

# 23.5 Degrees



By

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The earth is tilted on its axis at an angle of 23.5 degrees, a tilt born of violence but also luck. This fortunate imperfection means the Earth receives different amounts of sunlight during its yearly orbit, creating the four seasons and in turn such incredible diversity of landscapes, climate and life as we know it.

That same tilt, the same imperfection, has us all leaning into the light - sometimes too close to the heat, sometimes away into the cold dark.

Hamlet:                    There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
                                  Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

Hamlet, William Shakespeare.

## Dust

If we are just dust  
hovering in the light  
lit up by a splutter  
of energy, enough  
to claw some crude  
shapes, form dreams  
of better shapes,  
making better dreams;  
making every art,  
achievement, agony:  
agonising over instances  
of what was, is, will be  
long after the dust has  
settled, sloughed. Then  
what precious dust  
we are, how carefully  
we must hold each other,  
never spilling a grain.

## **DNA Destiny**

I reach out in bed, press  
fingers into your shoulder,  
my thin glove of flesh  
and bones becoming fused  
with the felt of your existence,  
feeling that skeletal future  
but asking that the magic  
of carbon atoms amassed  
from the decay of some  
other organic miracle,  
a DNA destiny shaped  
by flint, fire, endless  
immigration through eons  
of evolution to end up  
as me in a bed with you  
asleep, unaware; asking  
the magic to stay forever,  
defy the deafening darkness.

## Only or Without

At Königssee we crave crepes.  
A man sells them from a shop  
with a name that's just a list  
of the food he quickly sells.

I ask for crepes with *only* bananas  
but ask for *without*. We laugh  
about the German we are both  
trying to learn: *only* is *nur*.

He's from Bosnia-Herzegovina,  
no time to notice the beauty  
of the lake, he tells my wife.  
*I am working, all the time, working.*

Folding crepes, frying sausages,  
waffles, coffee-to-go – anything  
the tourists - mostly Chinese -  
want before hurrying to the boats,

drink famously cold lake water,  
chew snow dusted cliffs, gulp at  
Mount Watzmann, finish and  
leave him to prepare fresh batter.

## As Far As She Knows

I keep Mom's school pencil case  
tribute to her best efforts in school.  
Her contribution to family legends:  
Scoring 1% in a short hand exam.

Pencil case from New Zealand  
stacked strips of Kiwi timbers:  
*kahikatea, rimu, matai, totara, pukatea,*  
*kauri, and rewarewa sovereign.* Each

name a caramel chew of vowels,  
deepening orange to chocolate,  
brown sinewy, one speckled stone,  
the last darkly regal zebra brands.

Post-war case measures in inches,  
hinges open at one end with a creak,  
apologising for offering two tubular  
slits, room only for writing tokens.

Mum remembers splinters of life:  
Pencil case her daily companion  
in Cheam County Secondary School.  
Her name and *F16* scratched on the back.

She's forgotten what *F16* means.  
As far as she knows, the case  
is from Great Aunt Vera, 1950's émigré,  
unmarried Auckland Post Office worker

for over twenty-two years. 1992  
the last mention in my grandmother's  
photo books, the family encyclopaedia.  
Then forgotten, nothing left to write.

## The Buddha Laughs

My childhood laughing back at me  
on a restaurant menu in Yuxhei Park, Guangzhou.  
Bidai, *Xiào Fó*, the Laughing Buddha, rolling  
around the menu with his cloth sack  
full of sudden memories: my mother's  
tiny Chinese Buddha that now lives  
in the garden, silting with slug juice,  
ice crystals and calcification, but still laughing.  
I remember wondering why he's so fat  
and yet found everything funny. Fat Buddha,  
*Pàng Fó*, this future Buddha whispering  
destiny to me in my parents' back-garden  
in the England of my past, now laughing  
at our recognition through smoggy air.

## The Goat Knows

The goat knows  
it is the festival of Dashain  
in Kathmandu: time to die  
in thanks to Maa Durga  
for defeating the buffalo-demon Mahishasura  
after ten days of fighting.  
But the goat is no hungry Hindu,  
its legs speak of living  
stubbornly sticking out into the gutter.  
The goat's owner, a boy  
with a mischievous grin,  
wishing for Maa Durga's ten arms,  
tugs, tugs, tugs at the leash.  
The goat's head nods  
in the image of agreement  
to the wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita,  
but the legs knows better:  
the head will soon be sliced off,  
stuck on a table, tongue sticking out,  
tasting the lies of goat afterlife,  
blood running in the gutter.  
So the legs keep battling  
with the heart of a buffalo  
and the boy tugs, tugs, tugs  
with all ten of his imaginary arms  
and suddenly wins, dragging the goat  
up onto the pavement,  
off to meet its maker  
and make Maa Durga happy.

## Unable to Break

The young couple left  
the café quickly, nothing  
bought, and stood together  
in the grey, slushing snow,  
bodies angled obtusely, heads  
bowed like February willows.  
He looks up. She reaches  
behind his ears. He buries  
his head on her shoulder  
and they stand silently  
as the afternoon spills,  
minutes mumbling. They  
are immovable, talking  
now, nodding, aching  
tenderness, touching to  
try and reconnect, deny  
the decomposition. But  
no kiss or final turn. They  
remain waiting, unable  
to tear away, break.

## Late February Evening in the Bavarian Alps

Snow fills the orange cone of light,  
white waterfall of falling flakes.  
The same light reaches out  
to an arm of hedge-high snow  
and then is lost in the evening  
of darkness deepened by mountain  
clouds. The still houses punctuated  
with rectangles of yellow, sudden  
life, someone preparing a meal.  
Above, a piano is playing, notes  
rolling out to remind the winter  
that it has only days left to impress,  
to remind me that what is beautiful  
is found in stillness, snow, darkness.

## Tirol Teaching

Against the back-drop of snow-tipped teeth of the north Tirol,  
teeth that gnaw at the eyes.

Steam vents out of a hotel chimney:  
thick, greyer than snow, unfurling  
a sky dragon's tail tipping, turning,  
curling with wind whispering it

fainter, wider, fainter, wilder  
swirls of nothingness,  
sometimes too wild, then  
suddenly soft and dissipating.

All meaning of life inferred here  
with the unmovable mountains  
rising to continental conductors,  
falling, if a million years of water insists.

As I stare I know I am closer  
to the steam molecules than stone,  
to scattering snow than still conifers.

## Orion Over the Tirol

A rare break from the clot of cloud tonight.  
I watch the waxing Gibbous moon rise  
and feel roundly called to study the stars,  
that much muttered about aspiration.

Orion's belt guides me, and I begin  
the education of every hopeful Pharaoh:  
locating Orion's legendary body parts:  
pulsing Betelgeuse, Bellatrix, Regel.

In and out to the balcony many times,  
consulting the internet, banging my head  
on the window shutters, cursing loudly,  
wondering what neighbours make of such a

slow student. Still more to learn: tonight  
the Winter Circle, a huge hexagonal asterism,  
known to ancients without iPads or Airbnb.  
I map out the hexagon, afraid of falling

off the balcony, laying flat on cold stone slabs.  
Discoveries from legend: Castor and Pollux,  
then the brightest of twinkling twin stars  
yapping in yellow winks: Sirius the Dog Star,

barking at the flooding Nile to Egyptians,  
the Dog Days of summer to the Greeks,  
guide across the Pacific for Polynesians,  
Unknown to me, mistaken as a planet.

I thank Orion for starting something  
begun as a curious boy but forgotten,  
scattered through adulthood of alternatives,  
resurrected with sore head and wonderment.

## **Hawks in Sudkreuz Station, Berlin**

They flock in the lower concourse,  
perched on benches, an eye  
on the escalators, another watching  
the supermarket exit, swooping  
in for tidbits, scraps of generosity  
hassled out of the hands  
of commuters, tourists, poor migrant  
birds - the hawks do not discriminate,  
tattered feathers, bald spots, talons  
encrusted with blood and vomit,  
flurry of filth when wings are flapped,  
a poor crop praying on, praying.

## **Into the White at Barbaresco**

As I listen to Cat Stevens, a single white silk thread throbs unfinished in the railings. White flies swirl in a chaotic courting solar system, oblivious but consumed in the few days they have. From a white car men wander slowly, inspecting black knuckles of vines, cutting back, collecting old stems to burn. A scythe of white reflected light on the curve of the Tanaro river; downriver the slash of rapids spell white waves. The fields and rippling hill ridges smudged in the misty whiteness that has lingered all day, now condensing. White haze on the horizon obscuring the Alps, a curtain keeping upswept privacy. Only the tallest white caps peak above: Mount Viseo a mirage where white blurs into blue. And the song finishes.

## Mario of Perno

We unearthed this lost emperor  
of men managing an *agriturismo*  
tucked up against the palace  
of Perno, population 75, bordered  
by the rich Barolo vineyards.

First met we thought him a local  
worker, in his woolen hat, jogging  
bottoms, pointing out a parking  
place, then up a stone shattered  
path to the yellow bricked walls.

Softly spoken, confidence crumbles  
like the crumbled clay of the ancient  
seabed, heaved up with the Alps,  
weathered over millennia, moulded  
into a landscape of masculinity half-

way between snow and sea. No  
weather washes out his smile, not  
even his inactive left arm: a winter  
vine stump topped by a swollen  
hand, gnarled knuckles, lumpy

stems that hints at a cruel season.  
Tenderly maneuvered into action  
by his patient right branch, like the  
vinters in the snow speckled hills,  
trimming back deadwood to guide

the whispers of new growth, while  
winter's fatalities crackle into  
memorial smoke of renewal. Holy  
man, always remembering water  
with wine: *naturale o frizzante?*

He taught us all the names  
of famous hilltop towns and castles,  
pointed where proud Barolo sits  
cuddled jealousy by *Langhe* arms.  
He bade us to listen to the birds

in the scruffy *rattini* valley below.  
*Tranquilla, tranquilla*, he told us,  
holding a moment of silent grace  
as proud of his Piedmont paradise  
as any of the old vineyard families.

Wake to songbirds excited that snow  
becomes a legend and the sky talks  
bluely of Spring. Go to sleep to the  
screeches of owls owning dark hills  
drawn close under unveiled winks

When we left, sadness blossomed  
and hung purpled in our woods.  
No more guests that day. Shook  
his greenwood hand. The hardwood  
hand held back, just smiles for us.

## Strained English

At Morden station a middle-aged Chinese man in a suit holds up leaflets, lecturing the bus queue in strained English about Jesus, the Second Coming, Hell. He is inspired, perhaps, by the March day of sunshine, the open blue sky, the ripple of unexpected heat, uplifting feeling in his brain and body.

No buses come. The queue does not flinch. Spring, early, stunning and silent. After ten minutes, he moves away, still holding up his leaflets, still lecturing in strained English. Suddenly a sharp wind slaps still faces, reminding everyone how early in Spring it really is.

## 5 Days in April - Yangshuo, China

### I

The yellowing bones of  
a two hundred million year old  
seabird thrust up into countless karst  
shafts by India's ancient desire for Asia;  
sighing down seashell-sharpened  
rock faces to coral reef hearts,  
until us voyeurs are just fossils  
of a faintly disgraced past.

### II

Dripping columns of rain constantly  
drumming on the rooftop restaurant  
awnings, pooling on the floor, soaking  
the chairs. The ghostly splattering  
on the fish farm ponds, around atolls  
and islands of algae. The mountain mist  
painting its traditional beauty. Gushing  
rain water funnelling into the open  
atrium of the hotel, creating an artificial  
ocean on the ground floor. Only the  
most insistent, plastic wrapped tourists  
bundled on bamboo boats that punt  
along the blurred arm of the grey-green  
Yolung river, down to the Dragon Bridge  
bowed with traffic pouring in for Tomb  
Sweeping festivities, beeping coaches full  
of prayers for rain to cease for fireworks.

## III

*Awake! Awake! Awake!*

The excited machine gunning  
firecrackers shake the mountainside  
graves, rattling out dozing darkness,  
scaring the fingering evil spirits  
off old bones and memories  
swaddled up inside stone cairns.  
A guff of gunpowder smoke  
loiters for a while, taking shape:  
a face of an approving ancestor  
that drifts into the moist mist,  
suffocating evil spirits until  
the next Tomb Sweeping day.

## IV

Walking past a wall  
of grandparents and their toddlers  
watching a digger dredge a ditch  
outside a new hotel, taking years  
to build. I wave and say, “nihao,” to a little  
girl and her guardian. Both wave back  
so happily, earnestly; the girl keeps  
waving and waving as if waving  
can wipe out differences between us,  
the *putt-putting* of motorbikes ferrying  
locals to work in Yangshuo,  
cockerels crowing all day long,  
the distant grinding of other hotels  
being lazily built while old farm huts  
rot quickly back into the earth.

## V

The evening deadens all the Spring greens  
and makes prehistoric mountains march,  
bowed over, greying them into the evening.  
The Yolung River tugs up her foggy night  
dress. Time for the tourists on bamboo boats -  
heads down in smartphones - to be heaved home.  
Still the swallows playing parabolas over the fish  
ponds where three men wade in, netting  
baby fish, silvery flashes of bodies bolting for  
freedom. The frogs begin singing the same  
song sang in this water for millions of years.  
The trees nod to the croaky chords in the air,  
and misty clouds sink in and smother us all.

## Tech House Finger Tap

He's in a Tech-House bar in Camden,  
tapping the side of his pint glass  
as tall as the forest of women  
limbering to his right. The taps  
are not in time to the beat,  
to the hammering base beat  
so hard it slams through the tables.  
He has his own beat – occasional,  
not in any time, two-fingered. Not  
in any way worried that he stands  
alone on the bar corner, staring  
out at the exit, people pulsing  
around him. He is a statue in time,  
clothed in classic black leather coat,  
belly pushing out; dark blue jeans,  
polished black shoes – a middle  
aged man making an effort, fingers  
taping out the morse-code for alone.

## **The Spiders of Copenhagen**

Night on a bridge at Copenhagen.  
Under the steel rim, bright lights.

Caught in the stars are hundreds  
of grey flies, struggling on milky

white webs spiralling all the way  
along the stiff arm of the bridge.

A constellation of flies flickering,  
and behind each web, a black hole

where a spider sits in singularity,  
waiting for the right alignment.

### 3 Swans Arrive in Prague

They arrive clothed in April keenness, three  
Valkyries, a cloudy V made for smaller birds.  
They fly across the face of the National Theatre:  
golden spikes, a winged charioteer and reeling

horses, frozen in jealous bronze. Bobbing heavy  
on the possibility they're too big to be airborne.  
The three Snow White travelers line up  
over the Vltava river, but exhausted currents

tug them, a drunken line, between sights  
of the Castle, the Old Town, centuries of migration,  
unchanging instinct. They lower and pass over  
Charles Bridge, ignoring lucky statues, bands,

artists, beggars, hawkers, two dogs arguing.  
Wings folding down, an impossibly controlled  
curve that looks like crash-landing in trees.  
Instead a perfect landing on the river, home.

## The Wave Theory of Grief

Two ducks bullet overhead,  
fire over the lake  
where a hawk circles, darker  
than the albatross winged gliders.

I sit and watch,  
peaks and troughs of grief  
deepening in the quietness of water,  
the twitter of birds.

A blue tit bolts down  
and then back up into hiding.  
Each indifferent beauty  
reminds me that he is not here.

I sit and watch  
riding the constant waves,  
carrying no matter, just energy,  
just endless particles of pain.

## Wind and Gulls

The wind strumming clanging cords  
and ropes of sails on the metal masts,  
the whole boat an amateur orchestra.

The gulls accompany in broken sopranos,  
scratching the air, opening healed  
memories so just with these two sounds

I am a boy again in Paignton, Torbay.  
Mum and Dad are forever youthful,  
grandparents alive, enjoying retirement,

my brother and I playing in the sand,  
just children sifting the infinite,  
ignoring the gulls, the strumming wind.

## **Making My First Chord on the Piano**

Ilie tells me he doesn't understand my poetry, my Romanian friend, speaker of three languages, and a fourth, which he teaches me on the piano patiently pointing out how to place my fingers to find the C Major chord. The moment the keys strike I shiver. So this is the sound that summons so many people, the sound of a tiny achievement, making my first chord, but it sounds like honey and my friend understands poetry after all.

## Forbidden Swifts

Three swifts burst above the clipped shrubbery  
outside the Forbidden palace. They play  
in dives and swirls, too fast for snapping camera.  
They fly without knowing  
the famous protests, tanks, crushed national memory.  
They fly without meeting in the air,  
now five of them as May grows seconds longer,  
the tourists with airy memories,  
bored military police with huge toy guns,  
little Chinese boys dressed as Superman,  
hawkers selling Mao's *Little Red Book*.  
Perhaps the flapping red flags amuse them  
as they move with such watery ease,  
now eight of them hinting summer,  
scathing pass immovable cultural relics  
dressed by the immovable face of Mao.  
He does not blink and miss them  
Like I do.

Two hours later,  
a group circle around the Hutong,  
quietly collecting under vague  
cumulonimbus shapes as if to chase  
away the smog, the encroaching cranes,  
the grinding jaws of the city, snapping  
at the history hidden in allies. Just haze  
and no swift can move the haze. Fade,  
they can only fade.

## Epitaph for An Ant

The flying ant staggers across the table,  
slipping in and out of cracks on the surface,  
searching Martian ravines for a new home.

She sees it and picks up the salt holder.  
In a twitch of an ant's antennae,  
she stamps the salt holder down,  
savagely smearing it across the table,  
erasing the ant over the wood it found  
so hard to walk on. The bottom half  
reduced to a black tar scar. The top  
half a full stop.

She continues talking  
as if nothing untoward has happened.  
To her, nothing has. God has spoken  
and we ants can do nothing but pray.

## Daddy in Dresden

It bombs the tram window  
in a splatter of puppetry  
and paper thin appendages.  
Daddy Long Legs, a Crane fly,  
the biggest family of flies.  
15,000 species can't save  
the puppeteer's plaything,

mean school boys grinning  
like Nazi doctors, plucking  
long straws evolved to aid  
escape, no escape now for  
the powerless Pinocchio,  
strings snapped one by one  
until Daddy's left lolloping,  
tiny wings unable to lift it's

mosquito-like but harmless  
body. Today there are no  
cruel boys, just my wife  
shrieking in surprise, blowing  
Daddy away so he can flop  
masterless, wobbling into  
the giggling air, poke his nose  
in someone else's childhood.

## Suddenly Night

Half an hour ago we were on the front  
deck, finishing drinks, watching the sun  
purple the sky, blush clouds, butter  
golden orange the two softly rounded  
buttes opposite, birds darting to safe roosts.

Suddenly night unrolls its darkening cloth,  
the first stars proudly lighting the path,  
Saturn sneaking through the fir tree.  
Cars are bright dots on the distance road  
that wriggles the rim of the river and hills.

Bright house lights and insects clicking.  
A single bat drunk on darkness clatters  
through its sleepy start. Tree silhouettes  
filling shrinking spaces, all to be covered,  
and I must accept what was lost again.

## Beach Colours of the Tuscany Coast

On the beach of *Forte Dei Marmi*,  
exclusive Marble Fort, background  
of grey Apuane Alps veined white  
glaciers of marble, the Carrara quarries  
Michelangelo loved so much he laid  
roads to his waiting ships, blue hazing  
back into white. The beaches filled  
with olive skinned Italians, richly  
chipped but burnt Russians in yellow  
sun hats, rows of white towel-covered  
blue sunbeds, deckchairs, mostly empty.  
Wandering through it all, immigrant  
salesman buzzing about junk: glossy  
glasses, bright balls, shimmering dresses,  
neon iphone cases, bath towels of rainbow  
hues, leaning towers of sun hats on dark  
north African heads, some Nigerian,  
darker than secret migration stories;  
all waved away like wasps. Marginally  
luckier Asian women in white overalls  
offering massages to dozing Davids.

## **The Freight Train at Night**

The young night drips sleep  
into me. Suddenly a wail  
waves up six hundred feet  
from tracks along the far  
side of the Columbia River.  
A freight train is slipping  
through the Gorge, crying  
through Hood River, headed  
to Portland. Another wail,  
a knowing sound that washes  
over me, resurfacing lost  
faces seen in dreams, sadness.  
Fading grumbles, the kilometre  
of freight tailing off. Night fills  
me and I sink into the river,  
searching for the morning.

## Waiting for the F-Line to Castro, San Francisco

Two teenagers, first date or  
flirting friends, wait for the streetcar  
on the curb at Fisherman's Wharf.

Two deaf teenagers, first date  
or flirting friends, gesturing  
with such intensity, absorbed.

in each other's faces and hands  
buttering thoughts, patting each other  
urgently to insist, interrupt, press

silent words into eyes. She gulps  
the air with the flurry of thoughts,  
her face reacting with every emotion

from reeling indignation to beaming  
approval, some final sounds kissed,  
other completed with gasping laughs.

She, a girl grasping at womanhood.  
Iphone sticking out of denim shorts,  
flowery over-the-shoulder purse.

He, an older boy, olive skinned,  
black hair spiked, first beard neatly lined,  
leather jacket despite the July heat.

The gathering crowd watch them talk,  
engrossed by the bubble of their romance  
spelt out in blurring hands and fingers.

## How the Cookie Crumbles

The Corner of SW 4th Av & SW Washington,  
the Java Man cafe, base for city Patrol Officers  
taking a break, late lunch, coffee catch ups.  
Two Patrol Officers: one is younger, newly

qualified, sharp lines, fresh haircut, first  
days on the job, learning about law courts.  
More important lesson to discuss: love.  
Younger recruit recently burned, dumped

his nearly married-her-relationship after  
finding her toying with other new recruits.  
He wants to state his case, question motives,  
show pity for the other wronged men.

He rationalises his new wisdom: never  
cheat. One secret slip-up was enough. Weighs  
heavy on his conscience - how could he have  
married her? She left, so no need for confession.

Interrupted by a homeless man with lump  
on his head, false leg, begs to have his 5L bottle  
filled. No. Owner does not want to encourage.  
Water fountain in a nearby park. Good day.

Older P.O. knows about love, how people connect,  
how rebounds fail, being 'footloose and fancy free'  
Can be a fantasy. He drifted from his son's mother.  
Marriages in The Force Rarely Last. Official.

They compare notes of female cadets won  
and lost. Calls come in: fight in public lavatories,  
crazy dude pushing people on the street,  
needs picking up. Naked homeless man. East

Burnside. Older P.O. talks about the city sucks  
up the river of homeless, the incessant heat,

insufficient A.C. at home. Joking about nudity.  
Gotta see this. Bang back coffee, thank  
the owner, roll out unhurried. Return

a few minutes later, laughing. Crazy pusher  
caught. Naked dude put his clothes on  
and walked off down the street. Back to  
lunch. Just how the old cookie crumbles.

## **Slither**

Down from a ladder,  
smile wide legs slithers  
of air, sliding down  
it's thread, as slight  
as an atom, the whisper  
of evening, lines drawn  
from ancient evolution,  
millions of atoms less  
than this blundering ape  
but so much more. I pinch  
the thread and move it,  
reverentially, all Creation  
bobbing on molecules,  
then scuttling silently  
into the carpet, invisibility.

## The Singing Sea at Florence, OR

No one is with us. No one  
is playing that instrument,  
a hollowed bone horn? No,

the salty wind humming  
air over strings of stone,  
thousands of tons of sea

defence boulders hauled  
in place by bored soldiers.  
On the abandoned beach

beside us the litter of noisy  
nights when wind drummed  
hard, waving trunks bleached

bone grey; jumbled graveyard,  
of broken limbs, weathered  
husks. The haunting humming

goes on, the sea listening  
to its existence echoing  
inside discarded seashells.

A song of salt wind and sand  
washed percussion; needing  
no audience, no applause.

## Hearing the Sea at Pacific City, OR

It is not until we are leaving,  
cars bulging, backs turning,  
goodbyes rolling behind eyes,  
that I hear the sea growling

from over grass topped dunes  
higher than the sandy houses,  
a barrier from the water, wind  
but not the long-feared tsunami

brewing in faults. Such roaring  
I fear it really is the tsunami  
catching us after days denying  
geology tells the same time.

No, this is the constant churning  
groan of that wind-licked sea  
wanting to be heard over  
our prayers for safe travels,

rushed predictions for reunions.  
Louder as it hurries over dunes  
to wave us away, wish us back,  
dissolving footprints in the sand.

## Tamanawas

*For Chinook people, Tamanawas is a helpful spirit guardian.*

For two hours we tip-toe towards  
Tamanawas Falls, fine-footing  
through roots of century old Douglas Firs  
raveling around rocks, thousands of years  
still since they were spewed out  
of Mount Hood's magma mouth,  
first opening half a million years ago.  
We clamber over a recent rock slide  
reminding us briefly witnessing apes  
that even ancient elements move.  
The voice now is pounding water,  
recycled molecules millions of years older  
boring deeper into the rock, the misty  
froth spills around us. We take pictures,  
return to the car, the sun slipping  
June rays between dense trees  
As it has since there were trees  
and the sun, billions of years ago.  
Driving back unaware of fate, I ask  
what that flashing yield 4-way junction  
sign means. A white truck edges out,  
doesn't stop. In a second we are shouting,  
screaming, veering into the other lane  
of traffic. Thank the Chinook god,  
Tamanawas, who guides the driver, Jill,  
waving a watery wand. No oncoming traffic.  
We skid to a stop in a gas station, panting,  
hearts beating, the truck shrinking away.  
Three seconds and we're saved.

## Sniffing Death

On English roads blood-caked  
sacks of fur and agonised features  
are foxes, badgers, rabbits,  
sometimes too smeared to  
recognize as childhood friends.

Here on the Oregon coast,  
a few miles from Pacific City,  
there is a large black bundle  
cutting the middle of the road.  
A sprawled body of a baby bear

stretched out as if asleep,  
a cuddly toy dropped out of a  
car window. We wonder  
where its mother is, how long  
she stays at the roadside,  
sniffing death and growling.

## Swallows Leave Ticino

From north-facing windows we watch  
waves of swallows pumping past,  
slithers of wings on bobbing currents  
following summer south as it flows  
down alpine valleys into Italy,  
back home, African elastic snapping  
back as cumulus clouds pile up  
over the Ticino Alps. Some bolt past  
in small gangs, rolling over each other's  
airstreams. Others are lone stragglers,  
struggling to catch an exhausted sun.  
We watch and wonder how we arrived  
at this new view, home not yet found.

## Waving Cat

When we left China  
my wife wanted a Waving Cat  
to summon good fortune  
for our new adventures.

We bought it in Hong Kong,  
in the Temple Street night market  
on a damp, foggy evening,  
rain dribbling off plastic awnings.

We found her purring in golden  
plastic, surrounded by twins  
of every size, all softly waving,  
left paw clawing the air, dripping

with condensation. Ours had  
a solar panel under her feet  
snapping up lucky photons,  
eight minutes old, destined

to make an arm move, convince  
highly evolved apes that luck  
is a thing that be can be captured,  
shipped and set up as a shrine.

Now the cat sits on a window sill,  
pumping German air all day,  
slowly calming into the evening,  
waving, giving, reminding us of

two years of Asian adventures:  
sci-fi mega-cities, ancient rice terraces,  
karst hills, vast temples, unexpected  
friendships, marriage, moving.

## **The Old Man in the Café Bazar, Salzburg**

White receding hair, face lined  
in tectonic plates of sorrow forcing  
layers of life inwards. He sits alone,

staring out the window. Jumps  
with a start if you look at him,  
as if recognising a lost friend  
or his doppelgänger fossilising.

An elderly woman waddles over.  
He erupts into life, smile explodes,  
laughter bubbling. His wife? No,  
just a friend sitting at another table.

They exchange awareness of being  
still alive, then she recedes. He sinks  
back into coffee grounds. She leaves.  
For a last moment he is flowing again:

smiles, a wave, then solidifying.  
A tremor when the waitress arrives.  
He pays, tips, smiles, crumbles.

## From Egon Shiele's House in Cesky Krumlov

Looking down on the Vltava river  
yellow leaves splattering  
the glassy surface. Seconds later  
brushed away by the current.

Children playing in a kindergarten:  
roars, rolling screams, cries of delight  
colour the air. Years later  
brushed away by the current.

There will be clothed trees again.  
More children born to play, grow  
up, stand at Shiele's house, notice

those tumbling houses, contorted  
by time, the trials of human bodies,  
that some can never return but  
refuse to be brushed away.

## **The Luck of Waves**

To hold in your huge ape hand  
a perfectly evolved little reptile baby  
flippers clapping with excitement,  
wanting to be released into gulping.  
To place it down backwards in the sand  
and watch it instinctively turn, spurn  
the sand in tiny flipper spadefuls  
and surge with minuscule muscles into  
the Java surf, into its chances. To watch  
the one my wife was cheering on,  
turn suddenly right, head straight  
for where we saw a huge monitor lizard  
lolloping into the water. No amount  
of screams can turn it away, just  
the luck of waves and random currents.

## How the Hummingbird Hawk Moth Came to Be

As if a Creator had only parts left  
after finishing all the other animals:  
a hummingbird's orb, a bee's hum,  
the unrolling tongue of Spring,  
a bat's suddenness, a feathery aura,  
a butterfly's false eyes and orange  
underwings, but call it a moth  
so it can keep all of these secrets,  
suddenly tossed into the air, dipping  
a flower at a restaurant in Locarno  
in the middle of a warm October  
when insects should be rumours  
not nature's mixed-up punctuation.  
I am all exclamations and questions.

## October in the Saxony Countryside

The whole day is made of twilight and smoke.  
The sky grimaces every shade of grey,  
jealous of colouring woodlands, stubbly  
fields, the misty hint of high hills, still  
farms. Through the sky starts waving smiles  
and frowns of geese, v'ing from winter,  
shifting leader as they shuffle the deck.  
A sudden swirl of wind and yellow  
leaves vortex the air, yellow leaves  
everywhere until the wind dies, they fall.  
The geese gone and the grey remains.

## Only October

Only October spills out  
long summer shadows,  
stolen when August wasn't  
looking, tricking the trees  
into waiting, the sky into blue.

Ignore the white scarring  
of frosty grass, the stillness  
in the park, yellow leaves  
falling in quiet embarrassment  
to the floor, joining the other

yellows, oranges, reddening  
litter. Birds twitter about hope  
and light pulses bright one last  
beating time until Autumn sighs,  
waving it all away. By the end

of the month, now red leaves  
curl of the branches, flurried  
by the conducting cold, colour  
boldest in the last breath.  
Every current is sadness.

## The Music Played

Under the arches of the portico,  
pressed against the back wall,  
so that her body becomes stone,  
she watches the three-piece band,  
a much taller crowd gathering  
in front, blocking her view  
but not looking down at her,  
at a cruel discord in her DNA  
that jangled her fates, played  
havoc with cell division  
leaving her stunted, her face  
mud-slipped on one side,  
her limbs twisted like a wind-  
bent tree. These guilty words  
have no right to express her  
peace and beauty as the music  
played, her bobbing head,  
her enjoyment despite the Life  
dished out from scraps.

## Twinkle, Twinkle

Maybe it's the word *twinkle*,  
a relic of your Teddy Bear  
days when Nursery Rhymes

knew the truth. Too busy  
being adult, a being of work,  
bills, brain dulled by looking

down at the twinkling screens  
instead of up at the twittering  
sky. Look again, feel your face

unfolding in wonderment:  
stars are unimaginably far away,  
but your childhood so close.

Imagine. Just some solar orbits,  
a few calories of effort to raise  
your index finger, point up

towards the cosmos-crossing  
light that took millions of years  
to reach earth, photons bumped

by the atmosphere in the final  
seconds, causing the twinkling  
magic that illuminates your eye,

fires electrons, burns in your  
mind, resurrects memories,  
connects to space forgotten.

## The Time of Rooks in Dresden - Part 1

### *Early October*

Foggy morning and the rooks sweep into the city for the first time, gathering like a bomber squadron around the *Rathaus* roof and tower. They dip in and out of the tumbling sky, a noisy, black bombardment.

### *Mid-October*

5.30pm. The first time they flock in mock circles, an unfurling octopus arm spilling out inky, cawing dots from a nearby crane. They encircle the *Altmarkt* shopping centre, warmed up by commercial thermals. Now they play at being a spectacle that few people will notice happening.

### *Early November*

It has begun, the rook take-over in the pastel dark dawn. Hundreds of rooks in the trees and amassing on the roof of the old town hall, noisily chatting about a new gossip, new day in the old city. The rooks are the only noise, only movement.

### *Early December*

Two inky squadrons of feathered darkness whirl over Dresden as the rising sun blots the sky. Two days later a huge spooling murmuration manifests over the *Altstadt*. A noisy haphazard chaos as rooks try to decide where to go, how to cloud the clumsy sky.

## The Rain at Night

Rain patting down the heavy sheets of night,  
morse code messages interrupting sleep,  
tiny womb-beats gurgling peacefully  
so that I'm delighted to be awake, to drift  
back to the before-birth darkness we die into.

Shored up in places of plywood and concrete  
it's easy to find falling water pleasurable,  
to think that this is an ancient melody  
of childhood chatter and drips of dreams,  
a free meditative muttering from lost gods.

But perhaps our ancestors, shivering in caves  
or cramped up behind smoky walls  
of sloppily daubed mud, hated the damp  
music, cursed the tinkering sky deities,  
praying for the morning, sun, dryness.

## The Time of Rooks in Dresden - Part 2

### *Early January*

Rooks are reeling around the top of the *Kreuzkirche* - large black specks of ash lit up by the pastel dawn sky. They pulse and wave around that crowning statue with an outstretched hand. The bright clock face like a rising fire.

Rooks flying around a crane - their bony yellow night roost - as dawn breaks pale and sickly. Rooks flying like flecks of ash, urgent spittles of city memories, a wave of ink drops flicked off the undulating arms of a ballerina.

### *Mid-January*

The wind spills them over *Postplatz*. Complaining, they wheel around and crash land back on the rooftop as the weak sun milks the sky and the dripping sludge decomposes. A clot of newcomers bleeds in from the river and jostle amongst the roosters. The city now darker, winter-damaged.

### *Early February*

Dusk after thumping rain: the sky is heaped up at the horizon, clouds a pile of washed purple clothes. Above: the bleaching blue hanging empty and quiet, but suddenly rooks swirl into the emptiness, filling with giddy swirls, smokey croaking in excited child-cut circles, disordered dancing, their last chance before the evening settles into their feathers and blackens the choking sky.

### *Late February*

Rooks spill from the top of the Pullman hotel. One group flaps into the rising sun, heavy wings, becoming bigger birds, albatrosses as they pound the air. Another group wheel back, splinter, scatter, thin out in different

directions, wanting to remain city rooks but distracted by whispers of Spring: tree buds, erupting fields, the city recovering.

## **Together**

Elderly couple waddling  
down the evening street.  
Holding each other close:  
his white stick tapping,  
her eyes half opened, flickering.  
No leader, just together.

## Trickster Time

We are a few moments of time  
loaned by the Great Trickster  
from the Big Bang bag  
for us to use, abuse, amuse  
Him or Her as best we can.

An almost invisible thread  
in the tapestry of billions of years.  
We unravel through countless  
errors, regrets, greying hair,  
fated to the same ending.

Delay just an illusion, a gift.  
We are all children tiptoeing  
downstairs on Christmas day  
to find the Great Trickster  
welcoming us back to nothing.