

ancestors

practising my juggling
one day in Oxford
a passing priest
asked if I'd do a show
at an old folks home
at the end of the street

a few days later
I showed up
suitcase and suit
and met a few dozen
elderly Catholics
all
exceedingly posh

it was that one perfect show
not a single drop
and all my hardest tricks
sometimes it just slots together
and there's something
sublime

three ball pirouette
heel flick to fountain
four ball mill's mess
fifth ball taken from toe
three minute club routine

in my overblown imagination
that faultless performance
came to mean something

me and the ancestors
honouring
each other

[IMAGE: "5 balls East Oxford
Community Centre"]

you're leaving

heading South
in Katie's wonderful bus
a 1954 Bedford

it had long curves
a split windscreen
and a chimney
that gave it away
as a living vehicle

this was the time
when the media
was hysterical
about "travellers"

we stopped for tea
but before the kettle
had boiled
there was a knock knocking
at the sliding door

two guys
with a petrol can

and a lighter

they held them up
and said

"you're leaving"

so

we left

eventually

we got to Newbury

we had caught up

with the others

and a raggy convoy

rolled into town

somehow

a police escort appeared

at the park

there were people

waving flags

cameras for the mayor

to welcome

the travelling show

I still felt jumpy
and scanned their faces
these were the same folks
and you can't tell from looking
whether you are going
to get death threats
or bunting

[IMAGE: "Mr Gasket & Bedford
Bus"]

magic tricks

sometimes
doing magic tricks for folks
I get to see
their pupils dilate
their nervous system
goes off like fireworks
I like to think
the child inside them
breaks through all the layers
the charade of adulthood
and triumphantly declares
“see, I knew it was real,
I KNEW it!”

[IMAGE: trick]

spectre

I startled awake
didn't recognise the room
where was I?

waiting for my memory
to wake up
and tell me
I felt a pressing need
to remember
to not lose the plot

four five years
travelling
touring
doing shows
having adventures
and I'd come unstuck
and rattled loose
a spectre
searching
for home

it seemed terribly important
that my life story
should not end
in this vague blank
that I should not
linger
in that nameless place
as an extra
a walk-on

I didn't have a script

here was a deep fear
it has always seemed
that the folks around me
had lives
and backstories
even names and stuff
to be actual people
that their lives
really were
well

real

-2-

spy hole

spy hole
before the show
I'd peep through
at the excited kids
their candyfloss
so much to see
rubber necks
a thrumming
of expectancy
my soul battery
down to nothing
I was
a vampire
trying to draw in
their energy
to feed
on their light
to anchor myself

in an ocean
of darkness

[IMAGE: "5 rings"]

lost

birthday bicycle

ah, the glory of that bicycle
is it so long ago
that birthday?

wheeling scared elated
entrusted to momentum
my Dad released me
laughing steps receding
down our little hill

wind thrilled
my boyhood ablaze
with love mutely given
and tacitly received

[IMAGE: "Colmcille and Hughie
2007"]

behind the disco

my dad

always denying emotions

ran

from his mother's funeral

hiding his eyes

how do we leave the past behind

and set our course anew?

behind the disco

amongst the weeds and rubbish

hot tears of grieving

for the father

I still had

dad

I was watching my friends
do a street show
when I got the fateful call
my dad
was gone

I got there in time
to ask the guys
to give me a while

the bedroom
was filled with sunlight
he lay on his side quite dead
I sat in silence for ages
until all there was was peace

he had been going for years
his mind leading the way
funny to the last
mam found him struggling
half in and out of his trousers
mentally defeated
by the task of going to bed

his last words were
"it's my last trick!"

when I really want to recall him
I smell the back of my own hand
here, I'll do it now

it triggers a memory of childhood
strangely, vividly present

it was in his last years
when he'd forgotten
his parental stance
the sternness and distance
softening into warmth and fun
that we had our closest times

we both understood that love
is for always

[IMAGE: "Cul larfing"]

mam

five lunatic boys
loved unconditionally
throughout a steadfast lifetime
mam, you've demonstrated
the kind of selfless virtue
I thought only existed
in sermons

[IMAGE: "Margaret & Hughie"]

grandma

lazy dust floating
in sunshine
through a gap in the curtains
grandma sleeping in her chair

a blissful memory
of simple peace

she would play at cards
a kind of solitaire
and she would never miss
a radio show called
"Dr Finlay's Casebook"
the radio was huge and brown
with great big black dials
she used to call it
the "wireless"

she made soda bread
and lemon curd
but I was too young to learn
everyone else was at work
or school

which was actually the same place
my folks being teachers

she called everyone "lovie"
I always thought it funny
and she had a special tin
for saccharine tablets
she put in her tea

sellotaped inside the lid
was a shard of glass
it had stabbed her in the finger
during the war
a bomb had blasted
but she still had laundry
and got cut
patting it down
over twenty years
that glass bothered her
eventually it worked its way
out of her wrist
and so she kept it
as a memento

a trophy of a triumph
over pain

at dinnertimes for eight
she would often disappear
into silent reveries
as she tapped her fingers
on the table
my dad would slide a mat
under her drumming
and the sound would change
to muffled

we all went into fits

she had an operation
well into her eighties
gallstones I think
and the convalescence was long
one evening
when everyone was out
she popped her head around the
door
to say "I'm just off
to the whistdrive lovie"
I said something like
"that's great grandma
you haven't been for ages"
and she gave an unusually
enthusiastic smile

on the way
she was hit by a motorbike
and that was that

I found her glasses
on the verge
when I went to have a look
I like to think that fate
had dealt her a kindness some-
how
but still I really wish
I'd offered to walk her

[IMAGE: "Grandma Carroll"]

ice

lucid waters mingling
glittering mountain lake

released
the memories of glaciers

forgotten
the frozen dreams

of ice

[IMAGE: Mountain lake]

bottom feeder

bottom feeder
only murky aware
of the fizz and flash
of shoals of life
in lighter waters

the booming depths
of pressured pulsing

darkened half life
yet living

through ages

[IMAGE: "sea"]

love is a dance

flying lurching

wounded winging

love is a dance

stepping barefoot

across the void

lead and follow

joy and loss

a dossey doh of

tears and laughter

glittering between

birth and death

glimpse

the present

spliced infinitesimally between

before and after

rarely seen

at the cinema

mid film

I glimpsed the street

through a slowly closing

fire exit

balance regained

a miracle of balance regained
my mind is not these things
but not something apart
from this abandoned sock
this broken glass
this passing traffic

a miracle of balance regained
like water
like crystal
like space

what was all that
that dragged me down?

dragon

its sound is heard
by no ears
in silence

its motion surrounds
everything
in stillness

the epochs of minutes
have no duration

the dark wings
of the dragon
expose my heart
in pain
and beauty

jewels

the solar blast
shocked our chattering
into silence
the snow
the high moor
the jewels of dew
on the fir trees

blazing

like love

[IMAGE: Sarah & Hughie, Chan
Retreat 2001]

what is love?

what is love?
the shared silence
of spinning spheres
singing suns
sailing stars

we are voyagers
everyday its own destination

[IMAGE: "Giant's Grave"]

[The Sailing Stars](#)

what is love?
amidst the festival bedlam
breathing peace
by trust breathed
we formed the centre

what is love?
soft shushing strokes
of skin on skin
always good
right to the core
not to be doubted

what is love?
through the sunlight of our laugh-
ter
and the shadows of our fears

flowers

I looked at the flowers
while you made the tea
you had some news to give to me
I waited and trembled, what could
it be
that could be so big it needed tea
and
waiting
I knew it was the end of our
happiness, I knew in my bones as
I
looked at the flowers

the hours and years of our ro-
mance
began to blanch as you calmly ad-
vanced
your reasons
your reasons for leaving you gave
to me
over tea
and I looked at the flowers

the flowers I'd bought you to cele-
brate
to celebrate your return to home
and me and not to flee to your new
end
without me in another country with
your new boyfriend
I looked at the flowers
carnations I think blue and pink
and already dying because they
were cut
and put in the vase to gracefully
fade
but in their passing to gladden
to gladden the heart but mine
passed into the shade
your sun would shine elsewhere
how could this happen?
I looked
and silently knew that you had re-
turned

to our fairytale

as a thief who would take all the
light

and sew the seeds of the weeds of
grief

and so I looked in the calm
of moments before the storm
of showers that would fall from my
eyes

and so I looked at the flowers

[IMAGE: "Sarah and Hughie"]

dog & stick

multi-coloured leaves

flutter down

dog runs after stick

absurdly happy

all of us

just listen

sorrowing yes

aching too

but just listen

the surrounding hush

so bright

with loving

Richie

that stoopy way you had
and your sudden animation
long fingers unfurled
all eyes electric popping

for some reason

it's ok

[IMAGE: "Richie"]

or head lowered
twinkling beneath comedy eye-
brows
and when something was shit
you said "it's shit!"

after the funeral
after the song of the blackbird
we walked on the hill
how vivid that vision
of you turning and smiling
and waving "bye"
you always said it
more like "boy"

it's never going to be ok
your being gone
but somehow

the four great kings

the four great kings
my brothers
who spurned
my adoration
do they not know
the Lord of Death
cares nought
for seniority?

Yama crowned me
and now
in the fierce blast
of freedom
I wear
my shaven head

[IMAGE: "Hughie, Tim, Damian,
Matt, Jem 1985"]

Tim Tim Tim

Tim Tim Tim
my terrifying brother
the kind of fright
you put in me
as we were growing up
forced me to find my feet

and then the other Tim
who showed me
the stars
and the birds

and my God
that lifetime of your art
that mysterious magic
that no one understands

no one

bat detector

bat detector
a gang taking turns
on the headphones

suddenly transfixed
by the aching tranquility
at the twilight lily ponds
my heart burst open

I stood away in the quiet
feeling the fluttery wings
awestruck

later on you said
"it was a shame
you missed it!"

Carrollus Primus

my biggest brother
astride the Himalayas!
alone in a boat
on an ocean!
naming a glacier!
in Antarctica!

as a kid
the only person
more heroic
more impressive
was Neil Armstrong!

I used to think
you didn't know who I was
so thank you
for taking the trouble
to change my mind

[IMAGE: Damo skidoo]

[Benjamin Glacier](#)

silly walks

that wonderful dinner-time
of anecdotes
John told us
of the meditation retreat
he did with John Cleese
from Monty Python
I asked
“how was the walking meditation?”
everyone laughed
except John who said
“it was fine”

[IMAGE: John's 70th birthday
party]

10,000 Buddhas

in the hall of 10,000 Buddhas
on pilgrimage in China
I told Simon
about how it was
twenty years exactly
since the accident
I was trembling
leaf branch
trunk and root
he said
“that’s the thing
about anniversaries
you should consider
the alternative”

[IMAGE: hall of Buddhas]

Gaia

a great surge of love
overwhelmed me
Gaia herself
streaming with rain
the mother of us all

'how can I help you?'
I asked

'heal my children!'
she replied

I myself
streaming with tears

our pain

[IMAGE: "Maenllwyd"]

treasure

money worries everyone

a grateful heart

is treasure enough

owls

deepening dusk

hush enfolds

last birds

silent

zazen expands

boundaries blur

distant barking

inside

now eternal

night's bewitchment

brings

owls

[IMAGE: church & moon]

all of us

career, family, home
three pillars
collapsed at once
it took a long, long time
sifting through the rubble
to remember
in a way that needed
no one's confirmation
that my heart is both
good and true
and made up
of everything
and everyone else
that the totality
is not complete
without me
and so all the practice
the sitting
the study
the yells, bells and smells
I really do do it

for all of us

[IMAGE: Vulture Peak]

stopping the sun

whatever the monk had told us
I remember being upset
everything seemed hopeless
all my striving in vain
Sally, do you remember
you told me
“Hughie, you’re one of our stars”
well I do
that was a kindness

a few years later
in your garden
after your treatment
you had just told me
the cancer had spread
just before my tears
you stopped me saying
“but Hughie, everything
is absolutely
perfect!”

the sun stopped
in its track

[IMAGE: Sally & Hughie]

Sally Masheder catches a feather
on a fan at Tientong Si where
Hung Chih was abbot and where
Dogen got enlightened

giggle dancing

the Chan nuns
clearly loved
their abbess
young and pretty with it
she had an elemental force

at one point
as I left the hall
she was on her way in
she paused and looked
maybe sensing
I had something to say
“xienzai xin yi”
(now heart one)
the best Chinese
I could muster

she lifted a finger
above her head
and slowly slowly
drew it down
to the centre

of her chest
closing her eyes
as she went

we bowed to each other
two pairs of eyes
giggle dancing

[IMAGE: “China feet”]

strategies

astonishing scary reality
glorious behind a veil
of strategies and agendas
trying to find a solution
to what cannot be solved

la via dolorosa

on the via dolorosa
the descent into night
if it's all

"poor me, poor me"

then you know
you are halfway
and the return
is still to come

how else
are heroes born?

eyebrows

De Lin the Chan Master
a tigerish air about him
looked at John and said
“so, Shen-yen gave you transmis-
sion,
what did he teach you?”
all eyes shifted to John
“to see the nature with a
compassionate heart”
all eyes shifted back
De Lin rocked on his cushion
eyebrows lifted
“not bad! not bad!”

now it might've been
a rhetorical question
but still

even though I was the student
and John the teacher
I can't think
if I've ever felt

pride like it

[IMAGE: John rainbow Hughie]

plankton

all over the hermitage
polite little notices
asking folks to be quiet
yet

showers
doors
latches

sound like

ice hockey
kendo
gunfire

startled plankton
move further off shore
and we can't even see

the sea

survival

I've been angry all these years

self-pitying

wounded

at the pain of survival

my faith is that the suffering

has something to teach me

but only my body knows

what that is

thus the answer

will not be a thought

and maybe

not even an answer

perhaps Avalokitesvara

The One Who Hears the Cries of

the World

perhaps he

can help me learn

shadow

looking at this shadow
I used to think
it wanted to drag me
back to the abyss
and so I tried to dispel it
to illuminate it
to be done with it forever
but where there is light
there is always darkness
so all I have to do
is turn around
and face the sun
and there it can stay
behind me
where it belongs

[IMAGE: Hughie at the rigging bar]

cloud

that dark cloud
the one that looms
inside
that one
the one made of aching
of soreness
the longings
and fears
the rage
the exhaustion
the one that grows
when there's not enough
of what's needed
all that
just imagine it
alongside everyone else's
all together
an unspeakable vastness
a great blackness
it's that
that makes us

the same

[IMAGE: "dry dock boat"]

Silbury

a violent absence
that missing bike
on the last day of school
a brute reality
of theft
to welcome a pretender
into supposed adulthood
twenty years on
the rattling borrowed racer
left at the foot
of Silbury Hill
part of the ancient attempt
to refill with meaning
the endless void
of incomprehension
at the strange blankness
of things
meditating there at the top
illegally
hoping for some transcendence
or peace

I felt the background maw
of the abyss
eternally waiting
under the futile upward struggle
of feeble life
recycling
back to Swindon
back to struggle
and disbelief at the hardness
of achieving even banal normali-
ties
against the roar
of that apocalyptic
silence

[IMAGE: "Silbury Hill"]

banana moon

big old banana moon
backing up towards the dawn
jaunty yellow
funny face
thanks for reminding me
of sweetness

[IMAGE: "Waning moon"]

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new moon

oh look!

the new moon

abruptly scything

through our stories

[IMAGE: "new moon - Bill King"]

photo - Bill King

posh clothes

what is it
about posh clothes?
maybe people need
to dress it up?
the pitiful perjury
the cruelty
in cufflinks

silks and stockings
and makeup
to take her vows
I gave her
mine

smell the starch in the surplice
smooth ironed vestments
sinful
God knows
but the hypocrisy
in shining raiment
that's what really shocks

over Windsor knots
forked tongues
satin sheen
lining
their pockets

[IMAGE: "Bullingdon Club"]

The Routinis, Oxford jugglers, Ric,
Richie and me, were hired for the
summer ball that this photo was
taken at. We performed for this
bunch of bastards!

the big nowhere

he's gone

into the big nowhere

Ben

you funny guy

that looming presence

both awkward

and comic

has been in mind

these last few days

I wonder if you knew

how much grief

love and missing

there's been?

always mad for bicycles

you are recycled

and have raced away

into that big nowhere

who can say

there is a glacier

named after them?

snatched away

into the big nowhere

just as I was

in our late twenties

I was returned

you

were not

in the first shock

of that absence

I would have swapped

my burdensome body

for yours

so young

so sweet

your wit

and kindness

were needed

I hope we'll meet

in that big nowhere

somehow to restore
the faith that was broken
in that abrupt rupture
that cataclysm
the schism
between here
and nowhere

somehow to regain friendship
with that great
big
nowhere

robin

high on the rabbitry downs
in sunny seclusion
we listened
to the glorying mercury
of that robin's song

in such dazzlement
my heart found
its declaration to you

a triumphant surrender
older
than grass

[IMAGE: "Corinne and Hughie"]

Madonna

Madonna in the dust

drifting

buried

your acceptance

so radiant

[IMAGE: "Hush"]

gliding

over my shoulder looking
I saw the river gliding
water so quiet
sunlight all dancing
under leaves shimmering
ripple scintillating
but so so quiet
the water streaming
insides resonating
with that silence
why would it bring tears?
the shortening days?
looking for spring-time's jumper?
knowing I'm just visiting?
gliding by?

[IMAGE: "the Test at Overton"]

renting

marriage and mortgage

never mind the wedding ring

I was just renting

[IMAGE: "wedding ring"]

carrying the cake

looking down the garden
pausing with her hand
still on the kitchen door
she had just come back
from a week of meditation
my heart leapt in recognition
the poise
the relaxed stance
the golden glow
of love mystery
all around her
"she's come home"
I thought
"we can both live there"
my worries vanished
and not long after
she accepted my proposal
we jumped around on the bed
marriage!
wow!
right then we saw a rainbow

"it must be a good omen"
we thought
a year or so later
after the ceremony
driving home
on the way back to
a garden party
we held hands
I felt enveloped
by an eternal peace
a long straight road
a beautiful tunnel of trees
a moment
to ring
through the epochs
a few hours in
to the garden jollities
the weather suddenly
turned cold
I saw all the goosebumps
down a guest's leg

"ok, everyone to the hall"

I announced

and right then the thought

"not another omen is it?"

carrying the cake

through the streets

on my head

I didn't know

that yes

it was

boy

was I in for it

[IMAGE: "H and C Sept 15"]

gulf

what a gulf
that lies between us
how could such closeness
fling us so far?

the time came
when it started to look
like I needed
to be carried
and that time came
way too soon

you chose fear
over love
even at the cost
of appearing
a demon
who welcomes
only to spurn

treason

I gave you my very heart
trusting in our joy
but then you said I tricked you!
that I was capable of treason!
that was the real betrayal
it was you who tricked me
into becoming a lightening rod
discharging
your ancient pain

softness

oh but again
you will shine
your love
will bring flowers
blossoms and braiding
for your hair
the soul's lament
will again
be distant
and the softness
of things
will reclaim
your heart

[IMAGE: "H and C Sept 15"]

Photo by [Elmar Rubio](#)

birdsong

I bathed my broken heart
in three months of silence
and birdsong

Easter morning
alone in the ancient church
ablaze with clarity
resting in radiance
I knew at last
the healing was done

blossom fell as I left
a marriage to the Tao

the deity told me
"love cannot arrive
from outside"

the sage told me
"your honour
is redeemed"

[IMAGE: West Ogwell Church]

game

did you not see
me tremble?
your glance
so piercing

surely you saw
that arrow hit
its mark?

can it be
just a game?
again?
the yearning?
the abyss?

feel it too
for then you would not
hold out your arms
and beckon me
to jump

[IMAGE: "brown eye"]

who cares?

who cares?
my friend asked
as we strolled
and talked
of music
of poetry
who cares?

are we not the ones
whose job it is
to care
to craft?

to have a response
to make it public
to express
come what may
even if
no-one cares?

[IMAGE: "mani stone - Holy Is-
land"]

book

an open book
perhaps thrown
from a car
lying in the litter

the spine damaged
soaked through
scuffed covers
all ripped
but intelligible

the reflections inside
could still be made out
one reading
"I am an open book"
another
"all about secrets"

the font claimed to be
"All-Wisdom"
sans-serif
and the type
was cast

in a multitude
of voices

whole chapters
given over
to self-pity
or excoriations
about abandonments
and betrayals
still other chapters
triumphant
or wistful
raging
or terrified

contradictions abound
coarse humour
yammed up
against the ethereal
the transcendent

despite a host of names
the author remains

undiscovered

[IMAGE: "book"]

[image source](#)

bastards

the fire comes	for a quick buck
the body heats up	their displays
my rage crackles	of supposed power
and spits	childish
	boring
these ignoble schemers	vindictive
Machiavellis	
Davos demons	any gesture to fairness
hedge fund hooligans	or decency
want the market to decide	any notion
want naked greed	of universal welfare
in charge	derided
they protect the herd	progressive ideas
to milk their profits	compassionate motives
a bovine ideology	defiled
of slaughter	and turned into
	"virtue signalling"
both Midas	
and Judas	deploring racism
taking Mother Nature	dubbed "intolerance"
and reducing her	
to scorched earth	

upholding human rights
criticised as "entitlement"

anything to ease poverty
"leads to the gulag"

they say

they think it's clever

but they are only

bastards

I curse them

those bastards

thrice cursed

bloody bastards

[IMAGE: "Gerald-Scarfe-Cameron-
cardboard-cartoon"]

[Gerald Scarfe](#)

kangaroo court

every few days
there was new tech to learn
I couldn't keep up
it's true

they would roll their eyes
when I asked for help
apparently now
it was a sign of weakness

words meant
whatever suited them
I hadn't "delivered"
because they didn't use
what I gave

denounced
in their kangaroo court
a coach and horses
driven through
their veneer
of "fairness"

soon it was playground tactics
I was sent to Coventry
then drummed out of the regiment
by a man
I called friend

flight

the weight
of the words
rolled around
in my mouth

tasted syntax
taking flight
fluttering phrases
speckled speech

painted ladies
and linnets
alighting
as kisses

a flock of words
landing and meant
as liberations
sent as doves
received as hawks

ah but language
is a cage

is it not?

birds sing
through bars
we each
have a sentence

[IMAGE: "Hughie, guitar, butterfly"]

Photo by Lynette Thomas

Mrs Nguy

Mrs Nguy died
her family looked
for a Buddhist funeral
they probably googled it
they found me

I pointed them
towards more formal
and fitting celebrants
but they still wanted
me

ok I had some robes
and a bit of background
but you know
I'm not ordained
not 'proper'
and I certainly couldn't
speak Cantonese

a few minutes
before the service
her grandson told me

the congregation
couldn't speak English

I put away my notes
for the speech
now redundant
and nearly panicked
but there was no time
and the microphone
was on

I remembered
the old Chinese poem
the Chan thing
about the chanting
where the meaning
is in the tune
not the words
so I sang

the singing
lifted
we all cried

those ancient tunes

reborn

[IMAGE: Church door]

sunbather

I've always felt
colourless
skin so very pale
sunburned
in moments

careful with the timing
I sunbathed
maybe it would make me
more attractive
maybe Eros
would smile upon me
once again

little hairs
on my arm
spectacular spectra
rainbows refracting
scintillating
amethyst
sapphire
ruby

emerald

it reminded me
about how we are all
preposterous jewels
awkward miracles

[IMAGE: "skin colours"]