How hard to admit that it was  
Neither here nor there, added  
Nothing, was already hackneyed,  
And gratified only the cast.

Doing without an audience  
Was easy, no applause, but  
Then no boos or hisses either,  
From shallow, would-be actors.

Doing without scenery was the hardest,  
No audience, no matter.

## **ADVICE TO AUTHORS**

Study the latest books well,  
And the periodicals, give  
Out an accurate copy  
Of what you read; newness,  
Not novelty, is the point.

Sometimes yesterday's fashion  
Can pay—people often  
Need time to catch up;  
A little oldfangledness  
Can be well-received.

But never think for yourself,  
Never expect intelligence  
To pay, never bring new  
Tidings—no-one wants  
To hear tomorrow's truths.

You believe the words inadequate,  
Illogical, starting in the wrong place,  
Sense slipping between the lines—  
The whole no guide, no firm procedure.

Compared to your high ramparts—  
Unwritten, unarticulated, but sure  
And unassailable—they are indeed  
Poor, lacking of any wide-eyed truth.

But think of the slow pain,  
The careful matching of word  
With intent, the crossings through,  
All angered doubt, perplexity.

When true sense is called for,  
Walk out into the fields, run  
Amidst shadows, thank the moon  
For shapes made less than certain.

For morning light shed coldly  
On walls for ever too strong,  
Is baleful light, all of one cast,  
Single-minded, and at once mistaken.

## **WHY READ POETRY?**

The point of poetry  
Is precision. Poems  
Are either exactly wrong,  
Or exactly right.

So we read poetry  
Mostly for our prognostics;  
Just occasionally we find  
The cure set forth.

## **S'AGIR**

De quoi s'agit-t-il?  
(Les plus grands mâcheurs d'agrafes  
s'y sont creusé la cervelle)  
—Du climat?  
—Du temps?  
—Des moeurs?  
—Du monde?

En effet, ne dirait-t-on pas  
qu'il s'agit de falloir?

Dans les environs évocateurs  
la chose la plus importante  
c'est à peu près l'évocation.

Eh bien, qu'est-ce qu'il faut  
(Les plus grands gratteurs de la fourche  
y ont désespéré)  
—Du climat?  
—Du temps?  
—Des moeurs?  
—Du monde?

En effet, à moins que le homard étincelant  
de l'esprit ne dise autrement,  
ne dirait-t-on pas qu'il en faut s'agir?

## MY NOVEL

My novel will be set in the past.  
—For who can bear the present?

This novel will have a narrator.  
—For third persons are not to be trusted.

He will be an outsider in his time.  
—For the age and the age's opposition  
Are two sides of the one coin.

He will see evil, evil advancing,  
And yet be powerless to prevent it.  
—So he will be just like us all.

There will be no proper characters,  
But events unfold like a puppet-show.  
—Jerk the string, the puppets dance.

The narrator will have nothing to hold  
Fast to, yet he will tell out his tale.  
—His tale is his testament, and ours.

## PRONOUNS

Other languages have many more—  
DUALS, INCLUSIVES AND EXCLUSIVES—  
But English has only five (or six)  
Of them, and trouble enough to be sure.

I, first singular: recently abolished,  
Do not use, or you speak only for yourself,  
Though, on closer look, your careful habits,  
Carefully chosen, seem less than singular.



Thou, second singular: obsolete for centuries,  
Though no pronoun is more needful;  
It died, they say, in polite evasion  
Of any hint of possible intimacy.

He/she/it, third singular: the real worry,  
Look at him, or her, see what  
They do, or fail to do, they,  
In this case, are decidedly not you.

We, first plural: how to define?  
Context tells us, but ours is the context,  
And we shuffle furiously—this plural lapse  
Taken for wisdom of the deepest sort.

You, second plural: the easiest by far—  
The only difficulty, do you speak  
To one or many (see second singular)?  
Deities, loved ones, take careful note.

They, third plural, all the problems  
Of the third singular, only magnified—  
Are 'they' really no more than 'we'?  
Some say not, others shake their heads.

## **ON MONUMENTAL ARCHITECTURE**

The Sphinx  
Stinks.



## **‘Jesus in Kashmir’**

At first there was great silence,  
And we looked at one another, astonished,  
As we did not know what silence was.

Then we looked again and saw ourselves  
No different at all than we had been before,  
But we saw one another as new.

And then we saw that what had ended  
Was nothing, nothing had ceased—  
Only we had never guessed it to be nothing.

And we looked and we saw before us  
Nothing but what we had always seen  
Only with the nothing taken from it.

And we faced everything we always had,  
What the poets wrote about unswervingly,  
The obvious facts, things as they are.

In time we even came to forget  
That at one point nothing had ended—  
That life had begun to flow again.

### **ON TIME**

It is not by wishing for a time  
Beyond time, or after some time,  
That timeless content is gained.

By living time filled with time,  
Time is grasped for what it is,  
And time, as such, no longer is.

## NOT AT HOME

There was a brighter rectangle  
In the paint next to the front door,  
Where someone's name-plate had been  
Removed, and no new one put up.

And that was my home—or was it  
Somewhere else, where in an attic  
I found a tattered flag, transparent,  
Along with the pots and bedsteads?

And that was not my home, and  
Wind and rain, all the weathers, and  
All the seasons with their trees,  
Not my country either, or ever thought.

And from the new- to the old-lands,  
Out of my country and back again,  
Where I play with book-names,  
Mimic a set hand, and dot my iotas.

And where, in another place, another  
Generation, I am housed just as before;  
Home with no ownership, another  
Cautious non-residence, all together.

In time, I shall settle down perhaps,  
Become amenable, discover direction,  
Answer all questions unambiguously—  
But my answers will be worth nothing.

And all this, too, will have been as  
Nothing, unless it is remembered  
That wherever I was, my language,  
Was never my own, or ever claimed.

## **YOU CAN NEVER OWN A TREE**

You can never own a tree:  
You may plant one, watch  
Its sapling years, delight  
In its young growth, its first  
Maturity—but it will outlive you.

You can never own a tree:  
You might plant one, one  
Of the shrubbier kinds, let  
It grow with you, but who  
Can plan a life like that?

You can never own a tree:  
You may buy a plot with one  
Fine tree or many growing—  
But they were there before,  
And they will long outlive you.

You can never own a tree:  
You can adopt a tree, one  
Standing in forest or street,  
But others may have done the same;  
That tree cannot belong to you,  
Any more than does a child.

## **GOD'S SUNDAY AFTERNOON**

At length God grew weary  
Of human ingratitude; grew  
Cynical as he saw every church,  
Every religion, turn away from Him  
And turn towards itself; grew  
Angry as He saw men blaming Him  
For the results of their cruelty and fecklessness.

So He came and walked upon the earth.  
The freshness of the breeze surprised Him;  
He found a beetle, orange with a bluish sheen,  
That He had no recollection of at all.  
Had His hands made these things?  
He heard people talking and thought it  
The most beautiful sound He had ever heard.

At once God knelt and gave heartfelt thanks  
To His Creation for its great mercies.

## **THE SPRINGE**

One can think of numerous diversions—  
We all do, every moment of our lives—  
But there is no escaping the springe:  
The still, empty moment at night,  
The cricket's song in autumn.

It is not until that moment,  
The staring down of the nothingness,  
That we move with it, stand tall,  
Find ourselves at last, breathing  
Slowly in the cool of the night.

## ***FEU D'ARTIFICE***

In the soft and total darkness that high cloud  
And lack of moon conspire to make  
Fireworks burst in sudden splendour,  
In star- and flower-clusters.

Their moment is short, they fade in the time  
Of a slow breath, and vanish abruptly.  
It is not that they illuminate  
The darkness, but it is the darkness  
Which grants them all their brilliance;  
*La nuit de nul artifice.*

## **MENTAL AEROBICS**

On any day with a 'y' in it,  
Any season from midwinter, around  
To midwinter again, sit in a place  
Where the air reaches, and, standing,  
Think two contradictory things  
Until they grow obdurate and bristle  
With weapons. At this point think  
Of any third term related to both,  
Yet distinct from either. Keep all three  
In the mind's eye until you lose  
Focus slightly, then, when focus returns...

Perform this exercise regularly  
And in no time you will begin  
To notice a difference. This technique  
Is guaranteed to ward off depression,  
Boredom, and dogmatism of all kinds.  
It is compatible with all religions.  
Books, videos and sweatshirts with our logo  
Are not available; classes are not held,  
But there are always vacancies.  
(Fees are payable in full if you  
Never learn not to value money).

## IN A WALLED GARDEN

In a walled garden,  
At the foot of bluish hills,  
A man and a woman met—

What hills these might be,  
And when, after what events,  
Or in what times, is not important.

In a walled garden,  
Under a cerulean sky,  
A man and a woman met—

All about in the dusty trees  
Birds murmured afternoon fragments  
Of their very richest songs.

In a walled garden,  
Amidst the trees and flowers,  
A man and a woman sat—

Though they are no man  
And no woman, everything leads  
To and away from this garden.

In a walled garden,  
A man and a woman sat,  
And great peace was with them.



## **WHEN THE PROPHECY CAME TRUE**

When the prophecy came true  
Most of the believers were unaware;  
Some few took notice, but denied  
The application: 'It wasn't meant  
To turn out this way, we had  
Always imagined it otherwise...'

When the prophecy came true  
Most of the non-believers were unaware;  
Some, more thoughtful, took note,  
Highly amused at the coincidence,  
And some few even rejoiced,  
At this meaning lent their lives.

## **I, JOHN, SAW AND HEARD THESE THINGS (PATMOS, 90CE)**

It was once all too easy,  
Too easy for a Son of Thunder  
Who had followed John the Baptist,  
Had followed the Christ, seen  
Him hailed and crowned King,  
Had seen him again taken,  
Crucified, taken down as if dead,  
Three days later appearing again.

Given all this, wouldn't you think  
Everything else would follow? people  
Listen, believe, convert, everything  
Be prepared for his return? That  
Is what I have worked for all  
These long years, preaching, telling  
Everyone of his life, his mission—  
Yet nothing has fallen into place.

Some listened, some believed, some converted,  
But where faith sprang up, so did  
Division, discord; and so many wolves  
Were drawn to the fold: the Egyptians,  
The Tarsian, the others, those who  
Made me write my *Memoirs*, then  
Took them away without permission—  
They say they have rewritten them.

His mother died asking 'Why has he  
Not returned?' And why indeed—  
These many years wandering in Parthia,  
And beyond—he, he alone,  
Could have saved us, from the Egyptians  
From Paul, from our discord, he  
Could have saved his own people.  
What scruple prevented his return?

And then, when the Romans made war  
Against us, some of our own people  
Began to despise us, because of the others.  
When the Holy City fell who did not  
Lament? There was a great falling away,  
And after, instead of being leaders,  
Or enemies, we were just old fools—  
Nothing more bitter than that.

Now I find myself an old man,  
The events I recall took place  
So long ago. Yesterday's news is old,  
So what can I say of happenings  
Sixty years old? Say it again,  
Sixty years, a powerful long time—  
And me in exile on this island  
Under suspicion, papers stolen again.

Our flock is much reduced now:  
A few old men, men as old as me;  
We have one Rabbi, and one or two  
Younger men. All the rest have gone  
Over to the Gentiles—all the cheats,  
Bankrupts, crooked dealers, sharpers,  
Wife-beaters and whoremasters—  
All gone, still forgetting the Law.

I still write, I still preach when  
In Ephesus, but I wonder sometimes  
Whether my years are not deluding  
Me—what I write seems to be  
Not my thoughts, but those of others,  
Or perhaps I have gone on saying  
The same things for so long that  
They now seem strange to me.

But I can never forget those who  
Betrayed us, so often we were  
Betrayed. That is why I think  
He has never returned, he finds  
Abjection preferable to steadfastness.  
And I am old now, old and despairing.  
Strange events are afoot, and where  
They will end, God alone knows.

## **JESUS IN KASHMIR\***

When at last Jesus arrived in Kashmir  
It was beyond the synoptic ken,  
Beyond even spiritual interpretation—

He came to minister to a people  
Who were already his people, but who  
Perhaps, would never be his people.

He came to sit under the same tree  
That the Buddha had sat under,  
To become, beforehand, a Muslim saint.

He came, perhaps straight from the inn  
At Mysia, straight from the life that  
Had been his, but was his no longer.

He came to sit by the hot springs,  
And to speak of Wisdom and Truth—  
Truth now distant from his own tale.

And he, as stranger, holy man, invader,  
Peacemaker, sage, spoke in words  
That the local people understood:

The great tree was filled with birds,  
Children came with flowers on holy days,  
He spent his time in prayer.

At length he died and was buried  
Either by his disciple, or by strangers,  
And his legend grew, but it grew

In obscurity, it grew into itself;  
Of four pillars, only two remain,  
The others being reports of reports.

And this story, his Brahman-, Buddha-  
Life, his Sufi-story, story of itself,  
Was local and various, opaque,

Was a story none could contradict,  
No-one kill for—holiness, not dogma,  
Its point. And still the great tree

Remains, filled with bright birds,  
And the children with their flowers,  
And the broken pillars, witnesses.

*\*There is a tradition in Kashmir that the tomb of a certain revered holy man is that of Jesus. This poem is a commentary on details of that tradition and some other imagined details. For Mysia see Acts 16 7.*





John Leonard was born in the UK in 1965. He read English at Oxford and his first collection, *Unlove*, was published in 1990. In 1991 he came to Australia and subsequently completed a PhD at the University of Queensland. His second collection, *100 Elegies for Modernity*, was published in 1997 by Hale and Iremonger. He currently lives in Canberra, where he works in an office. He has two children.

From reviews of *100 Elegies for Modernity* (1997):

‘Tackles contemporary political thought at its philosophical roots... a success which is remarkable... no small achievement and I welcome the result as a distinctive contribution to Australian writing.’ Laurie Duggan

‘Leonard has a very distinctive voice, dry and thinky... he sits in sober judgement on modernity (which includes the Enlightenment, romanticism, the modern and post-modern: those successive waves of destructive arrogance)... like Swift, he turns upon all manner of human pride, with its implicit destructiveness.’ Christopher Wallace-Crabbe

‘[100 Elegies] is a unified banquet, no fat here... It is a series of meditations and speculations on economics as well as the on the plural in “us”. It is written with a distancing, almost public tone...’ Thomas Shapcott

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In his third collection John Leonard continues his exploration of modernity, the world of unlove. *Jesus in Kashmir* is organised into four sections. The first section, poems of ordinary life and love, is succeeded by a scarifying view of the world of the new Millennium; the third section consists of poems about poetry and writing. The fantastic humour of these poems softens in the last section in poems of consolation and reflection. The title-poem ends the volume, and deals with the tradition that Jesus ended his life in Kashmir as a contemplative.

These are intellectually vital, sinewy poems that make much of contemporary poetry look directionless and superfluous.

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