

Coming Home from the World



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THE POETRY PROGRAM

SCRP

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Five islands Press
University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia, 1994.

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From Instructions Given to the Royal Examiners in the State of Chi

Examine the candidate's state of mind
as he inscribed the answers to all of the above
and estimate the temperature of his brain cells
as he lay awake in the cubicle at night
longing for the raw oysters with calamansi juice of home.
Assess the longevity of his nails
as they quivered lightly over the brushstrokes,
the density of his gaze as he reread the instructions.
Reckon to the nearest decimal place
the honesty of his bones
as he let memory drain into the page.
Calculate according to established formula
the expression of his face, old or young,
as his lips guessed the first hushed sounds of the rhythm
and fix clearly in your mind what lay behind that face,
the trembling moment of pure emptiness.
Identify the direction of the wind
as it hurries the leaves of all the provinces
away from everything known,
brushing them with the fragrance
of unnamed creatures waiting to be born.
Remember for what purpose
you are setting down these dreams
under such limited starlight.
Remember the waves which are forcing you
further and further off all courses into the terrible wilderness
of death.
Then forget all of yourself and all your hopes
and write your mark and comments in the correct space
for the perusal of a higher order.

Never Again

The report by the Argentine Commission on Disappeared People is boldly titled "Nunca Mas" or "Never Again".

1.

The guavas grow by the winding lake.
Children bright-eyed and cheeky
under confused rain.
Abandoned concrete slabs
as disused garage
as aquarium of death.
In the fleamarket
I see the faces of torturers
bright and silent
with teeth around the flesh of an apple.
Around me
the same calls for tender squashes
and on weekdays
the same children plod to school
in the same heavy sneakers.

The doors are no longer strong enough for the night.
A power more sinister than generals
or the Minister of Social Welfare
with his private line to the death squads
has occupied the city.
I don't know the words to describe it.
It has the face of a drained swimming pool
lonely and savage by night,
a broken mouth of absence
smeared with blood.

2.

Or to wake up stranded on a sidewalk of Madrid
under the enormous eyes of 19th-Century architecture

halfway between the Third World and Paris,
one of the quietly blind
propped against luminous department store windows
where elegant women
peer at wristwatches
and even the subway prattles in the subjunctive
"Para que tu vayas encantado en calor."
Only the walls are scrawled
in counter-advertisements:
Ulloa Optica mata a los niños:
and Hector
in white woolen vest
playing music in the cafe
of Calle No Hay Remedios,
you who dodged death
under the blue and gold sky of your native land.
Strange to wake here
among the living dead
where the names of stations lisp
Bilbao Cubao Sol Salamanca Ventas
and the silvery cold sky
beams from gold leaves around the lake,
where in the walk back at night from the garden near Opera
you faced the statues of all those
improbable-sounding Visigoth kings
and read in the lines of their inscriptions
electric wire taped to the inside of wounds,
encyclicals
for the execution of difference.

3.

To be one day at peace with oneself
like a Pan Am plane about to drop
into the Pacific.
To be cool like a cosmic New York poet
enthroned in the highrise abstraction
of a nude descending a razor blade.

Bland sad music
of a dying disco
beckons from the cold of every city
tonight
and under the electric wires
they have stolen our words.
From the new countries
in their frenzy for money
a drizzle descends on the earth.
Rain of the isolation of fear
shuts down houses streetlamps
phonelines computer signals.
We are left with the knocked-out sound of final darkness.

4.

Elsewhere
Manila Makati: region of embassy offices
and vast foreign banks,
wide boulevards ringed by stiff high-shouldered buildings.
Hotels have grown protective layers of moss
to block humanity out,
concreted beyond the blare of taxi drivers and jeepneys,
grim monoliths
around which trail
the long queues of hopeful exiles.

Stuck up on the wall of a hovel
in a squatters' settlement
the painting of two deer,
timorous, surprised,
stepping into golden light
under magically autumnal Chinese trees.

5.

Where do we go in the days of the conquerors?
Coffee steams in the morning.
A child taps at the window.
In the glass bubble
the past makes rapid dialogue we cannot hear.
Faces rise from the pavement but we cannot address them.
In great symphonies
each note is framed unique
as the precise gestures
of a child we can never recover.

Where weeping became
edifices of stone
a white door
dust of flesh in the sky.

Never say

Coming out of the line of quiet trees
the swallows leave their shadows on the pool.

On Reading Nadezhda Mandelstam's Memoirs

Footsteps appear in the snow
along the path we are about to walk.

In the sparse white hills
and in the windows of the town
our future is waiting:
eyeing us as we tread
careless
alone or in company
whistling a song
burying our fists in our pockets.

Winter street of old women
bearing their ragged bundle of shrunk memories
in silence.
Chalked faces of coquettish triumph
that have outlived men's kisses and tears.

"Who ever said you should be happy?"
In a sparse white ward
the victim and the torturer lie dying.
The child constructs the universe
in the space a window gives above his sickbed.
A thousand floors up
the pelican nurse drops food
in his beak.
Still awake at blue dawn,
the lights of cities and of lost space ships
greet him in a coded language.
Like a giant
his tiny body
sleeps beside the broken continents.

His eyes say:
I do not need the great game of having lived.
Fantasies wide as the Amazon
merge and spin in the river of clouds.

For a beautiful Polish lady

Now that Death is dreaming
in his vast summer house by the lake
and the floating pools of iris and of nenuphar
shimmer in midday sun
a dancing girl takes the boat ride
with her protector's son.
Timid, her weary hands gripped close together,
she is free in the day's rare stillness
and delights in these curved bridges flung against the sky,
in ornate walkways of a vanished Tsar,
in this slow lightly dipping boat
circling where the swans lie down and love.

**Over them a white-haired destiny
endlessly tosses a tennis ball to a dog
on the balcony where speech has died:
this red-faced figure in a hunchbacked jumper.
Bleak stones are growing moss
and the dainty slippers of the dancer
skim the black-rimmed water
as she crosses.
On the brief jetty to the rosegarden
her feet pause and arch.
Freckle faced and proper
the boy beside her,
growing like a wheat stalk,
basks in her shadow's warmth.**

**And now the wind turns fretful.
The sun deserts the tarnished terraces.
Turning back then
you, the dancer, look about
and say
that love is what is left:
it is the last emotion to die,
even later than resentment or envy,
out in the wasted stone hills beyond the palace walls,
in the wilderness where gardens end**

and half-bitten cherries
stain the snow.

Separation

You in the high-walled fortress of sleep
I on an island of wakefulness
bird-haunted, trapped by mist

You eyeing the warm milk of suspicion
I drinking the green rain of the seagull's ocean

You on the red deck of the last ferry going under
I on the amusement pier lost in the crowd

You going forward into the mirror
I crawling backward into the teeth's cavity

You in sunglasses
walking towards the sea on a street that backs into the sun
I sliding on ice across the abandoned freeway

You in prison waiting for redemption
I in the asylum counting billiard balls

You climbing stairways, humping buckets of soapy fisheyes
I descending the silver elevators, escorted by clouds

You on the night bus that leaves from the ferry wharf and goes
across the stone desert to the other side of the earth
I on the top floor of the brightly lit hospital,
beating the glass with my hands

The night is cold
The poplars are grey in the headlights

You have opened the paragraph of silence
I was closing the volume of inaudible sound

Woman in a dark overcoat hunched in a seat

She tells me of horses, of the quiet eyes of horses
on her grandfather's farm –
how they would come with their deep understanding of sadness
and gaze slowly into her reddened eyes
and place their heavy hooves against the pit
of her twelve year old stomach
and how in the still dry summer months she would step
so lightly around them
carrying bucket after bucket of water.

She tells me of childhood games in dusty streets and a white stone church
silent in the empty playground.

She tells me of watching a helicopter in the distance the size of a fruitfly, the
sun glinting off its oval face.

She tells me of babies left on anthills, of boys selling their blood under mango
trees, of drinking scooped juice and finding in crevasses tiny
folded handkerchiefs of blood.

She tells me of a long summer shattered by fire from the sky
and the dreadful quiet of a cloud that passed.

She tells me of gamblers their pockets stuffed with explosives,
of women locked under floorboards,
men chained to each other ascending an enormous walkway, having to murmur
over and over the name of God.

She tells me of a city of small white houses clustered like gravestones on the
barren hills, gazing without hope at the sea.

She tells me of the final sea that spread along the black river
all one afternoon till it covered the plain.

As she talks the clock outpaces her.
Her thick brittle arms slump across the seat
where the wild scatter of her hair burns sullenly.
Behind glasses her eyes curve,
a single tear clinging to the eyelids.
The smooth of her skin is
a broken avalanche of snow in a field of jonquils.
Opposite us
a blonde haired teenage girl
with the stoned eyes of bliss
plucks out the name of Jesus on guitar

in this train that rattles on and will not stop.

Midwinter Swimming

I dream of the pool which is still open,
its long lanes under floodlight.

At the counter
a sultry gymnast
rolls languorous coins for the turnstile.

Before me
the vast overheated hall's
lit up like a spaceship
afloat in subtropical night,
and everywhere
sparse shapes are poised for demolishing distances.

Rows of orange markers
sway in the wake of lumbering middle-aged tigers
or matrons with varicosed thighs
white and blue as the Argentine flag;
while on the starter's block,
lean and rapt,
like St Sebastian in a swoon of arrows,
the body poised
as for the opening of the future.

Moving House

Rows of icons grace the small house behind the monastery.
Nestling beside the railway line
it lacks a kitchen but the sunroom has a stove.
In the square-shaped lounge room
weddings and children multiply
in photographs the size of Chinese woks
nailed to the rafters.
This is a house built for close perusal by giants.
The insignia of the lawn lead to a study built next to
a tumbledown garage.
In the front garden the owner occupier
is feeding tea leaves to a favourite rosebush.
The creases of his hands give nothing away
though tomorrow they will seem foreign
like the snow in a postcard
like the grin left on a pillow
when you sleepwalk through the wall.

At the threshold of the house
two bedrooms greet you
with the discreet fulfilment of needs
hushed in thick carpet.
The family has fled to the old country.
Only the father remains to complete the transaction,
his scorched gardener's face
muffled by a blue handkerchief.
At this price
you would be crazy not to buy.

Four Variations on a text of St John

1

I stopped at the well.
The busload of tourists with whom I travelled
had gone ahead into the village
to trade their dollars
for bananas chapatis couscous crabs and red cheese.
Pariah women with bracelets of gold
watched from the door of a broken hut
by a pile of smoking garbage.
I had no living water to offer
only shekels airfares walkmen third world debt
and one night immunity,
while outside all night
the wind of desolation
roared.

2

I stopped at the well,
the sun still blazing in deserted sky.
They led me down lanes from the marketplace
to a backalley cricket bat factory
opposite a door of sunlight
where a boy sat limp on a paliset
with twisted paralysed legs.
We looked a little at each other.
I felt within me
no power, no force,
only a double paralysis.
Beyond the silence
the world was rushing
in planes aircon buses jeepneys nuclear rockets.
I did not ask for water.
I did not offer water.
In one village I drank chai,
in another Coca Cola.

The wide hills were green and tall with barley
and they rippled across his mind.

At that moment
fish were listening.

At that moment
gunships were poised over distant villages.

At that moment
the world was formed complete.

On a stone within the well's shadow
watching this woman bending and lifting
the heavy bucket of water.

She had entered heaven five times
and he was to be the sixth

so he unstrapped the tetracycline from the inside of his thigh
and the woman stepped
within the ambience of truth.

Perhaps the veil covered her completely
so he could only guess
at her face her age.

Her hand from under the black cloth
reached forward
like the coarse knuckles of death
and he recited his litany:

I come from beyond the blackout.
I have crossed the river of darkness
strapped to a burnt out raft

and she exchanged
after all
not breast or cunt
but a ladle of tepid black water
while he waited
caught out for once and shamed
as she lay down at the feet
of this slender god of the future.

I stopped at the well and I asked for water.
It was late on a hot day.
Shapes in drab cloaks sidled away
like smoke in the dusty heat-haze of the plain.
Like an old ship battered by storms
that creeps into the shining harbour,
unwelcome,
unannounced:
whatever I gave was
as one gives crushed strawberries
heavy with too much sweetness.

So I carried off my guilt
dragging these limbs across centuries
to rest
beside the glib shine of omiyage dolls
in a hut by the inland sea
where I watch the bay descend in broken lines.
By night
a ferryboat shuffles the curve of sleek waters.

The West's sagas run out.
Broken swirls of blue ink
on the sign over a noodle shop;
shrapnel and soft drink, souvenirs of hands;
a river ending in lacquered gold.

A domestic helper returns for Christmas in the province

*Dumating umaga sa malayo bahay:
malakas ang hangin sa luma simbahan,**
the colour of freshly washed sheets,
and I will forget the ring of the intercom,
the aircon apartment smelling of America,
imported greetings on tennis courts
under floodlight in the crackling heat of the evenings.
I will eat mangoes and rice for days
in the rainy season's narrow abundance
and drink strong barako coffee,
sip glasses of sticky cane sugar
and be myself
in the hut we built with poles of bamboo and old wood
on borrowed land
with chickens running free in the mud
and the swampweed kankong
overtaking the sprawl of our vegetable garden
and the bitter ampalaya
slowly stewed with fishpaste.
On noche buena
five plates of spaghetti will rest on the mat:
one for nanay, one for me
and three for the absent ones:
older sister in Hong Kong, older brother in Singapore,
younger brother in Saudi,
under contract for three years,
three years repeated over and over,
snatched away by silver planes
to patch together little by little
the cost of living.
I pray for them this last night in Makati,
I pray for us all.

** I will arrive tomorrow at my distant home, strong wind against the old church
(Tagalog)*

The death of Franco

He lies there in absolute darkness.

A smile still plays over those lips that said to his African legions,
"Take your time – be slow – every gain must be secured –
we have so many accounts to settle."

How little the others understood that slowness,
the slowness of death knocking on so many doors.

How few realised what dreadful power lay
in the patient advance
of his dark-skinned Moors reconquering Spain.

The black skull of Mussolini
benign in its baldness
still talk to him across the darkness
while that other friend, Lopez de Rega,
has returned, flown off
into the electric storms to reach Argentina,
releasing the dust of skeleton teeth
from his bony hands.

The heir, Carrero Blanco,
lies scattered on the pavement
near where the prostitutes ply their trade
on Fuencarral.

Franco is not dead;
he has stepped down onto the soft crust of the moon
where the craters of loneliness
welcome those
who have sown death on the earth.

When eagles pause to talk with your sleeping body

When you wake again
the donkey will be standing idly in the road,
the old man will open his shop,
the seagulls will tread critically
among the piles of garbage,
wind will flap small religious photographs
pegged to the ice cream stall,
the old woman and her daughter
will be sitting under the black cross
near the santo ninyo,
a man from the desert will go mad
in the bar by the marketplace,
a boy bandaged like a doll
will gaze from the tenth story window.

When you wake again
dusk will be falling across the harbour,
fishing boats will be rocking by the stone wharf,
cold night air will ripple the line of water,
a sinker will fall from a bridge
and bury itself in darkness,
the last train will climb the hill
turning its back on the sea.

When you wake again
drunks will skate in wide circles over the pond,
the ice cream seller will fold up his van,
a blonde-haired stranger will stroll uphill
with melons and cheese for dinner,
the neon signs will come on
and tomorrow's clothes will hang in unopened wardrobes.

When you wake again
a favourite pillow will cover a magic toy car
that glows all night in the wind of silence,
a voice will cry out in a dream,
a woman will open the door
and recognise only the layer of dust on your shoes.

When you wake again
your life will fill the house
like a tap left running day and night
for a thousand years.

When you wake again
when the balcony crumbles at last
into the swimming pool
when eagles pause to talk with your sleeping body.

Ode to Allen Ginsberg

I

I am writing from the Hudson river the New Jersey side:
liberty is a perfect plaster cast trailing scraps of fog.
I am listening in my throat to an old man talking from bombed out Madrid:
the Spanish numbers reel off the date and time against the whine of
steep descending planes.
I am walking in my withered leg the steps of broken fossickers pacing the
shell of Somoza's palace.
I watch through two grey eyes cannisters of flame fall through the cockpit's
open door:
a ripple of screams splashed rapidly across treetops.
I drag in my broken knee joint the bundles of those who flee across borders:
the lucky ones who stumble into a middle age of nothingness
under tall alien buildings.
I am writing from under a gangland mural
in the blazing city of cutthroats
in the fires of anger.
I smell in the palms of my hands, in the shrinking paunch of my belly
bazaars threaded with dust and beggars:
vultures in the trees, dogs fighting over human bones
beside the cool eternal river
and like the anguished believers
I wash I wash
immersed beyond my eyes
in the residue of glaciers and cow-haunted fields
in the ash grey pollen of the dead.

II

Eccentrics yawn and stretch among shelves lining the mausoleum,
pale eyes shining in aquamarine solitude
or clouded with the mist of abandonment and breakdown in downtown
emporia of progress,
you among the eccentrics, bearded, bejewelled,
your necklace of candied skulls dancing to syncopations
of sitar music in the cowbell dawn.

eyes of loving in dreams floating over the locked up warehouse where the
 sea sinks its teeth into the continent,
chill now as you wait out your dreamtime
one more time on earth
in the closed eyes of a small girl
asleep in mother's bed
lightyears from the rippling wave of napalm.

III

Poems that crystallize in a shrug
directed to the cold night air.
The raw breath of your long lines
remains.
On the city skyline
etched edges of letters
wink what is left of your voice
across the maze of belittling neon.
Words misplaced from your poems
riddle the walls of decayed buildings.
The stumps of your eyes
glide through the wilderness of the acid exchange
as pigeons nestling under bulbless spotlights
feel for your anarchic presence.

Truth-sayer,
lone rat trapped on another shore,
I speak to you as of a god,
man of liberty mistranslating scraps of shit and mud,
dressed up in handkerchiefs smeared in ash,
satisfied in not the least degree
with the wedding rite of silence.

In the end
in the end
exhausted by the sadness of waiting for voices in the central spire
 of the hurricane,
brooding over your burnt out self-mystifying continent,
hysteric ghost wandering the lanes of sunlight out of

Washington,
angel fleeing an eternity of middle class bliss
that shimmers in the cherry blossoms
on Rollins Avenue, Rockville,
so like your New Jersey home.
Aunt Rose is dead in Newark.
Aunt Rose is at peace beyond Spain.
To what valley green with first sunlight
have you wandered
still waiting for voices,
ageing carsalesman of the infinite?
Have you met in your visions Rilke on the Adriatic –
a crazy roaming the castle under lightning attack,
Rimbaud cloistered behind curtains in Charleville,
little sister of grass and the sodomized sky,
James Wright on the road to Anghiari
transfixed up the hill to heaven, “a brilliant in the dust”,
blind Homer exiled by the waves’ edge
weeping for lovers and young warriors long dead,
thunder of pain in the surf’s collapse?

IV

In the terrible loneliness of bougainvillea
the blue and purple speech of what is lost
in a lovesick dream of fire
I reach out to the axeman
I offer this very small tear in my skull
to be healed
to be prised apart

because children cry out in the mountains
because life begins in unbearable tenderness as you open your skin
to the kiss of vultures

I will wait for your laughter,
wait for your stepping down out of the high cloud of drugs and come,
all wobbly with the white hairy flesh of bewilderment,
I will enter the door

I will leave a glass of water on the floor of the burnt down house
I will séance you into forgiveness
I will ask you to intercede with the dead I have wronged
I will leave my hands open for the living who pass along the folds
of their own silence
I will leave a hole in the Great Wall the shape of a man or woman my own
size and weight so that all that is banished may return
I will hum your sleep as a prayer to a lost god.

V

When you entered forever the kingdom of glass
on that wide river bending into sunset,
your body lacerated
by the shrapnel of exploding towns,
hurriedly grabbing your suitcase of persecutions,
checking out in the hot uniform
of a Singapore Airlines stewardess
en route for the Cosmic Burning,
appearing at celebrity lunches in the underwear of a deathcamp inmate,
eating ham smoked in the gas of cremated corpses,
vomiting out pages of sadness,
having only this life –
your own life –
to set it right

young boy with this enormous beanstalk
lingering in the back of the skull.

VI

Chronicler, custodian,
for you small birds send back permission from the stones
to write of the dirt that covers them,
of all that lives and grows on the dirt,
permission to leave these tracks of words perilous
in the late winds of the world,
chronicler of this half century of suicide and war,

conscience of Eisenhower,
dark underlip of Nixon's grin,
sad jowl of a bewildered Carter,
at one with all that is dark and moves under my skull,
at one with the lightness that glides barefoot over cold pavements
and fallen leaves and windswept waters of the warm ocean,
at one with the restless energy of rats' feet on corrugated iron,
itch of the wizened face of the Death Goddess
by the waters of Varanasi,
in the rushing stream
letting go forever.

It is dawn.
The sky goes blue across the townships.
Across the shabby rooftops of tin and cardboard
a streetlamp merges with the moon.

The breath of a sage is a tunnel under the ravaged continents.
The breath of a sage goes out
and enters the wide corners of everywhere.

Robert Frost at eighty

I think there are poems greater and stranger than any I have known.

I would like to find them.

They are not on the greying paper of old books
or chanted on obscure lips.

They are not in the language of mermaids
or the sharp-tongued adjectives of vanishing.

They run like torn threads along paving stones.

They are cracked as the skull of an old man.

They stir in the mirror

at fifty,

at eighty.

My ear keeps trying to hear them

but the seafront is cold.

The tide moves in.

They migrate like crows at a cricket ground.

They knock at the door when I am out.

I have done with craft.

How can I front ghosts with cleverness,

the slick glide of paradox and rhyme

that transforms prejudice

to brittle gems of seeming wisdom?

Though I bury all I own or hold close

though my skin outlives the trees

though the lines fall shattering the stone

I cannot catch them.

They have the lilting accent

of a house I saw but never entered.

They are the sounds a child hears –

the water, the afternoon, the sky.

I watch them now

trickling through the open mirror.

Sometimes, but almost never

we touch what we desire.

The Emperor Montezuma returns to witness the enactment of his last days in an opera composed by Antonio Vivaldi and performed in the theatre of St Angelo, Venice, 1733

I woke first on a pure note of high C,
crouching in a cold loft
worrying my nails,
the prey of blind sorrows groping for a name.
Below torches flickered.
A cold mist moved in from the wide canal.
Returned from silence
to the half life of a ghost
I knew myself among the Lords of Darkness
in this palace beyond distant waters,
I who had once so carefully fed the sun,
had touched and felt the presence
of the golden orbs of corn,
round cacao beads,
the quetzal's shining feathers
blue green in trembling air.
Memories gathered from the recognised tale:
my wives suiciding in the burning lake,
my city turned to rubble in the blood-red water.
I who had always been so meticulous with death
saw blood flow as blood had never flown
to feed the thirsty earth,
I whose feet had never faltered
hour after hour
as lines of victims edged towards the altar
where the stone knives peeled their lives.
In the realm of these strange conquerors
beyond the sea of death
within eyesight of calm water,
canals crafted so like my own,
small boats propelled by graceful oar,
I wake within the flow of music
a fragile god, half demon,
half trembling waif
stripped of my feathers,
the necklace of skulls,

the flayed dress of jaguar skin.

Once,
alone before the crowd,
my being split open
like the blistering gash in a child's lip
where the warrior's plug is inserted,
I watched the goddess Toci
in skins that turned to dust
sweep shrieking on the shamefaced warriors
brandishing a broom matted with blood.
I saw the terror as they fled
and the gulping agony of the staggering priest,
that layered skin on which the gods drew meanings.
All torn bleeding things I knew as order.
Now in the slowly winding mist of choir and sound,
watching an actor play myself,
the girls from the orphanage modulating sighs
in a windy cavern of stone,
I think of that other cave where priests made the cakes
of amaranth and blood,
the shared eternal food
of sun and cornstalks.

Outside now rain patrols the square.
Sadness drips along the doorways of old walls.
Cold air reaches for my heart.
I will walk tomorrow in the young girls' nightmares,
scarred and impotent
with all the power of masks
to whisper and possess.
Tomorrow I will move within the water
like bright tooth of an eel that cannot sleep.
Grim beings I cannot name
drifting graceful
across a stage spotlit for death,
I wrestle with your meaning,
the tauntings of your brittle arrogance.

1892

The sugarcane harvest will soon be in. It is before nuclear energy, before the dizzy narrowing down of the world, before men on the moon, before supermarkets. In Queensland and Cuba and Brazil the cane stalks are ripening. On desks crowded with paper in Germany and England and Canada calculations and equations are already edging their way towards Hiroshima.

It is a time to look out over certain stylistic conventions, over empires set down in the hierarchic shades of command and submission. Boats returning home are leaving a refuse of wasted black lives in the New Hebrides, in Puerto Rico, in Trinidad. On endless sultry afternoons children are sold as household servants to pious families in Toorak, Guatemala City, New Orleans. Blank faced prostitutes inject themselves with morphine in Havana, Buenos Aires, Melbourne. A bitter scent of cyanide has only just begun to ooze into the high tumblers of lemon garnished gin.

It is before the earth has even begun to register the devastation carried out against it. There are still blank spaces on maps, jungles without highways, rivers without chemicals, skies where the flames of oil are unknown.

In libraries and quiet rooms across the earth people are reading while outside snow is burying the first flowers and the maudlin drunks.

Experts are at work designing ideal prisons to remould whatever is crooked. Everywhere they seek instant answers, to rise and destroy the demon drink, the demon Jew, the demon owner of property and the demon of disbelief.

A boat is crossing from Cadiz to Havana and a man sits composing music, dance tunes and terrifying rhythms, while the sun blazes down across his shoulders. An astronaut dripping seaweed climbs onto the pier. Starry-eyed he tells us he has seen the end of the world as announced by a thousand year old crab.

Not yet has the bridge been built into the past so that the legions of Caesar can unwrap for emissaries from Cathay the assassin's heat sensitive time bomb.

In this year James Joyce skipped school, Freud annotated the progress of anxiety, some mentor of Gavrilo Princip spent hours trying to carve his name on a school desk. Whitman and Rimbaud are dead, sparrows descend on their graves, a new moon is born painfully from the cold shell of their eyes.

In the lesser Antilles ports lie abandoned, home only to the trade winds and the ghosts of bucanneers. Like some old drunk I would feel embarrassed about and cross the road to avoid, his face battered about the forehead, the flat nose bulbous between contaminated eyes, he stands there with one hand sketching the branch of a fig tree that leans out across the lagoon. A fisherman of the islands, the grandson of a slave, he is looking for crows in the book of dreams.

On crisp autumn mornings girls step lightly without shoes on spiky ground, their legs and thighs bruised purple from the slaps and pinches of their short-tempered mothers. A wedding procession winds uphill, trundling joyously over the cracked bones of the dead.

In Armenia a blue sky is the earth's great gift. Sullen naval boats prowl the harbour seeking neither to encourage nor assist as the town is set alight. Spiders control the fall of the dice. A candleflame in the abandoned synagogue forms the symbol of eternity before going out.

Innocent settlers arrive. They look down a road of ancient farmhouses and see empty space with their names typed on it by invisible typewriters.

Reviewing this year from the perspective of a hundred year old sleep it feels as if I am wandering through a vast warehouse of old games, hand-me-down rhyme books, Bibles translated into the thousand languages of extinct peoples, dust to add texture to the corn mush, salt to give flavour to the sea.

A woman in mourning for the century bakes a cake, prepares scones, dusts a punnet of strawberries with crushed white sugar. Replacing soil with ash, filling all things with decay, promising sweetness yet delivering an incurable hunger it has the taste of a hundred years of pain.

December, 1992.

The Joys of Mathematics

At fifty I will begin my count towards the infinite numbers.

At negative ninety nine I will start my walk towards the
infinitesimally small.

At one over twenty seven I will inspect the first bridgeworks.

At twenty two over seven I will write a message in a bottle, entrust it to
a sea turtle, slip under a wave and sleep.

At eighty seven sparrows will land on the windowsill, pecking a hole
that leads inside my arm.

At 127 I will begin to arrange the children's pillows, carefully filling
each one with warm handfuls of snow.

At ten to the negative six our friends from the White House will arrive,
handing out glass beads and broken shells filled with recently
perfected poisons.

At the inverse square of sixteen the sky will curve over blue lakes, songbirds
settle at dusk, a small train rattle off towards a village that leans
against a single church spire.

At one over negative twenty two I will start to dream in Sanskrit, creating a
swarm of brown ants to bring back a baby's rattle from the
edge of a mud slide.

At ten to negative two over three I will open my heart, letting go of all vanities,
right down to the wilted bones.

At the third transfinite number I will give up easy answers.

At e to the $i\pi$ the earth will bristle with skulls and weapons, dolphins will
proclaim the first inter-stellar arms bazaar in Antarctica, the
new born will drink only lead, the elderly will wander the moon
in the quest for warmth.

At one I will open my eyes.

At zero I will put the key back under the mat.

