

Diary of an Old Innkeeper by Roberto Sánchez Junco

I have enjoyed being able to tell people that I am an innkeeper. It has an air of romance, and reliability, a combination which I like. Here, surely, is the oldest profession. Men travel, men trade. Night will come and the traveller will be tired and hungry and need a place to lay his head, food, and a fireside where he can tell his tale and hear the gossip of his hosts. And 'innkeeper' has a ring about it that the title 'warden' does not. But our travellers have been looking for a different kind of profit and loss, a different kind of trade.

For several years my wife and I, after active careers, and looking for both peace and stimulation as we reached sixty years of age, have looked after a hostel in rural Scotland in which people stayed overnight (one night maximum) who were following an old route of pilgrimage, an increasingly popular adventure in recent years. This was the inn of which we were keepers. During the last year I kept a diary, writing regularly each week, about our guests, about nature, events in my life, reflections. One guest recently called the hostel a resthouse, rest on a journey, a journey whose purpose, often, is to find some peace, or inner rest, on the longer journey of life. And for me the diary was a way of bringing rest into my life as I fulfilled the duties of hospitality.

Looking back I can see clearly how fitting it was that I began this written record when I did. If you read on you will see that I made a somewhat tentative beginning, but I persevered, I think, because unconsciously I could sense how powerfully the future was foreshadowed in the mood of a year ago. The year ahead carried me along and gave me increasing confidence as it then came into being. There is sadness in this story, for Margaret, my wife, was already seriously ill at its beginning, but there is life in abundance. The people who come through the door each day, the changing seasons in a beautiful landscape, bring surprise and interest to temper the sorrow and pain of this year of my soul.

For many of our guests, too, pain or grief was the burden, the beginning. The pilgrimage was a path of healing or grieving. Sorrow is personal. Pain rests in the eyes, but waits for transformation, for change that is intriguing. How will we allow ourselves to grow, to mature? The leaves are falling, now, as I write - one, then another, a flurry then a pause, colouring the ground of autumn, leaving the spare beauty of the bare trees. Each of us can seem so insignificant, a speck of life that will fall and be forgotten. Such a thoroughly unoriginal thought has come alive for me thanks to the arrivals at our door and to my slow journey through the year. I have felt a flow of time in which each life shines even as it disappears – a spark not a speck. I let go, something disappears, then, to my surprise, returns. I see it in a new way. It could be a skein of

geese, the remark of a friend, or stranger. It could be my own sorrow which I let go into the glory of the setting sun. A pattern can appear, an order or even a power that is not solely personal but which honours the individual soul. This pattern includes ordinary thoughts, everyday actions, casual conversations. It is in this flow that my changes happen, my growth, and they happen, first, between people. I have had enduring friendships, and, in welcoming many travellers into our home, many brief but free and entire meetings. We talk today of natural wastage. This is natural growth.

In my work I travelled much, studying agriculture; how we take care of the earth, how we do damage. Now I have had these years with my own familiar horizons, my own ecology. Nature – the land, the sky – is essential for me as a domain for the changes that will work in me. I need wind and weather in my life.

Nature sustains me, and so I am drawn to the story of the seasons, the coming and going of bird and flower, sun and moon.

Then, into the way that outer and inner weather influence me, into the shifts between the tangible and the intangible, comes something elusive but, for me, recognisable. There are grand words for this reality – the Transcendent, the Divine, the Spirit – but grand words can weaken truth. To know this longing, this source, I need light and silence. I find this deeper motive in hints of change, in premonition, in music. I hear it in the silence after the last note fades away. I find it in the dawn and the dusk.

This diary is about the passing of time. What else is there but endings and returning, the many deaths, giving birth? What else exists?

I am back now where I started, with the autumn winds, a world on the move – my soul alert – and yet I have found peace, the peace to accept both what I have done and what left undone. Thanks to the daily unpredictable pilgrims and seasons, so reliable yet so unexpected, I have been led at times to the heart of peace. There I can juggle with life and death and birth. Shapes change before your eyes. Through all the motion of the year I feel the shaping love that lives in what is immediate.

Think what people endure! That is another kind of divine silence, a tactful, respectful silence, people accepting what life brings. To experience how people stick with the business of living is the inn keeper's privilege. The pilgrims have removed themselves from their routines, are walking their destinies for a few days, are often willing to talk and speak about their commitment to life. I have been lucky to hear their stories. And writing has been the task which has helped me to persist as myself through trying times. Being faithful to these strangers has kept me going.

A chance remark can stay with me – a pilgrim, a bit younger than me, spoke of herself as having decided, some years ago, that she was ‘too old to be desired’, and so she had shut up shop and resigned herself to a life of loneliness and memories. I keep hearing those words. I realise that my diary was my way of keeping going in the hope of being recognised as who I am, of not being forgotten, making clear that I have desires as well as disappointments.

So, yes, I have written this diary for myself but I have also written it for you, although it is only now that you are here in person to read it. I have imagined you being interested, trusting that my life, as any life, will interest you if I am honest, if I speak from my heart. We are drawn to the lives of others because we want to offer love, and love is the help we give each other to grow, and to offer love is a cardinal responsibility of the life each of us has been entrusted with. Stories of strangers teach us about how love works, and so do the colours and the voices of the seasons.

I have tried to keep the telling fresh, but I have also paused to compose the small poems, hoping to polish those moments into sparkling shapes. Even as I focus, my attention, mostly, will not stay still. One thing becomes another – a flying bird turns to a longing in my soul, a face across the table leads me to seek some truth within me, memory dies and vision dawns. This diary has been my resthouse and I hope it will be a place where you will feel welcome, and that there will be room enough for you to find the truth that is yours before you continue on your way. By each weekly entry you will find an indication of a numbered verse. These come from a small book called in English The Calendar of the Soul, originally composed in German by Rudolf Steiner a hundred years ago. These verses both intrigue and feed me, though they are not easy to grasp. I am a keen chess player and grasping the situation in a game often needs me to let go, stand back, let a shape or flow emerge, and then insight may arise. These verses are for me wonderful patterns of thought and feeling which hold the year, the soul year, in a subtle living network of ideas and images. I have, slowly, grown into an appreciation of these patterns, and because these verses accompanied me on my own path through the year, I have given the number in the sequence of verses which belongs with each of my weeks. The Calendar of the Soul begins in the Spring, at Easter – my diary begins in Autumn, so the numbers do not co-incide. You might be led to look them up, perhaps even to connect them with what was going on for me during any one week. That would be an extra, but not essential, layer to this story, told by an old innkeeper, of the light and dark and the colours they create between them.

WEEK 1 (Verse 26) – 6.10.09

The night before last, I was woken by the wind in the middle of the night, the first gale of autumn and I listened to the voices of the wind, the wind from the south-west. Furthest away, as it came towards our exposed house, was the vague monotone of the wind in the thick conifers across the open field. Then there was the buffeting of the wind against itself as it met the house, slapping and flapping like loose sails caught. Above and beyond the house was the shrill whine of the wind around and through the roof and finally the disappearing high tone, like arrows flying, of the wind going on, impelled down the valley.

Then last night, all was calm and cold and the full moon rose in the east above low layered mist suspended above the fields, too bright and dreamy to see the stars.

This full moon becomes
The silent sky,
Then cloud wisps pass over,
Breaking the spell.

Yesterday, as the gale was dying away, I was down by the burn and put my head under the old, untidy willow tree. In the branches around my head, a bramble had grown boldly and several branches hung down around my head, loaded with ripe berries, dark and shining, hanging free, drooping like grapes but wilder, black in the bower. I started to pick them but then left the beauty of it undisturbed. Coming out into the still strong wind, a group of rooks were letting themselves be blown away from me, quite low and noisy, working with the wind, crossing and tumbling through each other in a patternless flow, away over the woods lower down.

It is good for me to write. That is my belief. That is why I am doing it. I had a stroke two and a half years ago though you would hardly know it. Perhaps you would. My left arm is weak a little and there is a kind of limp and unusually my words are not quite normal. Left side and language do not usually go together, I was told. I do not know what goes wrong with my words. Things get stuck. I have to make an effort to find the word and there is a look in peoples' eyes, sometimes puzzled, sometimes helping me to search. If I write, I have my own evidence, I have my own record. I know what I have been saying. I like the effort. I like the hard work.

Two men travelling together stayed this week, one, the younger, was blind and his companion, an older man, hardly spoke. He, the almost dumb man was the one who

had wanted to make the pilgrimage. His friend, the man who was blind, because he needed or could benefit from help on the path, on the walk, enabled the other to make the journey. I heard the story from the younger man of course, when the other had gone to bed. He did not tell me the whole story, only that his pilgrim partner had experienced some dreadful shock, a violent death I believe, of someone he was with and which he had avoided, had not been touched by, had not been hurt by apparently. It had happened in the middle of a conversation, in mid-sentence. The shock had made him almost silent. He could make everyday requests at the table, greet and say goodbye but not much more and now he was walking the pilgrim path to try to find his voice again but, for himself alone, he could not move. He had sought out this blind man, almost a stranger to begin with, to accompany him, to be the one who would mean he needed to speak, to give directions, description, warnings. What an interesting pair! I can still see them setting off up the hill, the man with no sight stepping out strongly, the quiet man slightly behind, drawn along in his wake. A grief that cannot be spoken is a very powerful thing, a powerful companion in itself. It is possible to become very attached to such a private grief, a deep secret and not want to let go and the blind man, I liked him for his openness. He had a fine voice. I asked him about it and he said he had no trouble remembering a tune. Have you ever met a beggar who was neither defeated nor anxious and assertive but simply asked? I could imagine this man begging bread without dismay or anger. I can imagine him asking. And he came knocking on our door.

I met a man who
Had stopped speaking.
Sitting with him,
To breathe was difficult.

My wife has days now when she does not leave her room, though no day yet when she stays all day in her bed. When first she became ill, she cleaned the room, our bedroom, her room now where I am a guest, a welcome guest, I feel. She cleared the room of most of the things that had gathered, ornaments, decorations, books and boxes, forgotten trinkets, piles. Now it is bare and simple and there is a slight echo from the walls, once again bare. We sat in bed the other morning and there was a sudden squall and sharp rain fell against the window, each drop or whatever you want to call it was a fierce streak, a diagonal streak, a brush stroke sudden across the glass, here, then there, then there, each one decisive, then dissolving, gone. They seemed as loud as hailstones but I wonder if they were, at the time, as loud as they seem now. Then came the clearing of the cloud with blue sky, pale blue, appearing from the north, soon half the sky clear blue and the quick strikes of the rain, each at the same angle across the glass, impossible now. The glass was clear again, unmarked.

She wishes me to keep
Her window clean,
Her room a ship,
A lone sailor she.

I keep thinking of those rooks, disappearing on the wind. I do not fly nowadays. I have no reason to go anywhere by air. How strange it is to think of flying, to fly, but how beautiful. That is not the same as planes, as the noise and the being shut in. Planes make me afraid. I think of planes and I think of war and fear but I flew with those rooks. I was there with their jumble, their turning and diving, their easy energy. I still am there. I watched them till they had gone. I could feel their flying in me.

Today Margaret is sitting by the window in her room while I have been writing in the kitchen. I do not think words go through her mind. I do not think she needs them as I do. I need to see if I can trust my mind, if my thinking is up to the job of taking me from day to day.

From today, for the first time this autumn, I heard and then saw, geese come across the sky in clear lines and angles, each bird too a clear shape of neck and beating wings. The effort, the even pace, the direction and the plaintive cry made them more unearthly than the rooks, more unearthly but more part of a story, carrying more meaning than the ragged crowd of crows.

WEEK 2 (Verse 27) – 13.10.09

Walking by the sea on a warm October afternoon with much swirling and eddying in the unruffled surface of the sea as if the sea itself were thick and the surface a supple skin. Out to sea, a group of gulls, I couldn't say how many, for really they were one, came and went into the sun, suddenly flashing out intensely white for a moment. On the cultivated fields nearby were many black-headed gulls feeding but I wonder if the sea-borne gulls were kittiwakes. There seemed to me to be an edge of intensity to the white, a sea-dwelling grace to the flow of the flight, that would belong to the kittiwake. I like to think they were kittiwakes.

There have been nights this week when I have lain awake with the deeper darkness of the coming winter, listening to Margaret's breathing, enjoying her sleep, her, peaceful. But there is a kind of confusion for me then. I do not know who I am in the dark. When the daylight comes, not only do I get going, get up and busy but I also feel my own being moving within me. Light is moving. In the night, in the dark, things are simple,

there are no distractions but I feel like a shell, hard and defined but without a living inside.

Strange things give me security at the moment. I took a wrong turn in woods I know well and came into a clearing where there was a plain bench, without a back, a bench I don't believe I had ever seen before, square and solid, casting long sharp shadows on the litter of leaves. That was comforting as well as surprising. Then I became aware of a wren in the undergrowth going about her business with such delight.

The wren hopping round me
As if I did not exist,
Flitting at my feet. Far away
A second wren calls.

It's nice to be ignored. Something more disturbing was the low climbing rose in the garden. I love the roses in the autumn, the unexpected, unpredictable second flowerings. There is a small-flowered, deep pink climber, very warm, very welcoming but the other climber has pink-tinged buds opening into a pure white, if there is such a thing, a white that for me is almost frightening. I think that is why I planted it, for its inscrutability, its blankness. I cannot find my way inside it.

As I cleared and dug here and there,
The white rose
Holds the air,
Growing brighter as the light fails.

One thing Margaret gets cross about is when I'm careless or messy in what I'm doing for her or around her. The food on the plate, the way things are on a tray, small things, but the problem is not really tidiness. I keep apologising and she is sad, but she did try to explain. She said that when things were beautiful around her, when there was care and beauty in what she saw and touched and smelled, then she wasn't afraid, she couldn't be afraid. Beauty took away fear, beauty, little touches of beauty were deeper and stronger than fear. I remember when she first fell ill. We had a moment of our eyes meeting that was like a whole conversation in which she was saying that she did not want reassurance, she did not want lies, even silent lies, and in which I told her how I was searching for words to reassure her although I knew it was not a help, was a denial and I would try to teach myself how not to want to tell her everything would be alright, that you must always hope, that there is always hope. A whole conversation as our eyes met, with us perhaps six feet apart. "It's not a fight", she said, though I don't know if she said it out loud. There is something going on in her more powerful than trying to

fight. There is a longing growing in her which I think at the moment is uncertain. I see it in her shoulder, in the sad grace of her shoulder, the weaving shapes of the muscles like a waterfall flowing over and on down into her arm. She is letting go and discovering. But there is always hope, hope goes with tenderness.

One man passing through this week who impressed me deeply was Gary, a man of about forty, tall, well-built and I think even if he had not told me, recognisable as a soldier. It is not about muscle or the military stiffness or neatness but the way he held himself in. People talk to me, after a day or days of solitude, sometimes, not always, people want to talk. When I'm cooking, later, when I'm knitting. Yes, I knit. Many years ago, a Danish girl taught me to knit socks. My skill is very limited, very unadaptable. I have one pattern, one method, adaptable as to size only and obviously colour which keeps me satisfied and which I never tire of. Slowly pairs of socks appear and the knitting is also a background to talk, a help, a background, a diversion which lets people talk if they want to.

So, Gary was a soldier, is a soldier or, more strictly, a deserter. AWOL. Gone AWOL. Before he set out on this journey, he had been due back from leave but he couldn't do it. He informed the authorities, then left on his pilgrimage and so he carries on, waiting for the consequences but, I think, not much concerned. I get him to tell me of some of the places he had served, some of his experiences. What a strange, unfamiliar language it is all described in. I could feel how deeply all the training and discipline were established in him. That was, for him, the trouble, suddenly, the reason he had not gone back. There was something numb in him, something paralysed and he was trying to waken it, to unfreeze it. It was there in his face, his voice, his eyes and the world he saw – deep respect, faithfulness, honour. These words lived in him but the suffering, the horror, the blood and death, these were there now and not held in check by the discipline, by a vow of silence or acceptance or whatever it is that allows men to cope. He was a bit lost. He had had nearly twenty years of discipline and control and it was part of him but something had stirred in him, not fear for his own safety, definitely not what we call cowardice, and he couldn't go on.

Dirty joking soldiers,
They watched old women pass,
Searching for their dead -
Bodies for waiting coffins.

He wanted some kind of justice, a purging fire, a power from above to purify, perhaps to destroy.

On these warm autumn days, there have been many red admirals on the fallen apples and the autumn flowers. They fly so strongly, they make me recognize that butterflies have muscles, are material beings. The colours and patterns are so vivid, so perfect also, the symmetry - but they will all soon be dead, I believe; this late flush finished by the cold. Strange to see a butterfly on a disintegrating apple, a rotten fruit you could say. Drinking in the sugars but with no time to survive. Gary chopped some kindling for me before he left, leaving a neat pile of evenly split sticks and the axe safely in its place.

WEEK 3 (Verse 28) – 20.10.09

This morning a new wind, chilly from the east, and a beautiful tumbling spiral of rooks, perhaps two hundred at a guess, streaming like starlings over the woods below, low to the ground – which is said to mean rain, and rain is forecast. Black then bright then disappearing with a momentary flash as they caught the low sun, chaotic yet moving as one creature. Nearer, a buzzard touched the wind, playing without aim on the currents. Two crows came across from some tall beeches to bother it and send it away, and the buzzard could do nothing to stop their haranguing. The two birds belong to different worlds, different tempos of life – the dreaming buzzard and the crafty crow.

We had a pilgrim who stayed this week who reminded me of a bird, a sparrow perhaps – a small, bald elderly man with bandy legs and quick movements. A cross between a sparrow and a mouse. He insisted on cooking his own supper, boiling seeds he took from his bags, tasting from the pan very carefully as he cooked, chewing very quickly and darting around the kitchen asking for various herbs and strange condiments. I was contentedly peeling potatoes, I think, and we spoke together in the last light of the day, our guest talking of himself throughout as “he” – “he’s hungry after a long day’s walk.....he’s ready for his bed now”. All very immediate, all in the here and now. When I spoke he would stop and – perhaps I imagine it – cock his head to one side to take in my voice, coming at him from another world. In the morning he was gone before I was up, and if he had breakfast, then he left everything immaculate, just as he found it. The people who come and go to my small world, which I know so well, remind me of the size of the world – the deserts of Asia, the forests of Brazil, the plains of America, on and on like the ocean, like the sea. So big and endless I cannot take it in. That’s how it was when I was a child – the size of the world was overwhelming but also a comfort and an adventure, the mystery and bigness were part of what could be relied on, what was God, I suppose. Now it is not big enough, it is threatened, it cannot hold us, protect us. We have made the world small and dangerous.

Each day I dig a bit
Not remembering the toad
My spade disturbed the day
Before – a charmed life!

One morning this week, in the early light of day, the sky was grey and the garden was utterly calm, so there was no change, no movement, except the imperceptible change in the light as the day came. I felt something of the future in those few minutes of unnatural stillness. It was like the beauty of a painting, a bowl of apples, which holds something so that you can know it better. Then there was a sunset, not the same day, I think, when all in the west the sky glowed with a strange orange pink above the hill, a revelation that could not last.

For five minutes the sky
Was shining with a life
Beyond, loving as a
Face, then gone to grey cloud.

It was like an explosion, so strong it had no meaning beyond what happened. And that has meaning, is meaning.

We managed a walk down to the burn, Margaret and I, and Jude our daughter and her son Stephen – a warm sunny afternoon, autumn warmth, soon to go once the sun goes down, and the trees were most amazing – chestnuts and cherries at the top of the path, then the olive and gold of the oaks. The path was like a piece of music; it takes an unexpected turn and then the change in direction starts to make sense as you discover where it takes you - surprises however familiar they are in fact. Our grandson was up in the trees, climbing; we stopped to let him climb and call from high above the earth, the leaves still thick enough for him to lose touch with us below. Our daughter is something of a lost soul. She does not share herself with us. She does not share herself with anyone, I think. Perhaps she does not know how to. I see her as a stranger whom I want to help, for whom I wait till they are able to ask, to speak in some way. There was sadness among us three on the ground, sadness about Margaret's illness, sadness of the lonely child, our child, but up above there was joy, there was the boy exhilarated by space and with climbing and being free. Going down was easy for Margaret, on my arm, and the burn was beautiful, the sound of the water over the rocks, the way the slow running water, for the level is low, goes in so many directions as it drops between rocks and over ledges and round projections, pouring almost back upon its direction of flow as it finds the next pool, the next, stiller run where the dark reflections of the branches can be seen and the floating leaves quietly eddy.

It was a long way back for Margaret. We had not realised, I had not realised, what the climb would be for her. Jude helped, took her mother's other arm, as she struggled up the hill, finding it difficult to breathe. I believe she was grateful for the contact with Jude, that Jude had her hand, there, under her elbow and from time to time reached round with her other hand to hold her mother's hand as well as under her elbow. She does not know how to touch, Jude. She was always a creature apart – and then a mother at nineteen, and then even more alone somehow. Anyway we got back and Stephen had stars in his eyes from his climbing.

In August the woods were
One green sea, a dark place.
Now, withering, each tree
Goes clear, a different flame.

We got back to the house, and I helped Margaret to her bed, and there was a chill in the air now and Jude was quite passive and silent while Stephen ate toast. Thank God for that lovely messy noise and flurry of the toast and jam and butter dripping. We had no guests that day. When they had gone I cleared up, and washed up, arranging the plates and cups in the drying rack as a challenge, a balancing act, first one thing, then the next, half covering the one before. It could have been a painting, a still-life, when it was finished – the dishes, the cups, the old brown teapot with its chipped spout. I do not want a new teapot. I love the roughness of its bottom and the smooth curve of its side.

WEEK 4 (Verse 29) – 27.10.09

Out of the blue (as usual!) Bill rang to say that he and Joan were setting off to come and stay for a few days. Bill is blind, he lost his sight as a young boy, about nine or ten years old. We met as young men, and became friends, living together for a while. Bill studied music and became a composer as well as a music teacher to earn his living. Then, about thirty years ago, he composed some film music which, totally unpredictably, became very popular and has remained so. It's really about ninety seconds of music which made his name and gave him a comfortable living. His wife, Joan, is an artist. It is strange to be with them. Their intimacy is so public, as she acts as his eyes and they share their awareness, always in touch within the cover of his blindness – in a room with others, on a walk, at a meal table. Their love in total, open, it seems – without shadows. They bring sunshine with them but after a few days I am exhausted by their brightness.

We four went for a walk to a waterfall. There are proper paths and Margaret came in a wheelchair – the first time. We came up to the waterfall from below and the wind was taking the falling water and twisting and flinging and dispersing the hanging cords and sheets. Then we had to scramble up the rough side of the loud water – one of us blind, one of us weak – to reach the calm above and the high path which took us round in a circle. We watched a dipper flying and diving, then pause, a white spot bobbing on a rock.

Joan and Bill communed with each other and the bird, together with the sound and rush of the broken waters. Margaret sat, her head tilted a little sadly to one side, looking here more the invalid than ever before. Bill and I both wrote poems about the waterfall on our return.

I feel the water's force,
Fall of rock and drift of spray,
And light over skin,
A rainbow's mystery.

by Bill

Above the waterfall
The stream holds images
Unbroken. Drawn to the edge
It opens into twisting veils.

by Roberto

As we left the river to circle round back to the car I tried to keep hold of the river's sound and tumble, which offered such solace.

Of our pilgrim visitors this week I want to recall a tall American woman – it has been a week of tall women for Joan is tall too and thin though twenty five years older than our pilgrim, at least. She did not tell us her name but announced her story. She was walking her grief for a baby she had lost, who had miscarried. Such a difficult word – does the miscarriage belong to the mother, or the child, or cannot they be separated? She carried a bundle on her front, made of strips of coloured gauze, cotton or silk perhaps, all finely dyed. The bundle was roughly elongated, roughly the shape of a baby and each day she added a strip from the collection she had with her. The image of her lost child continued to grow, to become day by day slightly heavier. She was wrapping her loss and her longing. What will she do with her soft chrysalis, her rainbow pupa? When her journey is over? Leave it as an offering at the shrine? I am worried for her. In the evening she spent ages cleaning her boots, cleaning and waterproofing

the uppers but also meticulously cleaning traces of mud out of the patterned tread of the soles, singing a lullaby. I found that deeply disturbing. I went upstairs and there was Margaret quietly performing some kind of meditative physical exercise, movement, slow and measured. I did not disturb her by my presence, I hope.

She lifts her hand to her face
And I see her young,
Take in her curving ribs,
The fullness of her breast.

That night I woke from a nightmare, one I have from time to time, which takes me back to my time in East Africa when I had come upon the effects of a major landslide which had completely washed away the road I had been travelling along. The rough grey surface of the road had a sharp edge, straight across, and the land then fell several metres to the mud and rock, the huge boulders and the splintered trees, of the landslide which had passed across the road from above. From one world you walked into another, and on that day and in my dream there is just shock, paralysis, a mental fog.

I got up then and went out into the night and walked. It is what I do with this nightmare. I walk on the roads. Here where I walk, in the last Ice Age, the land was covered with ice, say a kilometre of ice, and even now the land is still breathing out, although the ice melted many thousands of years ago, is still rising, freed from the weight. I like to know the long times of our earth's history, rhythms of hundreds of millions of years as continents shift, part and then come together. It does not belittle me or my life to know such unimaginable times. It gives me the chance to know my own truth, not to feel crowded. I feel that I am taken in to something vast, like the sun, and am not just an observer. With Margaret I do not want to be an observer, but I do not want to be sad or angry either, to connect by wishing things different. I want the slowness of the breathing earth.

From the roads of night
I followed the pole star –
See – the small star of the Plough
For once is clear to my eye.

That star so close to another in the Plough is called Alcor. Some see it as the rider above one of the horses of the wagon, for those who see this constellation as a wain. I know it's there. Sometimes I imagine it. Sometimes I cannot see it. That night I could see it. I am not sure about the business of forgetting, of dealing with distress. What helps – to share, to make things clear to yourself, to let go? Would it be good if I could

fully forget what now hovers at the edge? I felt proud of myself that my sight is still keen enough to see the small star.

There was a day of strong wind, warm wind from the south, which took the leaves from the trees, the beech and the chestnut, and filled the air. The beech leaves materialise in the air, a sudden shower in the low sun coming from nowhere as they turn in the wind and fall to the earth. The larger chestnut leaves are pulled by the wind and fill the air. I remember a day a few years ago when, after a hard frost, it was the sun's warmth which cut the tie with the tree and leaf by leaf the chestnut tree in the garden, dressed in withered glory in the morning, was bare by sunset, the leaves spiralling down in the still warmth to lie thick below the drooping branches. No, this year it was the wind that took the tree and sent the leaves flying at my face, and round me and past me all through the windy morning, and the leaves mingled with small flocks of busy birds, high rooks, pigeons lower, and crowds of restless chaffinches in and out the bushes – this lively creature once the common man's caged song-bird. I do not like to see a garden song-bird in a cage although I am sure they can bring joy and comfort. In the cage they can still greet the sunrise, can sing but not let song become flight.

WEEK 5 (Verse 30) – 3.11.09

A week ago a day of pure blue sky and strong low sun, then four days that were grey and still and warm, a night of such heavy rain that the burn, for the first time since we have lived here, was right up touching the underside of the wooden bridge, more than a metre above its normal level, and then, finally, in this succession of weathers, yesterday came with the first chill wind of winter, the first time I thought of gloves. I love the low sun, what happens to the landscape, bringing sunlight right down to the earth, and the intense blue had something mineral in it, like the lapis lazuli that was ground to make the first ultramarine, a blue of sky that confirms the beauty of the earth, the truth of the earth and lets heaven belong with it, arching over. A waking dream, a dream awake. I want no gold, I want no precious signs of the divine. I want that blue which is like a wave coming and going between earth and heaven. There was another intense moment of colour as I was digging and turning in some nasturtiums untouched as yet by frost. As my spade turned the soil, one flower was caught in the jaws of the one spadeful against the last, a streak of vermilion against the damp dark of the soil. The single flower was an unsullied form with its cup and its trailing tail, a streak of utter stillness against the activity of my digging, the life of the soil. So there was the blue and the red. There was also the yellow:

Cold supermarket has
Lurid yellow roses.
At home last rambling buds
Gentle as a primrose.

Those misty days came with the changing of the clocks and with waking early in the still dark world and lying there because the clock was telling an earlier time. By now I have adjusted but I appreciated those few days of a time out of time, lying in the lost hour. Margaret was there breathing beside me and more than once I had the feeling, the conviction, that it would not matter if she died because she could come back, I can bring her back, I have the power to bring her back to life. This was so certain and then, of course, it went, it dissolved like a dream, but it still does give me comfort, as well as concern about my state of mind! I do not want her death to make me in any way a hero, to turn me into the one who suffers and is wonderful. What do I do to keep out of the way when she has gone; if she goes?

I don't weary of her old stories. She told me of the ritual in her childhood of the large tasteless ornaments an aunt would send, how these had their place in a box in a cupboard and in the box was a map of the house and the position each ornament must be placed in when the aunt visited. The box was labelled 'Mabel's treasures'. The children loved the excitement of getting it right, of dusting and positioning, exact to the millimetre. It was one thing, they joked, which they had to remember should mother and father die and Aunt Mabel be coming for the funeral. I have heard that story many times. I have a clear idea of those ornaments though I never saw them. I see them like the figures and figurines and vases which were on display as prizes at the Fair. Probably they were not so ugly or vulgar. Margaret laughed so fully, with such abandon, her face and body free.

I see many roe deer at the moment, as is often the case in the autumn, usually in small groups, but one of these misty nights I came across a large group on the road near the village, perhaps confused by the mist. They did not run or get startled but drifted round and past me as I drove slowly through them. In the morning there was a fawn dead by the side of the road. I did not stop although I wanted to rescue it from the damage of traffic. I was afraid, I think, of its deadness, its slumped shape, although then it was fresh and whole.

A fawn dead on the road.
Why, then, did I not stop?
A bloodied mess by noon,
Coiled guts and skin next day.

A few days later, in the middle of the day, there was a hind at the same spot, on her own, who ran on the road ahead of me than darted off into the woods. Could it be the mother returning to look for the dead fawn? It is the place where they always cross the road but she had the look of a mother searching, in distress. I do not understand the memory of animals, how it is tied to the earth and the rhythms of life and not to language, not to words.

Of our guests this week I want to remember a couple, a grandmother and grandson – she tall, with white hair and a marked limp, quite a thing on a long walk. She was a scholar, a historian, medieval Christianity her subject, and the walk, the pilgrimage, was her bringing her research out of the study. She was a wonderful story-teller, a beautiful shaper of words, totally there in the events and people she was telling about. Her grandson was in his twenties, dark-haired, dark-eyed, very quietly-spoken and slightly stooped. He was there to serve her, to be her support on this journey, and she was quite sharp with him, but there was, underneath the severity, warmth and appreciation. Nearby there are the ruins of a monastery, an Abbey, which was a significant stopping place for pilgrims in the Middle Ages. She – her name was Dorothy – told of an abbot who had had many children – there was a nunnery near by which may, perhaps, have provided the opportunity for the desires of the flesh to assert themselves – but the abbot always presented his offspring as a direct gift from God, as his special charge, marks of his piety. “Bernard’s Angels” were famed exhibits on the pilgrims’ way. She spoke like one who was used to holding an audience, and her grandson kept to the side, glancing up to check from time to time if she was needing him, looking to him for something.

Absorbed in her words she
Limps around the kitchen,
Waving a wooden spoon,
Pressing down a pan lid.

What about the missing generation, the son or daughter, the father or mother, who connected them, through which they were related? No mention of this necessary being, and I wondered if he or she were the deeper purpose of the journey – an estranged mother, a wayward father, a prematurely dead daughter, a violent son. For now I see her, tall, self-possessed, her cheeks with a lot of colour in them against her white hair, and her dark-eyed grandson slightly crouching, on the look-out. I am struck by the gap between them, and their love. The colour on her cheeks is not uniform, youthful, but a network of capillaries, a sign of distress, or just the wear and tear of age.

WEEK 6 (Verse 31) – 10.11.09

I look at my wife with the question in my heart – how is it that pain becomes strength, becomes accepted? Is it something rising up from deep down, of the self, of the earth, or is it this gentle rain falling, is it from above? After some dull days we went down to the beach on a day of low sun in a clear sky, and Margaret was in a daze of wonder, with her slow walk and difficult bending, but all the restrictions helped her to be satisfied by the tiny shells, the seaweed clinging to the rocks, the smooth tunnel where waves had worked for unknown years. There are two huge rock outcrops, the size of large houses, which lean in against each other, creating a smooth-sided, whorled tunnel just high enough to allow a person to walk through. Up above there are boulders, as big as beach balls or barrels, wedged between the sloping faces, wedged forever one might think. Just us and a few others with dogs, and one pair of young lovers.

Pink girl on the beach frees
Herself from her phone, lifts
Her arms to hold her man,
Kisses him on the lips.

Low sun giving the world
At my feet shadow and
Shapes, and far-away hills
Disappear into cloud.

There was no need to long for the Spirit; it was all around us.

We had four young men stay on their journey this week – bright, intelligent, fit young men with sinewy bodies and shaved heads. They called themselves anti-pilgrims in a jokey way. They were treating it as a test of stamina, and speed – running the mountain paths, taking it in turns to be the one who drove their one vehicle. Their conversation was quick, full of thrust and counterthrust, question and jokes and mock insults. They were all graduate students in Biology or Environmental Science, inquisitive and active. I liked them a lot, they brought a real breath of fresh air into our musty house, yes, very refreshing, but when they had gone I was left with a doubt as to whether they had ever really been in the house! Despite their muscular bodies, their gear, their confident familiarity, there was something insubstantial about them. Perhaps it is because I live so close to pain, to my lover's pain.

Most of the week has been dull and timeless and again I have been awake in the early morning, before dawn, but now in a dull dark that seems to have no end and in which I

felt fear brewing. I had a kind of waking dream where I found myself in a cathedral, a real one I believe, and I think it was in France, but I cannot remember where – a dark but large space with big windows, gothic windows, with dark, rich stained glass – all the colours – and the glass was thick. That was important, making the space like an underwater cave – the thick, impossibly thick, darkened colours. It was not a place of the earth. It was a place of fire and water, with no life inside except my mind and a kind of cold fire in my seeing eyes that depended on the thick light of the huge windows. But inside it was cold and the walls were bare in the beauty of their curves and verticals. It was a dream which did not console, but drained me of life.

Then the day of sun, the beach, and I was back on earth. In the stony grazing by the burn are now a dozen cows and their calves and the bull; my eye always seeks out his bulk. As we came back from the sea, mist was lying in long trails along the valley bottom and the sun was just setting on the high southern horizon, and everywhere there was light on the edges of things – the cows' backs, the hawthorn hedge, the olive-green oaks, a burnished larch.

Sunset so soon! Mist comes,
Shaggy cows in rough grass,
Bright calves, the small eye of
The massive-shouldered bull.

Then, more vitality, more urgent life, as a flock of about fifty fieldfares played nearby, settling in one big tree, or a few smaller ones, then suddenly gone, fast out across the field, then returning to a new resting place. Bold birds, tough survivors, but such beautiful colouring, and when they fly off together there is a magical silvery flash from beneath their wings. I have not seen them since, but they will be back.

The most startling event of the week has been the visit of my nephew, Stephen. He is a young man of twenty-five whom I last saw as a baby. The word we use is 'estranged'. I am estranged from my brother, his father. He is my estranged brother. I am his. But the word is too romantic, too tragic, too heroic. What happened was just two people turning into unmoving rocks, petrified. That is the word, petrified. I'm not going to write about what happened all those years ago. It was after our father's death. You say things, I said words, which I heard before I said them, whose wounding power I knew before I said them, whose untruth too I knew, but still I spoke them. And the words sound on through the years and belong to the two petrified bodies, the dead brothers, the estranged ones. And now, here, after a phone call of anxious gaps and hurried questions, he came. There was another family funeral, not my father's, and I remember a little baby, tightly wrapped, in a distraught mother's arms in a crowded room. And

now he is a doctor, and soon going to work in Ethiopia and he had wanted to see me before he went. So it was a farewell as well as a meeting. I told him of my time there, of the peace I felt in the hard work, the willing help, the impossible tasks, a peace then, a peace now, remembering. And he said that was what he was looking for, too. I became the wise uncle – telling him not to become a martyr, not to think that he could make some huge significant change. We did not talk of the past, and only indirectly of the brother, the father. Later, without asking, he played the piano, Schubert. I was sad to think of the boy and all the practising he had done, the hundreds of hours that I had never known about, the slow growth to manhood shown now in the playing. The music told a story; at the end, out of the self-contained meditation, or into it, comes a shaft of light, of hope.

He plays from memory
The Impromptu in G,
Hesitates, repeats, finds
The deep currents of love.

I have left the piano open so as to remember his hands.

WEEK 7 (Verse 32) – 17.11.09

In the garden there is an area of old black and white glazed tiles which was originally, I think, in the middle of a formal rose garden. Some tiles are missing, some are cracked or chipped, but I find it more beautiful for being somewhat dilapidated. I love to trace the pattern in the tiles, taking in what is now missing. Sometimes a pattern comes out of nowhere. Last night, after all the rain, I was walking towards a large bush, now bare, with an outside electric light behind it and, in a flash, all the branches, like scratches on a window pane, arranged themselves as circles in the spreading beam. I am searching after a truth which is beyond ordinary logic. First there is order and this decays, becomes disorder. But chaos is not lifeless. It has the energy from which pattern and order can be created. I keep the square of old tiles weeded so that the plan can be seen, the idea of a mind now gone. There is something strong before the pattern appears.

Earlier in the week I was in the garden on a day of sudden sun and showers, and, for once, let the showers come, did not retreat, or zip up my coat, but waited for the next interval of sun to dry me off. It was exciting, I felt like a child, enjoying the sting, the dripping from my neck, my nose, my chin as I worked at the soil. There were rainbows or hints of rainbows hovering all morning. I was soaked by the end, but not cold, no, invigorated, tingling.

Margaret was at the hospital this week, I went with her of course and even into the consulting room with the doctor where I sat to one side, knowing my place. She is a woman always wishing to accommodate herself to others, to anticipate and fit in with what others want. It is her nature, but with the doctor, she was firm. I could only see her back and the side of her face but that was enough to recognise the determination, the certainty, in her that she did not want the treatment they were, at first, describing, and then persuading her to take. The doctor and nurse were talking on one level, about technical matters, outcomes, procedures, benefits, and she was speaking from another level, a different dimension of her being, about what she sensed, believed, knew – which is the right word? – to be what was right, best, truest, for her now, living with being ill. They seemed to suggest she was giving up but this, I could see in the landscape of her back, the clear line of her neck, the balance of her head – this was courage.

It has been a medical week. We had a pilgrim staying who had been a nurse for many years, a single woman, but not the matronly sort of starched collars or managerial control. She had worked in many very difficult situations and told vivid and harrowing stories in which she did not underplay her own part but, through curiosity and her own deep amazement at life, her wonder at her own being and what has happened to her and around her, she wove her own virtue into the story she was telling. We both sat in a spell but I was left puzzled. She had spoken of horrible things, in great detail, of the smell of untreated wounds, the pain she could do nothing about when working without proper supplies or facilities after disasters – but she maintained a lightness as if the suffering had passed her by, as if she was able to deflect it, able to be there but be untouched. It seemed admirable but somehow impossible. Where was the distress? Had it all just disappeared into life? There was a subtle twist in her face, like the slightest of distorting mirrors might achieve, a twist that took her gaze away from you, kept her separate. But she was wonderful.

Her face was deeply lined,
A mask with soul beneath.
She spoke of saving lives,
The moment when hope goes.

I was at a funeral this week of a man I worked with twenty five years ago who had ended up, unknown to me, living quite close by, otherwise I would not have gone. I was shy approaching the church and did not stay afterwards for the refreshments. So my meeting with those who belonged to that time – my former colleagues – was brief but real. I had no trouble recognising them though I had no clear knowledge beforehand of

who was still alive, never mind who would attend. I had been his superior and although we had worked closely and in difficult circumstances, he had gone behind my back to complain about me and this led to my being moved, though I did not know of his part in this until much later. Things were done differently then; one accepted instructions from on high without recourse to rights and openness. He had it in for me, heaven knows why. He was a man with a terrible temper but at the time we had treated it as something amusing that did not threaten.

I remember playing long games of chess with him on hot nights. He would sit crouched and concentrated, coiled, all that restless energy held in his body as his eyes moved around the board, plotting consequences. We rarely spoke. He was not a bad loser, in fact I think he enjoyed a good contest ending in his defeat more than in his victory.

Hours we spent in silence,
Chess through sweaty nights,
Insects hit the hot lamp,
His fingers above the piece.

I had nothing much to say to the others. Another moment of pattern and chaos, from that time – people fleeing in a large square from gunfire, raying out like a drop of spreading oil on smooth water, figures dispersing, some falling, bleeding, some disappearing round corners, into alleys. I can see that mix of decision and panic.

I love the power of starlings. They cheered me up the other day as I walked through the town as an early darkness fell. The street seemed so sordid and dull, the people lost and rigid, but up above there were fast flying hordes of starlings, not the huge tidal masses that I have seen elsewhere, but enough to pierce the gloom.

On the high street at dusk
A dejected seller
Mumbles. Above broken
Roofs starlings scream and wheel.

Then, home at last, the night fully there, I turn and see a barn owl sitting on a fence post, quite close. Surely he has seen me? He wobbles slightly and then launches himself into the air, rising slowly and away. There is a sense of great effort yet the bird moves without the slightest sound, working the air but one with it.

A white owl with a face
Like mine, silent hunter,
Ungainly angel, he
Finds me pale in the night.

WEEK 8 (Verse 33) 24.11.09

A week, it seems, of relentless rain, dramatic flooding, the power of falling water, mess and debris. I longed for clarity, to be able to see the now bare trees, and the stars, and the shape of hills, but all was dull, head bowed to sharp rain, vision smeared by the wet running from my face.

Another day of dark
Rain and grim skies blurring
The known land. Sunset gives
Slash of bright horizon.

Margaret has been away to visit an old friend, travelling alone by train – at her insistence. She did not want me to wait at the station, my last view of her a glance through the waiting-room window, a figure old and bowed a little, but with a genuine smile, not for me, but for the world she was now facing on her own, alone. Why did she not want me to wave her off? Too close to dying, I suppose.

The bed was empty when
I came back, a cold house,
A burnt smell lingering,
Cat expecting nothing.

And then, out of the blue, my brother, the long-lost-brother, Stephen's father, rang from down the road and was on the doorstep ten minutes later; my older brother, Andrew, a heavy man, taller than me, but now, of course, old, and not so frightening. I found myself, as we talked, as we sat drinking coffee, Andrew stirring his drink into a perfect vortex and making much of the clink of spoon on china, I tried to remember happy, or at least vivid, moments from our youth, moments of connection, or even conflict. But none would come. I also found myself wondering what would happen the next time he came, what we would talk about then, if normality were established. I found it difficult to be with him, to get through the tinkling of the tea-spoon. We were cautious but I felt his power, a strength of suspicion, a conviction of his own ability to see through pretence or obfuscation, there in everything he said. I was glad that Margaret was away. She would have interfered with the purity of our non-communication! How do you go searching for

memories, for particular qualities of memories? Baptised Xavier, he became Andrew as an embarrassed teenager, eager to fit in. I had almost forgotten the change of name.

This week was, is, the anniversary of the death of my son, Noel, seven years ago. His death led me to this hostel, this place of refuge from the storm, rest on the pilgrim's way. He was a man whom I did not know until he was thirty, his life already destroyed by drugs, living a narrow, confined existence, determined only by his habit. I had had nothing to do with his upbringing though I never lost touch completely. I was, in matters of money, responsible but I kept away and was kept away. When I did meet him, he was happy enough to know me, to be genial, to take me in to his strange mix of chaos and fixed routine, of squalor and immense care about certain details, rituals of existence. His health, of course, was poor, but he had a kind of stamina and I never thought of him dying. And then he did. Alone, "no suspicious circumstances" as the phrase goes. It hardly touched me at the time although I hated taking away his things, his effects. It was so sad for me to see this life just disappear without any trace of pride or beauty.

Grandson Stephen came to spend the day with me and stayed the night. I showed him how to sharpen a knife, a beautiful old knife a colleague gave me once; he was Swedish and the knife has the feel of the wilderness about it. I showed Stephen how to cut into wood, to shave and shape, how to handle the knife, to hold the knife, to hold the wood he was carving. He did not have the strength (or is it the co-ordination?) to do much, but he liked to point the end of sticks into fierce stakes, spears. He did not cut himself, and nor did I in my attempts to teach him. The danger was a bond between us, a secret risk. He was fascinated by the sharp edge of the blade, the way it caught the light, the mystery of the thinness, the line that cuts. I could see him hovering on the edge of blood, wondering what would happen as the blood came. I enjoyed having him to sleep in the house, checking on him as I went to bed.

A boy holding a knife,
Taking a honed blade to
Reach pale wood through dark bark,
Feeling his own thin skin.

Of this week's few guests I will make note of two Australians, young men, a gay couple, very loving, very attractive, very close. One was a chef, a real lover of food, who took over the kitchen and talked, almost sang, his way through the preparation and the eating of a meal. His partner was a designer of some kind, observing, commenting on what they had seen – views, buildings, details. They shared an intense, conscious participation in life, dwelling in their experience, squeezing all the possibilities of

meaning out of what passed them by. I found it exhilarating although I wanted something left unsaid, unexplored, left to itself. They were bright souls, engaged, good-hearted people but a bit too much enthusiasm for me. In the morning, I came up on the quieter one, the designer, sitting in the alcove looking out of the small window onto another wet day and a wet journey ahead, and there was a lovely play of light and shadow, muted, between the white wall, the dull daylight, the shadows of his still body and the life and youth in his beautiful face, half turned away from me, in a reverie of rain.

In the village I had two encounters, one after the other, which made an interesting contrast, both with teachers, one the present head teacher of the local Primary School, the other with a former teacher now quite elderly. The first, a man of about forty, was full of the floods and what a wonderful stimulus it had been to the children talking in the classroom. It was the talking itself that mattered to him, a product, a disembodied skill. They could learn a vocabulary for their fears, adventures, shocks. The words were divorced from the minds, let alone the hearts and souls, of his pupils – impersonal fluency. I couldn't be enthusiastic. Then I met the old teacher, a woman, now frail, but with both an obstinate courage and a lovely listening twinkle in her eye, a slight bow of her head which says she is patient. There is a dismissal of herself, an impatience with herself, and an attitude of quiet interest towards the one to whom she is listening. I was refreshed by meeting her.

Her face waited, was a
Question that hoped for an
Answer, did not demand,
Wanted correspondence.

WEEK 9 (Verse 34) 1.12.09

I first met the hare this week up by the road as I drove away from the house.

The mad hare fled, stopped
And started crazily,
Confusing, then got lost
In immobility.

Big, yet timid, bold, and graceful, he, if it was a he, ended up motionless not three metres from me on the other side of the fence, trusting to stillness and camouflage.

A day later he came haring through the garden, something of surprise, even shock, in his size and the exaggerated gesture of his long, upright, black-tipped ears. He squeezed through the sheep-netting fence and disappeared into the deep rushes. Now I find him in the main body of the garden, still timid of course, but not just a panicking migrant.

Today the hare is sitting
In my garden, sunning
Himself in the mint patch.
Perhaps he has moved in.

There is something magical, alarming, about him that I cannot put my finger on. In repose he looks so wise, in movement he is strong and elegant but the image, the gestalt is disturbing, tapping into dreams, the mystery and power of nature, more powerful because so close, so domestic.

I had a most peaceful evening of conversation with one of our pilgrims this week, a man my age, an archeologist by profession, a man who had worked mostly in the Middle East, in the desert, a geography I know nothing about to speak of. He had a beautiful head which would have convinced the sceptic of the possibilities of phrenology. It was a landscape in itself, the total shape of his head with all its features, its prominences and its depressions. As he talked I found myself lost in the shifting shadows and lights on his face and jaw and neck. And his hands were fascinating too, not the fiercely, unconsciously gesticulating hands of a man who is totally engrossed in thought and argument, but careful hands, hands that had taken time to unearth treasures, to brush away the sand to reveal the inscription, the decoration, the precise details of history. Different degrees of modesty – the false modesty that truly hopes to be believed, the ironic false modesty, the modesty that is authentic but knows somewhere it is modest, and the modesty that comes with a generous detachment from one's life and one's deeds. Such was this man's. He had made great discoveries, of things and of meanings. He had given his life to the desert and now here he was in the wet hills of winter.

Stephen has been with me more again this week, because Margaret is away. I had a sizeable trunk of beech lying outside, a section of a large bough which fell last winter, which my neighbor collected for me and has promised to come back to split and saw for firewood. Stephen asked if he could try carving his name in the fallen bough, and he made a good job of it, a model of concentration – only the first e was spoilt, without a proper middle, but he had half got the hang of it with the p, and the second e was well planned and executed. Later he disappeared while I was busy in the house and it was only the next day that I saw what he had done – carved into the living bark of the bole of

that same tree, the bold bare statement, 'I want my dad'. I think that is what it says. The carving is not deep, is hurried, dangerously so, and the a of want looks like an o (the second a, in dad, is perfect), so the sentence reads 'I wont my dad'. He does not know his father except as a name and a photo and perhaps a vague physical memory, a presence. Who knows? I did not know what to do. At first I wanted to obliterate the mark, the pain, the wound. But then I stopped and knew we must look at it together, Stephen and I. I will not see him for a few days and I wanted to let him know I was not angry and that I had seen it, seen what he had done. I even wanted to correct the spelling, add my own incision, but only for a moment. I cut a slice from the fallen bough, and sanded it a bit to reveal the pattern of the rings better – we had talked about rings – and dropped it round to his house with a short note asking if he could work out how old the bough was, how many years were telling their stories in the circles in the wood.

With Margaret away I live with a lot of silence and there is, obviously, a lot of darkness. The nights are long and dark, though the moon is waxing. I am getting lost in the darkness, in the silence – lost both not knowing where I am or where I am going, and also letting go, dissolving. The silence and the darkness become God, my God, though I do not know whether I have escaped out of the narrow room into some immaterial world, or found the deep heart, the pulse, of nature. 'Out' and 'in' don't seem to mean much. I remember as a little boy lying next to my own grandfather as he smoked, waiting for the smoke to stream up and out from his mouth, through my fingers, and then disappear into the air. Where did it go, this cloud that came forth from his mouth, that I could feel with my fingers? He was my magic dragon. I am puzzled by this peace, this silence, this darkness which is both full and empty, comforting and frightening. It is a kind of dying. It comes, I cannot bring it about, and I am glad when it has gone, when the daylight comes and I can see the dog leg of the drystone dyke from my window.

There was a gale all day the other day and the big trees were creaking and swaying right down to their roots, like ancient boats worked by the wind, and the noise high up of the wind through the tops, through the smaller branches as they were threshed and bent, agitated my heart. It stirred in me both a rage, something fierce and angry, and also a need to nurture, to see what creature needed protecting from the storm. The next morning was still and sunny and I was very aware, as I stood on the ground, of the height of the trees around me, the space above me. All was peace but the birds were busy.

Chestnut buds hang round me,
A sharp blackbird poised on
A stronger branch above
Darts for winter berries.

Going down into the valley, there was mist, motionless, which in the end the winter sun would disperse. Half a mile away, on the horizon above me there were the shapes of beech trees in the mist but high up, directly above me the sky was pale and blue and, because it lacked horizontal definition, it was a sky that never ends. I was transfixed by distances.

On my horizon trees
In mist. I define such
Delicacy, tracing
Dry grasses here, close-by.

Distant trees lost in mist
Ask for eyes to find them.
What I see is a dream
Made firm by thinking's flight.

And hares are not referred to onboard ship. It's an old superstition. Too unpredictable in an unstable world?

WEEK 10 (Verse 35) 8.12.09

While I have been on my own, with Margaret away, I have been avoiding people but, as I have done so, I have felt my own light go dim. I think it serves a purpose. If I detach myself a bit, but not too much, I can stop myself from seeing myself as a victim. When someone dies there is the inclination to keep watch, to never part from the grave, to make time stop. That cannot be healthy, but it can happen. I went on the train to meet Margaret, on her way back, where she changed trains. I wandered for a while under the city's Christmas lights, and they had a cold magic, a wish for purity. The station, and then our train home, were cold and crowded. We were silent and awkward and that has continued in the days since. We have not yet reconnected and have not been able to talk about it. The train disturbed me.

Tinny drum and bass from
Tiny speaker. Bright lit train –
Disorientating –
Missing connections.

I stood in the freezing station reading the timetable over and over again as I waited for her train, fascinated by the details, the order, the precision. Why must it be 10.59?

Margaret has been knitting a lot since she returned. She knits fast and neatly, the quick little clicks of her needles have seemed very loud and insistent, given the silence between us. I don't know for whom she is knitting, or what, and I think she does not want me to ask. I have kept busy about the house, showing off my skills to her, I think, proving I am still useful, still strong. I feel as though I am doing penance for something, perhaps something as basic as being alive.

I caught a song on the radio by Richard Strauss. My German is not good enough to follow every word but a man was saying farewell to his dying wife with an openness of regret and hope. In songs you can let go, the melody and accompaniment juggling with joy and agony. The music was as raw as Robert Johnson with his old guitar deep in the Blues, but then, also refined, sophisticated. And the German was so ungainly, yet the whole thing was beautiful and helped me let go of my self-conscious preoccupations. The performance was so perfect that it became natural, believable. I was grateful to hear love made so explicit.

I have had several moments this week of being too aware, when with others; of there being no channel into which the energy of meeting could go, my own self loomed too large, or my awareness, and everything became magnified and stultified – a meeting with a boy I have known for several years but whom I had not seen for ages (and who has changed), a second meeting with another young man which became very stilted and thirdly a casual gathering in a friend's house where an unthinking remark let loose – or did it? – old demons for some others in the group. I seem to have lost my taken-for-granted social bearings. I feel dull, dim-witted.

A young man on the street,
He was the child I knew
Gone solid, no feeling
In his step, a little lost.

Joe was like a blind
Orphan, on guard, ready
To repeat, to mimic,
Not ever his own man.

A sudden silence. No!
The conversation went on
But each had felt the pain
Hanging in the room.

Things get stuck, and then get more stuck, until

I have been to the weir on the river where one can see salmon making their way upstream, to spawn. Leaping, we say, but usually it is not leaping so much as riding, surfing, working. Although I saw nothing I was excited and satisfied to live with the mystery of this creature and its ways and journeys, going from the river, far away out and down into the deep ocean and then returning to find the high, clear shallows. The great fish, I am told, have more often been caught by women than by men, despite the disproportion in numbers. Perhaps there needs to be something careless, some concern with beauty for the fly to be taken for the taking of the fly is not a practical act on the part of the salmon. It is play, or art. I did not see a salmon but I wrote of one.

I catch a salmon clear
Urging her way up
The waterfall's sliding sheet.
Her heart's in the highlands.

Poor creature, poisoned now,
Instincts disturbed, diseased,
Earth's rhythms desert her,
Journeyman of the sun.

I wanted to see this messenger of the spirit appear in the stream, as dramatic as an angel, but there were to be no signs granted to me that day.

What pilgrims there were this week have made little impression on me, except for one man, who would in the old days have been called a tramp, I suppose. He had the card which told me he was a pilgrim and who am I to judge who comes through the door? It is not a matter of equipment, the correct gear, or motivation, or conversation. All sorts appear including this man who came almost with nothing, unkempt, even the rope instead of a belt to keep his tatty woollen coat, unsuitable for the rain, wrapped around him. Perhaps because I was sad, a bit apathetic, I was not bothered by his strangeness, not frightened or even inquisitive. He went about his business, talking to himself, engaging in disjointed conversation with me, performing his routines. It was like a song. He was just passing through but in his presence I could take all of us as just passing through, divested of our plans and ambitions. We were in the room together and however respectable and coherent I was in my speech and life I had to acknowledge that my life too had a quality of madness, a privacy, a light of my own, that I wanted to

look after and which I would extinguish at my peril. We potted about the place all evening and somewhere in the background Margaret's knitting needles clattered.

To end the week, and despite my now one weak side, I went out in the wind and the rain on a hard climb up the hill. I wanted to be free of all the thinking, and experience the effort, the breath, one foot in front of the other, climbing, the feel of rain on my face, the sound of wind surrounding me, a mindless exertion. Tiredness and life, and life because tired, and tired because of life. And I got it. I suppose nowadays I am not strong enough to become totally absorbed into activity, consumed by physical action, but it was enough, to feel the need to take in oxygen, the hard pulse of my heart, the ache and tremor in my legs. I got to the top and the wind was wild but I enjoyed the cold defining of my face. So much there below me and although I was high above it, it all was not small and distant. I was able to inhabit the space between me and all that lay around me. I could cope with the scale. Going down was difficult, slippery, slippery, hard on the knees, and the rain had penetrated below my waterproofs and into my boots. I could see our home from the top and I was happy to feel at peace with its simple shape, and with the puzzle of love it held for me and Margaret.

When one dies what lives on is all one has given away, and only that. To wish to keep watch and never part from the graveside – that is keeping faith with a ghost, that is misery.

WEEK 11 (Verse 36) 15.12.09

At last a deep sense of winter, which I felt first in the early morning, looking out on a dark luminous moonscape.

Spiky grass, hard fields as
Day spreads pale with cold.
The sheep do not move, lie
Earthy. One ewe rises stiff.

I feel like a child in this winter world, protected, muffled, but clear-seeing, become like an artist, someone whose eyes are active, going out, and thus able to receive.

Crystal growth of frost furs
Each brittle leaf and stem.
Today the sun will preserve
Such spirit splinters.

The normal vigilance was suspended.

Daybreak and a roe deer
Materialises
Out of the mist, a ghost
Alert in thick rushes.

and there was a feeling of time suspended, of past and future sounding now.

Cold comes, mist in the sun
Hovers over fields as
High branches catch the light;
Premonition of Spring.

An interesting, loud, acerbic conversation took possession of our household one night this week. Margaret had a son, too, when young, who was already a young man when I met her again and we became close. He visits from time to time, a man in his forties, shaven-headed, strong-willed, he lives in the city, working with teenagers on the street. There is strain in his face, the determination to be out there, to meet you, to ask who you are, active compassion – but also a weariness, a wariness, a challenge that is not going to let you get away with anything vague, allow you to avoid the truth, as he sees it! His name is Hal. He brought a bottle of whisky with him and by the end of the evening it was gone and he had drunk the larger part. Not an unusual occurrence, I imagine. With Margaret he is tenderly offhand, for once a bit awkward and modest, trying to respond to her unspoken need for restfulness around her. She, though, loves his energy, his strength of character. She glows with pride at this man who is her son, the child of her youth. His main interlocutor and drinking companion was a pilgrim guest of that night, a middle-aged woman from Colorado. She was just the right foil for Hal, a woman who had brought a daughter up on her own, had struggled, had survived, and now, somehow, had decided on this pilgrimage, just because it was not the obvious thing for her to do. She was very direct, meeting Hal with her laconic wit, mocking and self-mocking, at once easy-going and steely. She knew her own mind and she would not be outdone or silenced or led where she did not want to go in a conversation. She had been a dental nurse for more than twenty-five years. She was very funny about her work, both about patients and dentists, with her the unrecognised one in the background ready with the right implement, living with the endless procession of gaping mouths that were not quite her responsibility. “Staring into the mouth of hell”, she described it in one of her amusing stories which I cannot hope to convey, lacking as it would her wonderful comic timing, her tone of outrage at life’s unfairness tempered by a hard-won tolerance. Normally when Hal comes, he does his best to fit in with us, but

pretty soon he is restless, picking up the newspaper then putting it down, searching for topics of conversation; but this time, with Diane, the dental nurse from Colorado, there was, for him, a satisfying clash. Sparks flew though no harm was done, no offence taken. Their hearts both seem not easily wounded. Perhaps each of them has given their heart away – a long time ago. Not to an individual but to the world, to the events which happened, to the work each day asked of them. Diane had a couple of large whiskeys but was not, apparently, much impressed by Hal's Scotch, or his discourse on distilleries and single malts.

Margaret and I are closer again, recovered from the separateness that has been there since she returned from her trip away. We have been trying out what it is like to be solitary and adjusting to this more conscious approach of death. I heard an interview on the radio with a woman who has set herself up as professional funeral photographer on the model of the wedding specialist. She spoke of being at her father's funeral and being aware of moments, meetings, people, poses that cried out to be caught by her camera and which she was sad were vanishing before her eyes. And so she set up her business. One of her customers was interviewed who, too, had lost a parent and invited, hired, the professional funeral photographer. This was a year ago and he had the CD or DVD or whatever with him, and treasured it, but had never actually looked at the pictures and was reluctant to do so now at the request of the interviewer. But he valued the object, the record of the end, being able to hold it.

In some Muslim cultures it is seen as a blessing to die suddenly, unexpectedly, even violently, especially as a martyr. This is the way to be propelled into Paradise – by the shedding of blood, by sudden death. A slow process of decline and release, 'natural causes' as we say, may hinder our passage across the chasm into Reality. We may just slip into the abyss, if death comes slowly. I do not believe in this martyr's path, that blood must flow from wounds. Margaret grows weak, her body less alive you could say; she cannot manage what she once could. But there is a beauty in her vulnerable flesh, her weakness, a tender beauty that is in no way pathetic or miserable. She is alone, she is, also, awake in a way I never saw before, alert to something that I cannot share in, although I also feel I know her better now than ever before, that she is truly present in this pained existence, this sick body. 'The Book of Martyrs' was in every church and fuelled hatred of Catholics for centuries. Christians have loved their gore and guts too.

We went for a short walk to a fine dry-stone dyke which goes as straight as an arrow up the hillside and, for the most part, is as strong and regular as when it was built over a hundred years ago. We both love this wall – its history, its form, the individual stones with their gaps and balances carrying the effort of bent backs and hard-skinned hands of men long dead. I think this wall connects us in a very powerful way. It receives her

pain and fear, and it receives mine, into its hard beauty, with moss and lichen and seedling, and through the weight of the stones we come close and find peace.

The hare is still around. I keep just catching a glimpse of white or brown disappearing round a corner or under a hedge or through a fence. It's always a surprise, a joy.

WEEK 12 (Verse 37) 22.12.09

This week the world has felt vacant without life, without time, as everything slows towards the turning point of the shortest day. Sometimes dramatic things happen which, when I reflect upon them, announced themselves, somehow, beforehand, prepared me with a question or a hint, a creature disappearing into the grass. But right now I cannot find anything in this pause which answers to my forboding. But there have been moments of reversal. The nights have been long and I have been awake, too awake, without the wintery dreaminess that I remember as a joy of the north. I get locked in my body.

In the night my heart seems
Unsure, above an abyss,
One beat from stopping.
The clock hands hardly move.

After one such night we went again to the hospital and I was dreading the impersonal corridors and the faces loaded with painful emotions. But it became an interlude of play, an escape, thanks to the specialist nurse we saw who created such a space of giving, an elegant, tactful welcome.

Back in the hospital
The nurse was kind, homely
Amid screens and dead light,
Giving us time to think.

Sitting side by side in her consulting room we were closer than we had been for ages, united by the nurse's attentive and hesitant gaze.

I have written almost nothing about my daughter Jude although we see her regularly and help with the boy. She is a teacher so her work does not require a lot of childcare for Stephen. I suppose I am embarrassed by how little she means to me, how little we figure in each others' lives. There are the memories of childhood, the journeys, setting off on holiday, faces in the mouth of a tent, and then there is a gap, the gap when she

became a woman. She left home, and she never really came back. It seems to me that, for us at least, she was not reborn as an adult, as her own person. I don't know what goes on behind the closed doors of her face, her eyes. I often feel as if we are both looking to find what it is we have to forgive – perhaps one of us only, perhaps both – what we have to forgive each other for and the forgiving needs the asking for forgiveness first and that can never be because we don't know what the wound was, what the wound is. And so sometimes I even forget her name, I think. There is no pulse of imagination between us, that pulse which keeps another person alive and real even in the way you hand them a bag of shopping or stir a teabag in a mug. She is a strong character, a survivor, lonely, and in her bearing there is the strength and at the same time a weakness, a weariness, a collapse. Those contrary qualities are both there at the same time like one of those illusional drawings which move between an old crone and a lady of fashion. And she becomes for me an illusion, a dancer without a name. Will this son of hers be the one to help us find each other one day? He came with me this week, planting some young trees, oak and holly. I tried to interest him in the way the trees would grow as he grew, how tall they would be in ten years, twenty years, fifty years, but he was unconcerned, more keen to master the art of banging in the thin stakes which supported the tree guards. It was awkward. He wasn't tall enough and I couldn't lift him at the same time as he was swinging quite a heavy hammer, but we managed where the trees were being planted on a steep slope and he could stand above the stake and enjoy the weight of the hammer, the swing of his arms, with my help.

As we worked in the winter afternoon a rainbow came, making the most of the low sun.

Close the rainbow gleams
Against a green slope. Later
Under grey cloud far-flung
Sunset gives glow to stones.

I was so aware of the distances, of the movement of light between near and far, but all that meant nothing for Stephen. He was fascinated by the holly leaves, their sharpness. We picked some branches from a mature tree nearby and he was eager to try out the sharp leaves, putting one in his mouth, pressing it against his own flesh and then against mine, pushing, all the time looking up to my face and then down to the part of the holly leaf pressing into the soft flesh of my thumb, looking to see my reaction, looking to see the limit, how far he could go. He drew a drop of blood from my hand and then withdrew the point of the spike, watching the drop of blood well and spread. By then it was nearly dark.

In the dusk a cow becomes
The white hair along her spine,
The droop of her tail
Lasting into night.

The night became clear and I went out late, alone, looking out for meteors which were due that night. As a child, at boarding school, I was ill once, seriously ill, a fever, and I remember matron telling me to listen to the most distant sound and pay attention to that. It would take away the pain. I don't imagine it helped much in the muddled distress of fever but the thought has stayed with me. I think it is part of why I love the night.

Listen out for the farthest sound –
Wind through winter reeds,
Geese high overhead –
It will assuage your pain.

The meteors came, powerful but not alive.

Shooting stars, one here, then
One there – no hurry.
From deep sky each falls
Slow towards my widening eyes.

They happen but are inhuman. They take me out of myself. We had a strange character stay this week, a Frenchwoman who worked as a coach driver and mechanic high up in the mountains, the French Alps I suppose. My French is not bad, but having been cemented in West Africa; has a strange ring to it which she found amusing. She loved engines and mending things that moved and had parts connecting to each other. For her things that work, that have been built, designed, are simple – there is only so much that can go wrong. You take it apart. For her life was simple, life was standing back and trying to understand what might have broken or become loose or blocked or bent. I have avoided the most obvious thing because it is difficult to write – that she was ugly. She used the word about herself and so I feel given permission to use it. Yes, she was ugly but, apparently, unbothered by it. I don't think that "apparently" is necessary. That's just my doubts about myself. She was not bothered by the word or by her face. It was for her a challenge to those she was with, to go through or let go or forget their, perhaps, first reaction of disgust or revulsion or rapt preoccupation, and find an enhanced sense of freedom and connection. "This is me". "I depend on you". Both statements she embodies, vulnerable to how others saw her and treated her, but with an integrity all of her own. I do not want to try to describe her physical appearance, not

because it did not matter, or did not come to matter; it did matter but my description could not do it justice because it would just be a list of features and distortions. It needs a portrait, a sculpture, - it needs her. There was something so substantial in being with her, like the sounding of a great bell with layers of soul, different intensities and layers of pitch, impact and reverberation and echo. A bell with a crack, a bell without a crack, I do not know.

WEEK 13 (Verse 38) 29.12.09

Christmas week and we are gripped with deep cold for once. The shortest day has been. It is mid-winter and yet also winter's beginning . Different kinds of time, different births and endings. The cold confirms for me the underlying power of life. The landscape became a single drift of snow and my mind and being were transformed into a wistful peace.

The cattle stand unmoved
By snow icing grubby ewes' backs.
In this muffled world
Strangers wave boldly.

Windward trunks are plastered first.
Soon all is misty white,
But in the big ash
Rooks gather black and clear.

A wind to draw skin tight,
A sky of lilac dusk,
Lit windows of far houses
Telling of warmth within.

Freshly dark, a half moon,
Indigo luminous,
Air stirs, cry after cry,
Many geese flying south.

This strange hard world, with new shadows and colours, has changed the way I see and hear. It has, inevitably, something of the child about it, a wordless innocence, a purity that reaches up to the stars. I am alive with the endless surprises, the soft whisper of thick falling snow, the whine of the wind in the night, the creak of ice under foot. It feels like a dream, you could say, but more, for me, as if for once I am truly awake, or have

escaped from some numbing drudgery. There was something both exciting and poignant to see the few lights of windows coming into being as the violet sky of dusk deepened into night and mist hung round the hollows and spread across the fields. A window into the warmth of life of my neighbours, some known well, some just faces you wave to as you pass in your separate cars. In many ways an empty time, not a lot of life in the landscape, although the movement and colours of the birds stand out. But the cold hurts as well as being beautiful. One morning there was a ewe by us, motionless with cold, only her eyes still opening and closing in silent numb pain. Our neighbour took her in, she was able to recover, but had gone beyond the point of recovering on her own. People, too, lose their minds in the cold, strip off, feel they are burning, lose connection with the earth. This beauty of winter is hard and crystalline but also ethereal, unearthly, on the border between waking and sleeping. For many it is their god, or their substitute god, or sufficient spirit to remind them of what is important.

We had a most interesting pilgrim this week, a young man, Mohammed, originally from Afghanistan, who had found his way to our country as a child refugee, having been a child soldier from a very early age. A young man so wonderfully wide and open in his face, despite all the trauma, all the stuff of nightmares which he had seen: now he was settled here, studying computer science, with good English, and a determination to be here, and to be true to his origins. He had seen his own father killed, for no good reason (what reason could be good?). He was not bitter. He listed the family members who were alive, their circumstances, their upheavals, their daily trials. He had come on the pilgrimage, I think, because it was a way of connecting with his roots, his Islamic roots through the experience of devotion, of journey, of endurance. He needed the reality of hardship. Religion for him was very tied in with Justice. I remember him slapping his forehead with the palm of his hand and saying that God was there, God was right in front of his eyes, where he could not see him. God was there. He could never know him but he could serve him. He could reach out to his brothers and sisters, he could make himself see. To see, for Mohammed, was to fight injustice. Passionate words, and a young man's conviction, but such eyes! I was lost in the dark and depth of his eyes. Off he went, hardly dressed for the bitter cold, making his way in a still strange land; a pair of old trainers.

Jude has gone with Stephen to Miami for the whole school holidays. She does not celebrate Christmas and needs the sun, so there were just the two of us. When Jude was born, Margaret had a difficult time, with depression. I was not a lot of help then. I just wanted to get her better and spent all my time trying to work out ways of helping her over it – exercise, food, therapy, pills, holidays. Then one day I caught sight of her, through a doorway, sitting in our bedroom, by the window, very pale and still, but with so much going on for her, in her. It was another being growing towards birth. It was

another pregnancy, another conception, I remember thinking. Or perhaps it was another stage, another part, of Jude's birth, a birth of the heart more than the womb, acknowledging the necessary pain of this child's life, the mother as the guardian of the hidden life of the child. She, the child, will be sent out, sent away. She hardly moved for weeks, Margaret, barely managing to talk, caring for the child almost as a foreign thing, and then, one day, it had gone. She wore different clothes. She cut her hair, she wrapped the baby close to her breast, she was ready to set Jude free. How did it come about that people believed in a virgin birth, a birth without mess and physical union, that this should be the sign of the divine? Purity is an achievement of the heart, a gift, yes, but not a quality sullied by the body. We come here to be pierced. On Christmas Eve we sang, the two of us. Margaret plays the cello, not well, and now she has not the strength to play or practice, but this night she did, just a few bars of the tune to get us going, and I love to see her embrace the instrument. She comes so strongly into herself as she sits and holds it and her fingers move clearly across the strings, firm yet sensitive. She looked well, and the wood glowed in the firelight and candlelight and the play of the bow was music in the light.

We sat with candlelight,
The air swam as with tears.
Love went hand in hand with
Grief. We did not speak.

The silence was humming with the fading away of the notes, the last reverberations. Suddenly, the air was chilly, the fire was dying, the candles guttering. We found our way to the, at first, cold comfort of bed.

On Christmas morning there was a leak in a pipe, just a small one. I managed to fix it, at least temporarily. That was very satisfying, the calm thinking through of possible ways of sorting out the problem. A leak is just a little hole, after all. For Christmas lunch, as usual, we had Tom Brown with us. He is nearly ninety, lives on his own, was in the Navy in the Second World War, and a prisoner for some years in the Far East. About this he does not speak except by using flippant clichés, jokey phrases which seem so at odds with the hints and flashes and shadows which I catch in his face and voice. But these formulae only come when I ask or probe indirectly; otherwise it is silence. He says that for him the best thing is that he is not eating alone, that there is someone else on the other side of his plate. What a strange expression! The blank space on the other side of the table, with no possibility of conversation? As we sat at the table, the three of us, I was aware of the space above the table, filled with flavours and steam and the mingling of our gazes and voices.

A week below freezing,
Icy underfoot I
Cannot trust. I shuffle on,
Grabbing at the air.

WEEK 14 (Verse 39) 5.1.10

New Year has come and the cold gets stronger. There was no sense of an ending or a beginning for me with the moment of the year's end, despite it being a full moon, with a partial eclipse. I seem held in a different rhythm. There are folk-tales here of the year as an old broken man who, encountered on New Year's eve, the Old Night as they say in Spanish, is transformed before your eyes into a youth, then a child, who must complete his solitary journey before he becomes newborn, unborn, reborn. This year little moved, little changed.

Full moon and the wind too
Is frozen. It is so bright
That ghosts are not a-field.
My heart's fears, though, abound.

By now the burn belongs to winter. It has a skin of fantastical ice under which the water runs. A few days ago it was still open.

Water falls, pools, falls again,
Swirls from icy rocks,
Splashes shining into drops
Tiny on cold moss.

I remember in Sudan an old story-teller who would always have another twist in the tail, in the tale, when you thought the story was over. 'This is it', we say, knowing, really, that if it was really 'it' you wouldn't need to say it. There is no doubt about the final word, the destination, the state of being totally alone. To wonder if you are there means you have not arrived.

Few pilgrims this week. The fields have become hardened and slippery even where no feet have trod or vehicles pressed down. We had a man marvelously equipped, Don, a pilot, a helicopter pilot, from Canada, a big man, tough but precise, who had come to find a slower pace, without restrictions and timetables and the need for pinpoint accuracy in all he was doing. But he was well kitted-out and he pored over his maps, calculating distances and likely times. We had a game of chess, a rare thing for me. I

played a lot as a child, we had many Polish neighbours, and so the habits of strategy are there somewhere. I am a methodical player. Don was bold, very present, above the board, looming. I was slowly building up the pressure, resisting his adventurous attacks, forcing him back, in a strong position, and then made a simple bad move, exposing myself in an obvious way. I was way ahead of myself, the present forgotten in the slow march of my build-up. But it was enough for Don. The game shifted completely in two moves – my folly and his rejoinder. I could not regain my composure. I could have resigned there and then but we enjoyed his completion of the defeat. His mission was to be incisive, mine to be careful and contained. I enjoyed the silent debate, the many paths and structures of thought, the mix of the predictable and the surprising.

All the signs of animal life of the early days of the snow are much less visible now. There has been little snow and the frosts have now either hardened the old snow into impervious ice or powdered it into icy snow that does not take impressions. The only new sign of life has been a fox, or foxes, barking in the night quite close to the house. I imagine that they are hungry although it may also be the beginning of mating. Early one morning one came trotting across the field, in no hurry, then along the wall to the corner, up onto the top of the wall for a while, quite exposed, then on, out of sight, into the next field. The sheep, after a bitterly cold night, hardly seemed to notice, did not notice, stayed huddled by the wall, higher up, not in his line of travel. He was both graceful and powerful, although just on his way somewhere, nothing devious or shrinking in his motion. A survivor. So now I hear him barking in the night. It will not be long before the vixen will be screaming for a mate, but then it will be Spring, or Spring on the way. The fox gives me a sense of what it would be to live with wolves.

Forty hens slaughtered thanks
To a forgotten door,
A fox with blood on his jaws –
And soft feathers hanging.

Thirty years ago, I remember the scene. It was bad enough with hens, a few small birds. I have seen it with human limbs, with children. I have seen much more blood.

How do words and pictures, images and understanding, fit together – or not. These flashbacks I can do nothing about. I am stuck with them. They are stuck in me. Now, right now, I have an intense awareness of Margaret as a physical self – her life, her shape – because she is so vulnerable, in pain, close to death, probably. I live with, and into, her slow movements, her brave efforts, her patience and I feel the mystery, the spirits you could say, who surround her and carry and receive her enduring life. Her

presence grows, glows, with significance and I feel sure I would be unwise to try to put that significance into words, yet it belongs to my total awareness, my mind, my thoughts and is not just her physical appearance, her ill body. Opening the front door as the sun rose she was suddenly, as her pull freed the slightly stuck door, lit up by the low sun streaming into the entrance with the glow of stained glass beside and above her. She became an icon alive, the divine glimpsed through her bright face. Most of the time my life leads on from one thing to another and I accept the unthinking flow. Now Margaret brings that stream to a halt. It means she is alone but her solitariness is a gift to me. She helps me accept her death. And mine.

My friend John Milne, has returned to his house down the road from his other house in Gascony. He is my age but he has a young, a very young, wife, a young Russian woman he met only a year or two ago, and a baby, now seven or eight months old. He is besotted – with the baby and with the wife. He was a man always who needed to talk, to argue, but not now. Now this woman and the child she has given him are enough to fill his life, to satisfy his spirit. He dotes. No, dotes is not the right word because there is nothing sentimental or excessive in it. He does not ask anything of others, of me, as we sat together. The child and the woman are the lights of his life, like the sun. They simply are there and nothing can be more important. He too has grown-up children and a happy marriage that ended in his wife's death about six years ago. We are now not the friends we once were. I cannot quite look at him, cannot quite look them all in the face. It is wonderful to see him so happy and contented, absorbed but this is a foreign world to me, this baby, this woman with her swollen breasts, her dark hair. They will be here until Spring so they can all have some northern light, then back to the heat of the South. I cannot remember what it is like to look after a baby. Perhaps there is nothing to it.

Margaret gave me for Christmas a biography of a local man, an artist who died a few years ago. I didn't know why – yet. He is a man who converted quite late in life to Catholicism, was chronically depressed, and, in the end, committed suicide. This is a particularly tragic conjunction because it probably meant that he died with a terrible sense of mortal sin. His work is not outwardly troubled or disturbing – quite the opposite, very cool, beautiful still-lives with a wonderful skill in rendering texture and feel so that the objects sound out with the substances they are made of and the processes which gave them being. They are faultless, while his life swung between disaster and salvation. His paintings are too precious for me.

A wall, made by hard hands,
Stones, each half a ton,
Flat-faced granite, gaps
No bigger than fingers,
On up the slope it goes,
Narrowing to a scratch.

Two-week remains of a snowman,
Not in good shape,
Personality lost,
Small head poised on a point.

I am missing manual labour. It is work which lets me think, lets a flame escape from my muscles.

WEEK 15 (Verse 40) 12.1.10

The snow is blue with the
Space of the sky and the
Long-shadowing sun.
Ewes bleat, sensing an absence.

The week of the deepest cold and snow, of burrowing, hibernating, letting go into the magic. Why do we imagine that we are going to be freed of a pain, find closure, be reconciled, move on? Because we want happiness and peace of mind for ourselves and others. Illusion. It has been a week of deaths locally – two brothers, middle-aged, fell through ice and, although rescued, died of the cold; a woman in her thirties skidded and hit a tree and was killed instantly. The tree and the fast moving metal of the car, they do not belong together. A young man who had won a huge amount of money a few years ago found dead in his home with “no suspicious circumstances”. Deaths that others will have to deal with, deaths which I hope will remain individual, personal, people who will continue to speak and be spoken to by those who love them, those whom they who have died loved ...and love. I have been where death has become meaningless, has become slaughter, with no hope of recognising the individual. I cannot deal with that on my own. In this winter the animals show how death is the constant noise of their lives. We have to discover death, wrestle, but not look for a winner, a loser.

Way below freezing and
The flinty night has stars
In the vastness, stars
In the snow here at my feet.

I seldom take a dislike to one of our visitors, our pilgrims, but I did this week to a young softly-spoken Catholic priest who was making the most of the seasonal hardships, sent as a test of his piety and discipline, a test he was passing with flying colours. His skin shone, his language shone with precision and erudition. He was a man pleased with himself but, I felt, hiding it immaculately. I felt so uncomfortable with him in the house but I was drawn to him, drawn even to pick a fight, pick a quarrel. It didn't quite work out like that. Who started it? We got into the subject of abortion. I think I led him on to rehearse his calm arguments, his moral logic, that was dripping with emotions, unacknowledged feelings and condemnations. I was not very effective or coherent. I think of the young girl, scared, alone, trying to understand her life, I think of the desperate women using soap, whisky, toothpaste and dying in the thousands, all over the world, through the centuries. There, I've done it, gone from the one whom I can imagine to the many in order to press my case, but I don't have a case, I just want to get away from ideas of crime and sin. Safety, that is one side of it, to avoid the ignorant self-mutilation, and the other is responsibility, to stand in awe before the decisions and responsibilities which we all face at moments in our lives. Enough of my preaching. The priest intimidated me although I took a dislike to him, did not have respect for his moral authority. I am trying now, and failing, to make up for my tongue-tied response.

A long row of rooks against
Pure pale sky.
Off they go in twos and threes
Leaving behind a bare wire.

In the morning Margaret was there at breakfast and she managed a brilliant performance, except that it wasn't a performance for her. She was like a bird, or a butterfly, very light and darting, humorous, totally untouched by his subtle weight, his wish to have both gravity and grace. She gave, she was the host, hospitable. I suppose that is what I wanted to develop in myself, to give to the world in a small way by running this inn, this hostel, the open house, the willingness to give all. Margaret was without any 'side', she had nothing she was trying to gain, and nothing she was trying to defend and the man, the priest, was disarmed. For her it was just how she is, how she wants to be. Those two conditions are not the same but, at the moment, I cannot tell for Margaret how much she is, or needs to be, in charge, in control, of the

changes she is experiencing. She has set off on a journey, a solitary journey, from which there is no turning back, but what or who is carrying her onwards?

Crusted trees carry the snow
Just as it fell days ago.
Above the running water
Ice thickens.

I took Stephen out on the frozen loch, the first time I have been walking on it for years. I asked his mother first. She did not answer directly but said that as I believed in adventure I had better take this opportunity. She kept using the word “adventure” so that by the end of our conversation the word had lost all meaning for me. We took the sledge and out we went away from the banks out into the middle of the loch. We were not the only ones. I felt completely safe and confident after so many days and nights of hard frost, some people will think I was being foolhardy, with my grandson in tow. How strange and exciting to be out on the frozen water, to know that there are fatal depths below, that you are on a firmness that will be gone in a matter of days; an innocent danger. This may be the one time in his childhood when he can slide across this other world. It was a risk, to be out there in the open, just the ice and a few others, a few shouts and laughs, and geese above. I think I was much more impressed by the whole event than Stephen. When we got back to the bank I stood looking out across the flat surface, seeing us out there. It already seemed a long way away. But I felt very fresh, without fears. I had left them out on the ice. We had had our adventure. When we get back to her house, Jude would not quite look me in the eye, but got busy toasting crumpets and making tea. She talked to Stephen about what had happened but would not talk to me. I think she had been worried, frightened, but not wanted, had not been able to say anything to me. I still cannot understand it. She wouldn't stop still long enough for us to come to some kind of understanding. She said thanks for taking him as I was leaving but that only made it all the more dissatisfactory.

What I keep hearing are those other voices, the children on the frozen water, the cries and laughing and shouting in the immense still space of the cold afternoon turning towards night; with the geese overhead – it was as though I had made it all up yet it filled my heart with a kind of childlike love. This week was a time of such powerful beauty and stillness with clear sunny days turning into clear starry nights and the whole world startling and bold. The everyday just fell away and I was left with the earth and the stars and the sun, and the moon disappearing towards the new. But I am still troubled by that priest, and I don't know why. He talked a lot about guardian angels. He wanted me to succumb to something. Now in the last day there is a change. It started with the wind, the motion of branches, the sound. It broke into the unearthly truce, the pause in

the battle. That's when they saw angels, wasn't it, in the trenches, at Mons? Angels are not propaganda.

I had forgotten the wind,
The maddening wind;
I flinch from the harsh wind.
Winter's deep pause is past.

WEEK 16 (Verse 41) 18.1.10

This week has brought a thaw. It came with the new moon, sitting like a smile on the horizon to the south – and lots of rain! The rain, melting the ice, revealed the life beneath the hard crust – snowdrops squashed and ready, eager to burst up and out. The mole is busy making his usual winter track across the lawn, bringing up his beautiful, huge hills of dark tilth. The snow was a blessing. Is it now farewell to winter's fierce life?

Is this the last snowfall
Before the promised thaw?
I tread on it with care,
I ask nothing of it.

When the rain came I felt both irritation and relief.

Grey skies, sleet, wet shoes, old
Arguments and tired words –
The world needs something new
From me – my fire, my light.

I went off for a walk deep in the forest but there the going was hard.

Deep in the woods frost
Persisted. As I slipped
On old ice, water trickled
Beneath the rigid crust.

I came up the cold slope into the warm south-facing hillside with tall well-spaced larch and beech and hollows of moss so luxuriant and fresh, a sign of life both tenacious and gentle.

Larch, high and wide, above,
Dark spruce below, younger;
By the wall two dead oaks,
Ancient skeletons.

On a beach the boughs would have become bleached driftwood, indestructible. In the forest the forms were still sharp, like antlers, but the trees were destined to disintegrate, crumbling to dust.

I have been drawing and painting Margaret. It is not for a memorial. She is pleased by my doing it. There was a portrait done for Churchill's eightieth birthday – the old dark defeated dog – and his wife burnt it after his death, burnt this treasure which she found ugly and unfair. I remember Margaret as a young woman. I knew her a little then, a tall athletic girl, good with horses, a fine skier, fine-boned, a brittle beauty. Twenty years later when we became close her face had gained substance, depth. The eyes had not changed, have never changed. Perhaps your eyes only change when you try to hide from what your eyes have seen, or try not to see what is there before you. Eyes only change with what was not admitted. Around the eye life weaves its wrinkles. In the centre the mystery of the individual, the colour, the dark centre, the spot of light reflecting. We see nothing if we do not make the space to receive. When I draw I start with the eyes, the placement, and end with the eyes, the moment, the realization, the life. She would usually wear quite chunky jewellery – beads, stones – and always colour at her neck, unusual colour of earthy pink, or turquoise, viridian, a sheen, a silvery thread and simple clothes, simply cut, like a peasant, which hung well on her body and also did not define her, let her hide, be shy. She wears less jewellery nowadays. I think it feels too heavy for her but she has one or two unpolished stones she wears and now it is shawls and longer scarves she wraps around herself, wraps herself in warp and weft. The drawing began in the strange days of snow and ice, the days of isolation. We had all the time in the world, but it has continued now into the thaw and beyond the thaw into the sun. I am slow and painstaking. I do not have talent but I have eyes and we both welcome the opportunity it gives for me to be able to look at her and her to be able to be looked at. We talk. She said she did not want me ever to give her a description, a title – not wife, not partner, or lover, or comrade, or companion, or best friend, or..... They were all not true, she said. She did not want me to use them (when she died – was implied, was meant but not said). She was still but not posed, watching the birds. I was busy, messy, glad to be occupied, feeling that otherwise I would be irritable or depressed. I see her, then the seeing clearly dissolves into a haze, without outlines.

We have a New Year ritual with Margaret's son, Hal. He is a keen skier, an unlikely passion for such a rough diamond, such an inner-city man who loves his life working at the edge: Fierce love for the outsiders he helps. Anyway he always goes skiing after Christmas – France this year – and has two weeks of mountains and speed. Then he comes to visit us, brings a bottle of whisky, and we get drunk, peacably, together, the only time in the year I have a serious drink. For once all the tension is gone from this tight man, he is still with the mountains, storms and all, and we have a mellow meandering conversation well into the night. This year we talked about Margaret, something we had never done before. We did not really talk about her because she is a different figure for the two of us – mother and lover and we, with some hesitation, placed the two side by side, shared them, details, memories, reflections, and let the two become one, become the woman herself out there, in the firelight, not our doing. It was like a poem, or music. We didn't look ahead, didn't speculate, but gave each other this indirect support. The service for the departed, the request for peace, for rest, for eternal rest – who is it for? Those who grieve or the one who has departed? Who is pleading to be consoled? Hell is nothing, hell is just absurd (and judgement) but paradise, the eternal light, the eternal rest of the poor man, that need not be shallow consolation. That can be a quest. After the earthquake I buried children and I did not know who their parents were and they will never know where their children's bones lie. When the last part of the child's body is covered by earth, an abyss opens up. I have known societies where the bones of recent ancestors are taken out and wrapped again and reburied. New members of the family are introduced to the dead and memory is renewed. It is a time of celebration. Memory is not that powerful for us and bones do not hold meaning for so long. So, Hal and I had our annual drink. The bottle was empty but, as usual, I had no hang-over.

Pilgrims, though few, do continue to pass through. A middle-aged woman, called Janine, passed through. She seemed at first sight very unremarkable, a rather dumpy, ordinary person, someone it would be easy to ignore. As we were both busy in the kitchen and dining room we found ourselves facing each other as we passed and looked, for a moment, into each other's faces. In that moment I felt her power, a wisdom, a magic. It was still very ordinary, very everyday but I felt instantly in the presence of someone you could rely on and who knew important things beyond my knowledge. She was a hairdresser. She has a salon in the north of England, two children, grandchildren, the usual. She had no trappings – of manner or speech or in her life and habits. The only story I can remember her telling is of her grandson's hamster getting lost behind the bath, but her presence is still here; she has stayed sitting at the kitchen table. And the thing is that she, of course, had no idea how special she was. If she ever did have that thought, the magic would evaporate, instantly!

Morning mist, a rainbow;
Later, on my bare head
A touch of stunning warmth
From the January sun.

WEEK 17 (Verse 42) 26.1.10

It is always the same with the hunting of the hawk. The first thing I noticed was the absence of the small winter birds and their endless search for food through the short day. All had gone quiet, the hedge was still, and that usually means that the sparrowhawk has swooped, has passed through at breakneck speed. Then I saw him, the male sparrowhawk, sitting on a fence post at the boundary of the garden, looking slightly down and to one side. I knew that, in some sense, he was unaware of me, that I did not disturb him. He was in a trance. I slowly took a few careful steps closer, to enjoy his colours, rusty orange and blue and warm grey, and the lightness and power of his form. Then he was gone, just a dark stroke of movement, down and away behind the dyke. In the garden a different kind of movement, the mole's slow winter progress, the same every year, re-excavating his labyrinth across the grass in the garden. What mountains he moves! Where did he go in the long frost? There is ice still on the loch ten days after the thaw began. Sometimes the cat sits by a molehill waiting for disturbance, the shifting soil.

The earthy mole is back.
I see him rarely
But know his old weathered hills,
And this one darkly soft.

I went with Stephen on bikes deep into the forest; up and up the rough track we went and I loved the feel of my heart. Strange that the sound of the heart is the valves closing to keep the beautiful rhythm of the flow going – it's not the push, the force of contraction but the sensitive intertwined controlling of the flow, the stopping of the flow, the valves drawing together – lubb dupp, lubb dupp, lubb dupp. With tall dark trees all around we stopped and once my heart had quietened I could live into the great silence, with no birds or wind or traffic. It was already late and Stephen became quite frightened, anxious about our finding our way home. The geese brought contact, a world beyond our gathering gloom.

Far across the dusk sky
A sinuous wave of geese
Sweeping west to last light –
A thousand birds as one.

We were home before night came, the last part of our cycle along a straight road which has become a tunnel with branches above. That was a comforting dark for both of us.

Long line of squat beech trees
Arch over the bare road,
Bent by the endless wind,
Generations of strain.

That morning I had had a moment of fear; the day was fresh and bright. The winter cocoon was broken. Now I was alone, now something would be expected of me. Now I would fail. The ride home helped, allaying Stephen's fears and mine. At breakfast I had looked at Margaret, in half-profile, and I knew it was me who was withdrawing although it was she who was departing. There was both absence and purpose in her face, she was already on a journey, or making her final preparations, or the ship slowly separating from the quay and I was the one left standing. I could, for a moment, see and feel her state of being, seeing and hearing me getting fainter and smaller. This was not about vacant expressions or lack of conversation or lack of interest in me or in life on her part. No, she is often acutely aware, amused, observant. That seems to make the separation greater. She is far away from her smile, although it is genuine.

Her face was open wide,
Her gaze met mine
But she has gone, leaving me
Only an invitation.

Then it was the sound of crockery, plates against each other, the running of the tap, the gathering of crumbs, the sweep of the brush, watching out for unexpected visitors at the bird-table amidst the belligerent antics of the chaffinches.

We had a group of four staying this week. They were from somewhere in Eastern Europe, with gypsy features, Roma people. We had little or no language in common so our communication was with signs and gestures, very comical. They were, anyway, quite self-contained, two men in their forties perhaps and a woman who looked much older, but probably wasn't, and a young man, late teens. They talked very loudly and often all at the same time, as they had their meal, and I found it impossible to tell the

mood, what was genuine anger, or passion, what was exaggeration or habit. The younger man, the boy really, went over to our old out-of-tune piano and began playing and improvising on a slow melody, quite simple and severe but with turns and inversions on top of the sustained rhythm and the basic tune. And the others ignored him in the heat of their interchange. Occasionally there would be a lull, the three would turn away from each other, sit quite fixedly for a moment, taking in, gathering strength, and the boy's music could be heard clearly before it again became submerged in the fierce exchange. I hovered on the edge, drawn to their energy, and enjoying the play of gestures, the feigned incomprehension. The boy went on even after the others had left the room so it wasn't just a way of protecting himself, insulating himself from the noise, the emotion, the daily repetition.

Hal gave me a book last week, a biography too, just as Margaret had done. The subject is a man I only know by name, a late Victorian aristocrat who is also an early socialist and social reformer. Hal reveres this man for his strength of character, his commitment and devil-may-care eccentric idealism. Hal is very patriotic and this man was also a lover of the land and of tradition. I cannot warm to him, to his sangfroid, to the utter conviction of his actions – never mind prison or the possibility of death. His wife died young and he had her buried on a small island he could see from the window of his ancestral home, and no-one was to go there but himself. He married again, an older woman, much beneath him socially, who stayed very private, was not introduced into Society. But there are letters to her from her husband, very tender, simple, undemonstrative. And the young, beautiful, dead bride's grave always visible from the bedroom window, away out in the loch.

Two mothers were in court this week, in separate cases, accused of murder, one for injecting her permanently unconscious son, severely injured in a road crash, the other for assisting her adult daughter to die, a daughter she had cared for over more than fifteen years of total dependence due to a chronic condition. The first was sent to prison, the second not. For the law the very deliberate nature of the first mother's action made the verdict and the sentence more clear. Pre-meditated. The law has a distant tolerance of impulse, of the wronged lover who strikes out in jealous rage. The mother's decision calls for mercy, but is mercy before the law, more fundamental than the law, or an afterthought, a special pleading?

The moon is coming towards the full again, though, for the most part, the nights have been cloudy. I do not know the names of the stars, of the constellations, but I am familiar with the patterns, the moving geography of the night sky. One night this was lost, the stars which I could see became solitary.

Moonlight behind thin cloud
Gives diffuse glow,
The sky darker where breaks reveal
Single stars now strangers.

WEEK 18 (Verse 43) 2.2.10

This week the oystercatcher came back to the now green fields which have been swept clean by the cold and the wind – just one so far and I think of this bird as female, as mother-to-be, come inland to announce the new year. It's an ugly long name for such an intriguing bird – and wildly inaccurate. It comes at this time of the year both as the bold black, white and red bird of the day, angled and sharp, and as the fast-moving, alarmed but plaintive 'Cleeping' wail of the night.

She has come with her bright wings,
She belongs with the shore,
the sparkling waves.
Here she blazes spring's sharp tides.

I think she went quiet at the full moon. Perhaps she has gone for a while, this messenger. Sometimes this week I have felt the coming summer, imagined I was in the garden with the chestnut in blossom, the lilac, the cherry. It was all here already, more true in the imagining. Why do we judge such presaging to be ominous? Because it is out of the ordinary. I passed by the farm and the bare hedge and road were busy with sparrows feeding on barley, the hidden sound and then the busy little bodies, risking the dangers of the farm's traffic, quickly to and fro.

Sparrows chattering
In the thorn hedge by the farm,
Darting for spilt grain,
Summer murmur in the chill.

This week has been chaos in my feelings and in my life, people coming and going, memories, dreams, half dreams. I was so surprised to be caught by this chaos. I thought it was a thing that did not belong to me any more, did not belong to my life. There it was – restlessness, inward and outward. I decided to try a self-portrait. It is almost twenty years since I have looked at myself in a mirror so intently. The last time was in a crisis, a crisis that led to health or something on the way to health. Perhaps this is still the same thing. I am aware of myself leaving accurate memory behind, now using remembering as a way of finding ties, connections, meanings and not being

bothered by historical accuracy. But needing also to fool myself that I am in touch with the truth. So I took a big sheet of paper and a pencil and controlled myself, looked, stood back, worked very slowly in the looking, and simply in the line and the shading, just trying to calm everything down. A pencil line on a clean sheet of beautiful thick paper is a comfort. There is a poem about two lovers who never come together, only see each other through a window; She, the one inside, has a sculpted head of herself placed in the window where it looks out on the statue of her lover on horseback, riding by, which he had placed there. Statue faces statue. After a few days the face in the mirror, for me, became familiar, companionable.

It was Holocaust Memorial Day this week. Perhaps it was in my mind, but without in anyway looking for it, I picked up an old copy of Anne Frank's diary in a charity shop; I am sure it is the very edition I first read, a Pan paperback with a cover I remember; her innocent face in the foreground, a stairway and vaguer menacing Nazi figures behind, a deep blue background. She writes of wanting to live a special life, not to be ordinary, to leave something behind when she dies. She draws everything towards her, towards her need to burst out of the confines of the Annexe. And she did – by her death. She could be a woman in her eighties now – grandchildren, great grandchildren perhaps, starting to be tired of life. Not this eager child yearning for experience.

Anne Frank wrote,
before the car doors banged,
before her hands began to shiver,
“People are good at heart”.

A man was on the radio, a survivor, describing the moment when he waved goodbye to his wife and child who were in the other queue. They had matching jackets on, the mother and child, made by the mother, cut and sewn and he described how both had hoods with points, quite unusual, a little comical or fanciful. The jackets with hoods for the mother and the child. “In a couple of hours they were ashes” – a way of ending this memory, which has shaped his life, and which through the years must have been repeated and repeated.

I had a friend who played the clarinet, died young, but had made many recordings. They don't get played much, less and less I suppose, but still, sometimes they turn up on the radio. When a piece is announced which is going to have a prominent clarinet – Mozart, Schubert, Brahms, Messiaen – I always think of her, picture her, hope it is going to be her playing. Her husband, certainly the last time I saw him, a good few years ago, cannot bear to hear recordings of her playing, runs a mile, is superstitious, finds it an unbearable intrusion into his love, his continuing conversation with her. Perhaps that

has changed now, I wonder. Perhaps he collects her recordings, or their children do, needing whatever avenues they have to discover their mother.

Margaret said again to me this week that she does not want to be known by any title in relation to me when she is dead – not wife or partner or other more sickly terms. “I want no clichés”, she said, “No labels, no clichés”. I don’t think I can do it. When it comes to this, to death and grief, what are there but clichés? She also said that if she didn’t find peace she would be afraid. The peace comes first and the peace has to do with keeping clear of clichés, being solitary, self-contained. I think I’m going to need my clichés. We will see.

Among the few pilgrims this week was a small, wizened woman, quite stooped, with a deeply sculpted, lined, chiselled face, which you couldn’t quite see because of the angle of her back and the twist in her shoulders and neck. She arrived with a bundle of sticks, for the fire, a bundle of dry sticks she had gathered outside. It was her offering. She saw my self-portrait and inspected it closely, bending and putting her face right up against the paper. I didn’t like her breathing – or even dribbling on it! She asked lots of questions, terse, probing, about me, the house, the area, the guests, little fragments of our life seemingly unconnected to each other. There would be a pause then another question, darted at me, homing in, a reply, a pause, a nod or slight sound, a pause, another question. She was slowly sorting something out. When she left we discovered on the table three little wax figures, as big as a thumb, without detail but very clearly herself, me and Margaret.

There is a church about ten miles from here which houses a very unexpected sculpture. It was done by a woman who had survived the war. She was Jewish and ended up here. She must already have had some training in art because she got a commission for the Festival of Britain – an event I just about remember. Her piece is of two lovers, a man and a woman, naked, entwined. The man is sitting, the woman facing him sitting astride him. Their faces are close, they hold each other. It has peace and passion. The figures are thin but fully human, her breasts do not touch his chest. The title is carved into the base by their feet – ‘There shall be no shame’ – in English and in Polish on the other side. The sculpture was not exhibited at the time of its commission – too shocking? I don’t know. But it found its way to this very ordinary church where it sits in an alcove. The figures are a bit more than half life-size. The shock has gone. It’s a good place for it, for this divine passion, for these lovers who are in part upright. What is this shame? The shame of being born, of having a body, of bleeding – the shame of our dreams when we realise that they tell so much secret truth? The little wax figures are on the bedroom windowsill.

WEEK 19 (Verse 44) 9.2.10

I had had an unusual, abstract dream, of coloured spiralling s-shapes, turning first clockwise and then anticlockwise. They were in me, contained within a bag-like stomach. Then I woke early and went down in the dark to the little bridge, and heard an energetic splashing in the shallow water. It was an otter, oblivious to me, turning in that same spiralling, reversing-of-direction way, its body breaking the surface, its head below water for the most part, moving slowly downstream, working the stony bottom, hunting for small fish, eels perhaps, Its motion was so lively, so firm and muscular, slapping the water, enjoying the water. It's two years at least since I saw one last. Pets are different. They have absorbed our attention, have become dependent members of the household.

The cat's back flowed under my hand,
Enjoying avoiding,
Then his tail curled
To roll round my fingers.

I found our neighbour's old dog
Lost in the road at night.
Silent she struggled to climb
Into my car.

Margaret and I are unhooking from each other, disentangling habits in a companionable way. We say little but I do not believe we are running away from each other, or from death, from parting.

We had a visit from neighbour John with his young wife and child. I thought she was Russian but she is in fact Polish, a big difference. She speaks English fluently with just the hint of the exotic, the glamorous, but she is wary. Who knows why? There are so many potential sources of discomfort – her youth, her beauty, being foreign, being the one who has let this fading old man be rejuvenated. John has eyes only for her and for the child, who is called Anton. Perhaps that's why I thought she was Russian – the name, Chekhov perhaps? He seems like a man reborn, who has rediscovered his soul. There is a sense of focus, of no time to waste. I am overwhelmed. I am sad at the loss of a friend and yet I marvel at his vigour. Perhaps she is embarrassed at what she has done to him, for him – this revitalization is inherently sexual. It reveals how powerful her energy is, and perhaps she would like it hidden. I envy him this dark-haired beauty. The child was there as a topic, as a distraction, as an emblem. Margaret sang to him as he sat in her arms and he was intrigued by this strange voice, looking away from

Margaret to his mother's face, who sat beside Margaret, so the child could move between face and voice and play with unfamiliarities. No, I do not envy him his young wife. We still have things to work on.

Midday and still foggy -
I felt some little fear.
Then sunbeams came angling down
And sent it spinning.

There was a moment on a walk, with low bright sun on a slope, a steep slope, with widely spaced tall larches above me and an open valley below, and the shadows of the trunks interlaced with the trunks themselves against the mossy green of the hillside. I seem caught in long moments of disorientating transition. The long goodbye. A silly joke. I crave clarity and the biggest obstacle is old pain, are the memories I can do nothing about, not the present distress. I can remember being left at boarding school aged 7. The place is crystal clear, the dorm, the refectory, the chapel, the gym, but it is all silent, and all drained of colour – not black and white and the beauty of grey but drained to a lifeless, bloodless palor. I try to put colour back into the images, the images of food – liver, custard, porridge, chocolate blancmange – but it will not take. It has bled to death, a world buried, but it still stays with me and feeds into what is unfulfilled in our conversations, into what I cannot give her.

She says she does not remember her dreams. I am surprised by that. She has always said that; whereas for me my dreams are an ever-present feature of my waking life, more than I would wish, but a texture and necessary stimulation which I can't imagine being deprived of. Last week we had the woman who made little statues. That touched Margaret. She has, since then, made several small "scenes". I don't know what you would call them. Miniature installations, collages, arranged on small surfaces – an Indian papier-mache tray, a hand mirror, an old wooden plate, a baking tray. On them are arranged, very precisely, little scraps of cloth, and natural objects such as shells and stones, as well as crafted things. These are not dreams but, to me, they seem like the product, the echoes, of dreams, a way back into forgotten or unremembered dreams. She lets go but the composition, as I watch her observe the finished work, is everything. I sense that if she can get the arrangement right, the right pieces, the right relationships, then the scene comes alive. I think I see her eyes moving, taking in the drama, the action, of her creation. I try not to disturb her; I fear that if I make comments the work will shatter. After a day or two the one "stage scene" will have disappeared, dissolved, and another is in the making. She does not hide them. There one sits on the windowsill but they are private. But I think she wants me to see them, to acknowledge that she too dreams though for her dream is closer to play than to sleep, to pain. There is a pool in

the burn where the water is deep and usually runs smooth. We stood there the other day both looking at the reflection of the grass and branches in the water and we were close, I felt, talking to each other through the reflections. We cried and after the tears there was peace, such peace, and we hadn't looked at each other, or embraced. We had stayed with the brown water and the flow, and the shifting but identifiable images.

We had a young man staying this week, big and gangly, quite stooped, with a very old-fashioned mop of hair, and demeanour, and, to cap it all, he is going up to Oxford to read Literae Humaniores. Nothing could be more humane! I expect he has Euripides and Livy in his rucksack. A shy young man, it was only in the morning that he told me about why he was on the pilgrimage, what had led him to it. He had been having routine surgery, appendectomy or something similar, and probably because of mistakes with the anaesthesia, he had gone into some kind of coma, which lasted about three weeks and in which he had a kind of dreamy awareness of the world around him and of himself incapacitated, but with a divorce of his sense of himself from his inert presence in the hospital bed, and the family members and hospital staff at his bedside. He was, he said, ready to die; it seemed the right thing, the obvious, mundane outcome of where he found himself. He was calm. But he also had images of himself climbing, vaulting, flying almost, over a stile on a footpath. Time and again, a light-footed leap. He cannot remember a moment when the coma lifted or started to lift. Suddenly he was back and awake and touching and seeing, but the journey back had passed without him being aware. And now the pilgrimage was his enactment of the stile-leaping, up and over and on he goes. A strange case, by name Benedict – a terrible effort for him to tell his story but then a wise smile of relief. The night sky is led by Mars, sweeping up and over through the evening, in conversation with Sirius – the close red glow of Mars, the diamond flashing of the distant Sirius. Mars seems so close and draws my vision on and out to the sea of infinite stars and galaxies that belong in another world beyond our sun. But I would not find access to that far dimension if this near one, this red one, were not showing me the way, leading my sight beyond the natural. Mars mesmerises me.

WEEK 20 (Verse 45) 16.2.10

This has been a gentle week, a kind season, without fear. I saw two young boys, brothers by their looks, outside the shop, licking ice creams, totally absorbed, leaning on each other absently – and this the middle of February! Then sudden catastrophe. A young man in the village has died in an avalanche on a trip with friends and family, a fine young man, last year of school, strong, adventurous. All gone in a moment. What do you do with such an accident, such a shock? How do you try to compensate, as a

mother, as a brother, a friend? The ground gave way. You fall, broken and twisted, onto rocks.

Weeks of winter skies
And hard starry nights.
Now the day is damp, foggy,
They say a gale is brewing.

I keep getting into petty tangles with Jude. She comes into our kitchen or I into hers and even as one of us is walking across the room to where the other is standing or sitting, a gulf is opening and we are becoming further and further apart, our voices hardly audible, and yet also very close, face to face, too close, so that we both are reacting to what the other has not yet said. And then we're stumbling over the rubble, trying to save something, to be loving. Sometimes she then becomes very articulate, explaining something in detail, following through a train of thought with dry clarity. Or else she goes silent and is sad, makes tea, looks for biscuits. I prefer the latter. And what do I do? I try to tell her something of me and end up with unfinished sentences and half-formed thoughts. She gets annoyed and then somehow we are friends again. The abyss closes. She has a bad back. Fistfuls of painkillers. I don't know how to help. We part and I see her in my mind's eye, hear her voice, and try to start the encounter again, the conversation, have it again, imagine it happy. I see her pained body, I hear her voice, I hear my own voice, but now it is not jumping in, jumping ahead, now it is how I would want it to be, the last time and the next time I open her door. But so many pain-killers to keep going – a busy, responsible woman, highly valued, respected at work!

I try to sense or acknowledge that the sap is rising in the trees although all is bare. The days rush towards Spring, grow longer, and I find the gentleness in the snowdrops and the strength in the trees which seem to silently hum with life.

The trunk is firm, the bark cracked.
Beneath flows life, the sap
Rising to the buds
Brushed, here, pink, here, green.

A tin bucket cast aside
Ages since, with snowdrops
Thick in the rusted bottom's
Milky depths.

I bring my face down close
To dry leaves and grass wisps
To find the scent of snowdrops
Hanging by the earth.

Margaret is well. Her most regular visitor is a woman, local, whom she got to know as a nurse, but who is not working now because she has a young baby, a few months old. They visit often, Jill and her little Debbie – who is not thriving. She is too quiet, floppy, passive. Jill is very matter of fact about it. Nothing identifiable has been found, no diagnosis, but she is very open about the possibility of Debbie developing more obvious disability in the months and years ahead. Margaret loves this dark, quiet little creature. You can feel her willing her into life and movement. I sense Jill is helped too by Margaret's unspoken hope and determination. It doesn't seem quite right to call her attitude positive or encouraging. It's not as planned as that. They don't try to identify improvements or set goals – two women, mother and grandmother, if you like, nurturing a sick child, being the world for her.

Where does fear come from? Our cat grew up with a dog, now long gone, and the two were good companions, content in each other's company, sleeping side by side often, not arguing over food. But if a strange dog, any dog, arrives on the scene, then the back is arched, the fur is up, the throaty whine begins. Where does that general fear lie? And what of us? I see Margaret constantly dealing with her fears. She needs me, mentally, out of the way because reassuring me is probably her hardest task. She is often silent, still, but I sense a lot going on, her trying to find a place, a state, a direction, the one, unique configuration of her life, her being, in which she will be free. She is ridding herself of unhelpful influences (including me, very much) which interfere with her arriving at this point where she belongs – a point of departure. She is refining herself. At those times, when she is calm, and I am calm, there can come a strong but unspoken (even inwardly) sense of a loving eye, a presence, who sees her, me, us. And this presence is also us, me, her.

I enjoyed the stay of a strange little man, rotund and totally bald, somewhere in his fifties I would guess. He was a priest who was no longer a priest, who had lost his faith, abandoned his vocation. Is that the right word? What do priestly vocations do when they are no longer there? Do you lose it, or desert it, or run away from it? I think for him, Charles, it had disappeared, evaporated. He said that walking was his substitute for faith. He would walk and not think. Yet he was carrying a huge book, a biography of Picasso, just a few years of Picasso's life. He said that he knew now that he was not ready to talk to God yet, to hear God's voice, to have a conversation, and he didn't expect to be mature enough for such a meeting before he died. He was sure there

could be no talking and the best he could do now, he said, was to get to know Picasso. He was a tough little man, but jovial, a twinkle in his eye, with this huge tome he was lugging along his path instead of a spare pair of trousers or a medical kit. And the weight of it! He says the pilgrim path is the thread leading him through the labyrinth to the Minotaur but he does not intend to slay it but to tame it, and Picasso is his companion on the quest. Off he went into the fog, this squat round figure with this heavy book in the pack on his back. A man is on trial for shooting dead a doctor who performed legal late-term abortions, one shot to the head as he stood in his church one Sunday in Wichita, Kansas, acting as an usher. His killer bought the gun the day before and practiced shooting with his brother. He does not deny the shooting but said he had no choice. How strange to say he had no choice when he made such a conscious decision, had such a clear plan. When was the choice made and, why, if it mattered so much to him, these – (to him) – murders of unborn children – does he not take full responsibility?

It has been a peaceful week and the days rapidly grow longer.

Forty minutes after
The sun goes down on me
The crags to the north still
Glisten, dead bracken burns.

WEEK 21 (Verse 46) – 22.2.10

A photographer, a journalist, stayed one night this week. A tall big-boned young woman from Arizona, very pale-skinned with almost colourless long fine hair and a beautifully sculpted face. She loped about the place. She was creating a film, day by day, with immediate viewing, intending also to edit the whole into a more finished film when the trip was over. She showed me from the earlier part of her journey. She has an unusual eye. The images are often quite abstract and she uses speech like a musical sound track, of broken-up sentences of people she overhears – like me! – and a mix of quick and short actions, movements, with enigmatic still shots, dwelling on a shape or a play of light in which everything seems to stop. Then on it goes, but with respect. Yet, there was something I found disturbing: her quiet assumption that she can explore my world, me, that I am part of the history at her disposal. But her confidence came out of her unspoken respect for all she was seeing and meeting. She would be faithful to it in her creativity, reveal its truth, and because of that there was no need to ask, to gain some kind of permission. Beautiful but unsettling. Unexpectedly I am on my own, with Stephen, this week. Jude has used half-term to go off for treatment to her back at a private clinic – costing a fortune, no doubt, and Margaret went, at short notice, on a

retreat at a Buddhist centre near-by. Short notice to me, anyhow. She needed to escape my anxious looks, she wanted to give me time to work through my sadness. This was not said out loud. So Stephen came, and more snow.

Slow the snowfall
Each flake so big and gentle
That falling I may follow
As the world goes silent.

We have been out a lot, ignoring the clock.

These days shadowed slopes remain
Frosted cold and white
While open fields soften
Green in the warming sun.

The cows and sheep in the fields around us look well for all the cold and the harsh winter, invigorated – but of course they have been tended, fed. On their own they would be skin and bone by now.

The cow's firm licking
Of her calf now big and strong
Belongs to the birth's
First trembling separation.

Down at the coast, there are lambs already, but not with us.

Some moments become timeless, taken into the tissue of memory, even as they are happening and intensify the presence felt. I was walking across the field with Stephen, we were looking for tracks in the snow of the animals who otherwise go unknown. Everything composed itself into a whole, and then, either as a result or as part of this perfection, he reached out and took my hand and we went swinging along in the winter sunshine.

This boy goes alone
But today as we walked
Across the rough field
I felt him put his hand in mine.

The sky was clear and the sun was warm, melting the snow where it could. We lay in the old grass exposed to the sun, and then as I rolled over to get up I looked down on the boy, still with his eyes closed against the brightness.

I had a sudden sight
Of your young face
Grown lined with life's ups and downs
And me nowhere to be seen.

I slipped on the way home and, reaching out to stop myself from falling, jarred my wrist. No bones broken, but it is painful and stiff and I felt weak and old, old and awkward. For Stephen, a fall like that is nothing, for his elastic body.

Markets in Africa mean, for me, colour and dust, crowds and laughter and shouting and sad figures squatting with little to sell, and piles of ripe fruit and vegetables, foodstuffs and strange ingredients in bags and baskets. It is people coming together, barter and exchange, in cities, towns, villages, river crossings, lakesides, borderposts. I go into a supermarket here with its wish to be tropical and the feel of a real market is born out of my memory. Once I was in such a market when gunfire broke out, panic and screaming, bodies bleeding, random death. I thought I would be forever haunted by that shock, that the magic of the market was lost. About two years afterwards I went back to that place and on two rough cement walls were paintings, already peeling and discoloured somewhat. One was of the market with all the colours larger than life, the glory of the produce, the joy and swirl of the crowd. The other was portraits, bold but individual. Of those who had died, eighteen in all, head and shoulder, each in a panel, orderly, restrained, painted from photographs rescued from phones or albums or wallets or frames taken down from walls. The terror was taken away, for me, by these memorials, known faces, each with a name, a home, an occupation. Life could carry on. Memory can weigh us down, or be a source of hope.

Stephen hates me to see his body. He will do anything to keep his body covered in front of me. Where did that come from? When I was young there was a strange cult of nakedness at school; it was a perverse ascetic manliness – not to be bothered about showering en masse. I mind Stephen's self-consciousness because I feel it gets in the way somehow, it stops him seeing the world, recognising me even. He seems so tied up with himself, coping with the currents of his own being. I want him to see me, to challenge me, to ask something of me. Margaret is not here, but I feel her and see her through this absence. I can let her go about her business on this retreat and feel I am accompanying her without interfering. Here I easily become a nuisance. I love, I treasure now her naked body, her bare weak body, her thin body. It has become so

beautiful to me, because it is a sign that she is just who she is and not described by her usefulness or her public beauty. We work, we serve, we pursue our purposes, and then, perhaps each day, perhaps once in a blue moon, perhaps as death approaches, we let go of these justifications, and become utterly naked. When I was young I remember being deeply affected by photos from Hiroshima, of corpses with patterns on them. I can't remember what the patterns were, like shadows, imprinted on the bodies in the flash of the burning, of the explosion, of the blinding radiation. This seemed impossibly grotesque to me, the tattooing of the body in the moment of death. This was desecration beyond slaughter, this was inhuman horror. Those photos led me to join CND in its first heyday, its innocent determination. It seemed so obvious and necessary that we succeed. My brother Andrew was furious with me. It was our first adult quarrel. He was horrified by my doing something so strange, so outlandish. He was frightened. He tried to physically prevent me going off on the Easter march, barring the door. We had a fight, a real wrestling match as I tried to go out of the door. It was beyond the pale for him. Off I went down the street with my rucksack. I don't remember how I got out of the door. Doorways. I had a visitor yesterday who would not come in.

I invited him in
But he wasn't stopping.
We leant by the open door
As chill fell with sunset.

WEEK 22 (Verse 47) – 2.3.10

Light snow, frozen puddles
My feet crunch but by ten
The sun warms my lifted face,
Birdsong claims the air.

Sometimes I worry about little Stephen. He becomes charming. He says sentences about his life, his feelings, which seem composed, rehearsed, designed to elicit sympathy or a smile, to be interesting. But of course it is all unconscious. I ignore it. He doesn't do it to me. I took him to see the trees we planted some weeks ago – nothing is stirring yet, visibly at least – and on the way back I was telling him about people who stand still for long periods of time as a spiritual or physical exercise – being a tree. He stopped dead and held out his arms, without a word. I joined in and we stood there together in silence and motionless. For a long time! He was not going to be the one to move first. So I did. It had begun to sleet. He was shivering and the water was running down his face but it was not tears, I think. Then he said, "I might never have existed" or "I might never have been born", I can't now remember which, though

they are very different. There was no wish to be charming in these words. He was touching something inside, a place beyond pain. I wonder if he will try it again on his own. I don't think he will. It was something that I brought about, that happened in my presence, but was nothing to do with me, really.

I have been on a long trip by train, to a wedding, a Highland wedding. I was invited by the bride, a woman who many years ago cared for my son, tried to support him in his chaotic heroin-dependent life. She was young, naïve, committed. Out of clashes we became friends, and have kept in touch over the years and now she makes fine furniture and lives by the sea in the far north and had decided to celebrate her long-standing relationship with a wedding. I was going to write that I am like a father to her, but I am not, I am a friend, a figure who represents a phase in her development. She, though, to me is a kind of daughter, a friend who might once have been a daughter. She carries my son with her. I did not tell Margaret but I bought her a gold chain with a heart – a beautiful and very expensive gold chain, delicate, pure, and a heart with a clasp, gentle and refined. I have never bought anything of gold before in my life. It was an impulse, a jeweller's window, a wish for something precious, something inexplicable, startling, that I had done for myself, by myself. The chain lay in its blue box, lined with blue satin, but I did not tell Margaret. I showed her just the glasses and the jug, the heavy glasses and the tall jug. At the wedding I was with the old folk from the village, such a lovely slow business the gathering together and the dispersing in the early hours, but the journey up on the train was a wonderful escape, an adventure.

Beyond the town the sky
Has the look of a sky
That is over the sea,
Reflecting one vast swell.

Many a beach from the train
And on each a dog runs
And a lone figure
Walks flexed against the wind.

Journey's end, steep fields,
Cliffs then an ice blue sea
Under fine apricot clouds
As winter melds to night.

I knew this woman as a brave helper in those years of despair and disappointment. Now she lives by the sea, under dark mountains, and with the sea to look out on and

the feel of the smoothed plank under her fingers. She has found a new world, and I still mourn a son dead before me. The gold chain was an attempt to redeem. She will never wear it. On the way back, the long journey south, I dozed most of the way, waking once to see a vision of paradise, a grassy hill rising out of a field close to the railway.

A knoll, calm, pastoral,
A grove of full-girthed oaks,
A few sheep who graze,
A time before taut, sharp wire.

The sheep were safe within a shape that needed no boundaries or restrictions. They belonged to a story. And when I hear music I want both structure and story. I listen to Chopin and I want to know the drama that lies within. One guest this week was a small, neatly dressed man, in his forties. 'Dapper' might be the word to describe him if it didn't have a note of ridicule. He told me about his life's recent upheaval – recognising (admitting) he was gay, separating from his wife, disturbing his now grown-up children, leaving his job because of the need to begin again somehow. His wife, he said, had been relieved, his children had as yet been unforgiving. He himself was very matter of fact, practical. He spoke about letting go, of a short intense period of extreme promiscuity, an orgy he called it, that 'had to be done'. He needed the risks, a time out of time, a blank. It was hard to imagine, because now, as before, he was sensible, collected, a model of moderation. The pilgrimage was for him a way of confirming his new strength, his self-knowledge, his gratitude. All those years of, for him, a kind of dullness, of confusion, were worthwhile, he said, because they showed up, by contrast, the clarity he experienced now. He thought, he said, he was too old for love but it seemed to me that he was open, that the tidiness of his life was a kind of shelter prepared for a lover to come to, to discover. But he seemed to think he had it all worked out. He would be alone but honest.

The last few days, since I got back, have been filled with my brother, Andrew. At Christmas I had had an enigmatic card in which, quite intentionally, I believe, he had written upside down and included a couple of lines of Latin to the effect that 'I'm the King of the Castle'. Then, the night I got back from the wedding he rang in the middle of the night – to pick my brains about a crossword clue which he couldn't solve. The next evening, he rang in the middle of a football game on television to ask what I thought the final score would be as he had put a bet on and hoped to win a small fortune. Then it was a call about our mother's recipe for gingerbread. Then a call to say he would be arriving soon. And there he was, walking with two sticks, very heavy gait, his head carried well forward and thrusting out towards me as I opened the door. In the few

months since his last brief visit, he had changed enormously. And not just the sticks. He had lost his power, his strength. He was weak. But I did not trust him. I suspected an act of some kind. He would not stop talking, he would not let me get a word in, and all his talk was in clichés, in formulae. His monologue veered between his achievements in the past, his current dreadful state of health and his fears for the future. He kept saying he was 'losing it' but nothing specific, no diagnosis, nothing to account for the sticks or the stoop or the phone calls out of the blue. The other thread was something to do with me, something I had done long ago, which he implied was too terrible, too embarrassing for me, to be mentioned and for which he was offering me some kind of forgiveness; that I had been young, thoughtless, that I had suffered enough. I couldn't find a way in. I started to search my memory, half believing, more than half, that there was some awful blot on my life, some dreadful deed which I must have repressed. I still think that now! He staggered out, repeating 'reconciliation', saying each syllable separately so that the word turned into a ridiculous incantation. Will he be back? His legs and arms stiffly propelled him off the premises but I feel as though he left his soul here with me and I do not want to give it house-room.

The sun is hot through the big window and all the tiny droplets of frost have melted on the bushes, but snow stays in shade. I want warmth and brightness for Margeret's cold, toneless body. I want her to be strong again, in the old way.

WEEK 23 (Verse 48) – 9.3.10

I sat down in the sun by the War Memorial in the village, and read the names, nine from the Great War, two from the Second – rank, initials, regiments, one name, Wilson, in both. At the foot of the Memorial, in the gravel, were groups of crocus open to the sun, a light purple with bright golden stamens and an intensely orange central style and stigma. Lest we forget. These men who went away, some freely, some conscripted, free men to the fight, that first Great War, that had nothing to do with them. Did the writing of the names, the correct initials, help the widows, did it help the dead that they were remembered, although their bones were far afield. I read over the names many times and I thought I would be able to recall them but only one or two have stuck – Wilson, McLean. A soldier dies in Afghanistan and we must be told that 'his family have been informed'. The details, then the body. This is the truth that will help the relatives but what will help the dead? I do not want to celebrate the dead. Written in stone, but then the moss will find the grooves, will cover the inscription. The delicate naked flowers just emerging from the earth, then opening to reveal their vivid centres. It was, I thought, warm enough for bees, and no wind but there were none to be seen.

It's a good fifty minute walk uphill from the village to our house but we have a regular visitor, a young girl, Mo, seventeen maybe, who has a new baby. She lives with her parents but is strongly drawn to Margaret and so she walks, pushing or carrying this tiny creature, in all this wintry weather. And the two women sit in the window with the baby asleep, or feeding, or in one or the other's arms. I don't believe that they had ever met before the baby came and I have no idea how the friendship began. I catch snatches of their conversation as I pass and it can be of anything – the news, history, politics. The girl is looking to Margaret as to a teacher, not a teacher of mothering, but, with the child held between them as a sign of life, a source of interest in the world. Then she goes, and Margaret is refreshed, restored by something I cannot give her.

An old friend of hers, from her youth, called in one afternoon, a lively Irish woman now retired from a position of great responsibility. The two always spar with each other – animated argument, jokes and banter, playing on the differences in their lives, their interests and concerns. This is how they show their affection and Eileen made more of it today, perhaps to show her love, to stave off decline, to defy or deny the illness. We ate together and then she left and Margaret was suddenly utterly exhausted, all the life drained out of her by the exertions of the meeting. She was exhausted, but restless, her hands and face in slight constant motion, and when she went to bed she could not settle and she did not want me with her. This friendship with Eileen has an edge, a sharp edge of conflict but Margaret now does not want it. With the young girl and her baby she is at rest, and for the girl, the walk and the unfamiliar place, this stranger become a friend, offer a hope, a world beyond her now restricted horizon. I do not have anything much to say to her.

During the last of seven summers of would-be paradise that Chopin spent with George Sand she would read aloud to the house-guests the latest episode from the novel she was writing, in which the deteriorating relationship between herself and her sick, self-centred lover was meticulously described. She must have needed this way of escape, this indirect self-expression. Margaret and I are living awkwardly with each other at the moment. I suppose I am waiting for something to happen, watching and waiting.

There is a sickness in me,
A waiting for the hour,
The crisis that will come
When I will be trusted.

I am preparing for the test but the test will not come. Meanwhile, Margaret is inhabiting a place of rest, I imagine, in which I am the disturbing element, who will not give her peace. We sort of talk about it, but skirt round the subject.

Love turns to sorrow
Sorrow becomes love.
Why do I reach out to you?
How does my heart keep beating?

We both know the longing of the other, for the other, but at the moment this longing is only fulfilled in unpredictable, simple moments which are like fragments of song.

My dreams move with waves, waves of the sea slowly forming, breaking, flowing back. All is power and peace, running up the beach then falling back. Sometimes, something whose shape I cannot make out is stranded by the returning wave.

Sunrise now reaches deep
Into the dark east room;
The lacquered box, the flecked oak
Take, each, their glowing.

I had not been up and over the ridge for many weeks, to the two lochans, one feeding into the other and then on down the heathery slope. I thought I might hear a curlew but mostly I heard my own breath with the effort of the climb. I keep being confused at the moment by stillness and motion, silence and sound, one inside the other, one emerging out of the other.

Climb to the high lochan,
Ice remains at the edges,
The dark waters and weeds
Broken into life.

I thought there was silence -
But soft – water over stones,
A tractor, hungry sheep,
A thrush, rooks roosting.

The guest I remember from this week is a writer, a novelist, well-known, well-respected. She had a certain dreamy quality in her speaking because she was so much thinking about her words, about the way her thoughts were being shaped into sentences and the way her words were making manifest her thinking. It was a performance, but reflective. She was her own audience. I was fascinated to have this private activity revealed to me, the way her thought was drawn down into the room where we were talking. I felt I

had to be on my best behaviour! She was explaining to me that this walk for her is not research although she is planning an historical novel set in the period when this pilgrimage was popular. It is not overt research relevant to the details of life in the past. For that she will look to documents, to accounts, and lists and court proceedings. This walk is for her, a dedication of her self to her task. For her it is a great responsibility, to pay her debt to the dead, to create a truth that is imaginatively accurate. As she walks, distances let her travel in time; the landscape becomes history. And then, in the night, as she sleeps and, I think, as she listens, while being awake, voices come to her out of the darkness, the voices of those who will live in her story. All this came forth from her quite without affectation or undue emphasis. This was her vocation. She was an artist in training - articulate, serious, devoted. At the time I did not think I had ever met anyone so convinced of their mission and I was deeply impressed. Now, a few days later, I am wondering. I am resisting her. I am somewhere suspicious but I am unsure as to whether I am suspicious of her self-possession or of my willingness to be impressed.

WEEK 24 (Verse 49) – 16.3.10

Stacking logs for winter –
Some gone powdery,
Some toned like muscle.
Will she be here to take the warmth?

Just as the sun begins to spread into longer days, I have a delivery of logs which I stack for the end of the year. The land still has the feel of the two months' covering of snow and ice, flattened, matted, not yet breathing with fresh green. Something has become freer between Margaret and I. We got into a silent tangle about forgiving – who was asking whom for forgiveness, and for what? And there was a kind of battle about love, the need to love, the need to be loved – which took precedence? I became the one at the centre, the one who was being abandoned by her dying, the one she was asking for forgiveness. Something shifted one early morning, before daylight, as we lay in the dark and a soft wind stirred the night's end.

I lie with her, she with me,
Two of us less tight
Within our generous state,
Listening in the dark.

Deep intimacy and her bones so prominent but not skeletal, not deathly, but just her clear form in which her life was crystallised.

When one dies the others
Can continue to love.
Is that what matters most,
The love of the living?

We both got up into the new day more able to see each other, to see ourselves, to see the buds opening, swelling on rose and lilac and chestnut. We had a happy, ordinary day, being at home, cleaning, tidying, sorting, but also just, without saying anything, showing each other the place we shared, the place we had made together, the place which reached out through time and through space and had connections to so many different people and events. Our lives were gathered up, in this sunlit house. In Uganda I remember one family, after floods and landslides had swept their home away, living in a tent – as were, and are, so many – but the tent was a home, the precious things arranged, cloths to give colour and to divide the area, a sense of cleanliness and decorum, a connection to the past and the future. All achieved in the way the tent was arranged. No need for an altar, the home was an altar. And the children going off to school amid a sea of now dry mud, to gather under a tree. The teacher had a map of the world hanging from a branch, so incongruous yet defiantly optimistic, this big sheet with the shapes and strange colours of the countries of the world flapping in the breeze as a crowd of children squatted on the ground in a landscape of loss. But it was home, it was real.

The face of the woman whom I wrote about last week has stayed with me, a face unmarked by life except by a pained innocence, not really childlike, more like a troubled angel, a face not quite of this world, watching from heaven. A brother and sister stayed this week, lively, open, enthusiastic young people who were mourning the death of their brother, some years older, who had committed suicide. Why? They did not know. He, the older brother, had been a highly-regarded artistic director, entrepreneur, a man who made exciting things happen. And then one day he was dead. The younger brother and sister were hoping, on the walk, to discover why he did it, to see, too, if there was anything they could have done to prevent it, to have anticipated it, to go over the past looking for signs that this act was in their dead brother's mind. He had been a very energetic man. I can't say 'driven' or 'ambitious' because that already says more than I know. These two are both in the same world of music, art, shows, performance. The sister says she has now given it all up, the brother is looking for ways he can work in the future which eschew fame and publicity and making a name. For now the pilgrimage is intensifying their attachment to their dead brother. As they walk I can imagine them dissecting, endlessly, fragments of conversation, hardly aware of the path they are treading. We got out onto the subject of Muslim women covering their faces. It was the

only conversation between them in which they separated out from each other and from the shadow of their brother. The sister relished the idea of retreating into a private space, when no-one could intrude and she could be herself, be in control. They were definitely not Muslim themselves. The brother was shocked. "I need to see your face", he kept saying. "If you hide, you are nothing, you are nobody, you have let them win!". He was really afraid she would do it although it was not a practical discussion! She had no intention of actually covering her face, but he was deeply afraid. To be behind the veil would frighten me, to have my inner world so sharply divided from the external world. Which one would matter, which one would be reality? All I would know of myself as something objective would be the darting movement of my eyes through some small slit in the dark cloth. I am glad that Margaret and I have managed to re-establish the give and take between us. I was not letting her give me anything and in so doing I became the one who was dying.

I have been up late in the night listening to music. I was drawn to big works of massive redemption – Mahler's eighth, Schumann's Faust, the Dream of Gerontius – and all of them disappointed, all of them were too much, too grand and overwhelming in the way the heavens opened. But I endured them to the end, perhaps to confirm to myself that I do not want such certain consolation. I do not want to see the angels, the heavenly host. It is not my style. But still I listened, and I was, truly, disappointed at my lack of faith, or interest in ecstasy. Then one night, into the small hours, I read 'King Lear' and there I found comfort and redemption amid all the suffering. As he dies he believes he sees breath on the lips of dead Cordelia whose body he has carried onto the stage. He believes he sees the breath passing over her lips. They are both already resurrected through their patient bearing of life. Ripeness is all – reaching what you have known will come.

Michelangelo past eighty
Left gods and precise lines,
Worked with black chalk at
A Christ on the Cross.

We have had two sunny blustery days with fast-moving cloud. I was out in the garden clearing away old dead growth and leaves gathered brown in corners, and I let the wind take and scatter much of what I was raking and cutting, revealing the first pointing growth of perennials and bulbs – for all the daffodils and tulips are very late in coming. New growth now is safe, the hard frosts are a thing of the past. The hare has returned, in the garden, bold as brass, and out in the field -

The stippled hare springs away,
Silent as when still.
Behind the tussock
The smooth hollow where he lay.

Life is strong, the buzzards circle in pairs and cry on the wind. I had been keeping away from Margaret because I was afraid I would hurt her. And I do, sometimes. I do hurt her but there is a different, deadening, hurt when I stay away, and she from me.

Dumb ewes who soon will lamb,
A band of restless rooks
Who clamour and scavenge –
No play 'twixt bird and beast.

Giving, receiving, returning. It is not meant to be only a confrontation. Too close and you cannot focus.

WEEK 25 (Verse 50) – 23.3.10

In the garden I cannot decide if things are catching up after the long cold or not. I keep expecting an avalanche of growth but the daffodils are slow. The small larch I planted now have round green buds swelling. Some shrubs, hit badly by the hard frost, still have the cold in the feel of them, have not woken, although the wood is not dead and there are active buds. From the garden I looked in through the big glass door on Margaret and Jude sitting, talking, moving round the kitchen, making tea, drinking tea, reserved, keeping their distance, a bit stiff. There they were, I saw them as I passed, out of the corner of my eye, taking their time, expressing their respect. Both in control of themselves, the daughter having decided, long ago, to establish herself in freedom before the mother abandoned her, and the mother letting the daughter go before any struggle for independence. I watched the silent pantomime. Little happened but as the afternoon went on I did realise that they were comfortable with each other. They were not giving away much but there was an honesty in their indifference. They still had reasons to be together, to talk, to know each other, to inhabit the same room for a while and drink tea. As I passed to and fro I tried not to look, just to notice the feel of them together, the two women, restrained, their gazes passing by one another, keeping the conversation going.

Stephen stayed the night but could not get to sleep, appearing at the bedroom door with a whisper and a touch of fear about the welcome he would receive. I was glad of a midnight companion. Out of our talking about being up in the night, I was telling him

about my first trip away to a scout camp, and that led to a dig in the cupboard and the old photo album with small black and white prints of that first camp, somewhere in the Lake District, an army lorry, boys with short back and sides, the early fifties. Lanky boys and pipe-smoking leaders, washing-up, games, a few landscapes, heavy tents and knapsacks. Stephen was fascinated, especially by the faces, wanting to know whose names I remembered, who were my friends, what were they like. A few I remembered, but many had been strangers come from elsewhere to the camp. Stephen kept pressing me to remember more, and I did remember though, of course, I also made it up as I went along – the adventures in the night, the midnight feasts, diving into the moonlit river, the inevitable telling off and the punishment latrine duty. He examined the photos carefully, bringing them close to his face, hoping they had more to reveal. It grew cold, we had a blanket round us on the floor; eventually I wrapped him in it and carried him back to bed.

As we pass through the equinox the weather is changeable, normal, after these weeks of a precious constancy, a feeling that the world was being held still just for me. A day of deepening rain which then led into a night of wind.

Rain turns to driven mist
Sweeping over the field
Thickening this soft sky
Hiding my horizons.

A winter with no wind
But now the night is loud
With dark weight of air
And the flaying of branches.

I couldn't sleep with the rattling of windows and the shaking of the house. I got up and read 'King Lear' again, lost in the storm. Life as patience, suffering, accepting. The next day was warm; we were outside in the early afternoon and heard, first, the high commanding squeal of birds directly above us.

No breeze but buzzards
Spiral above,
Seven with wings silver flashing
And cries spinning round the sky.

Wings held still, they rose as a group, passing and intertwining, one letting itself go, from time to time, to wheel away and fly across the blue, recovering to poise and then make its way back to the vortex of held motion above.

A heart-warming pilgrim this week, a young man, a teacher, he was walking in the opposite direction to the usual pilgrim, having set out from the destination, while his partner, a woman, was following the usual direction and they were going to meet in the middle. This journey towards each other was their act of commitment to each other, their sacrament of marriage, both private and public. The first thing he did was to show me her photo, to make sure she had not already passed through and somehow passed him by. Of course there was no guarantee she would have stopped with us but really for him it was just a way of announcing his quest. According to the plan they were now close. Each was going alone, gathering up the path of their life so far, opening themselves to the sight of the one they had found, perhaps discerned on a far horizon, perhaps appearing and disappearing for a while among trees, perhaps to be met at a bend in the track, surprised and as large as life, perhaps one coming on the other as he or she sat by a river watching a bird or lost in a dream. I have taken such pleasure in imagining their meeting and I suppose there is nothing to stop me continuing so to do. Meeting after long parting has not always been easy, but they will have the right time for it, I know they will.

One of our guests was telling me of a game he plays – he says it is quite common but I have never heard of it – where he plots on a map the letters of his name, perhaps several hundred metres high each letter, and then goes and walks his name, inscribing it on the landscape. He does it in cities and in the country and each require particular adaptations to allow the shapes to fit the restrictions of the terrain – streets, fences, bridges, buildings. Maps and names on maps – our guests are often obsessed with maps but in fact you could do this pilgrimage without one if you were content not to know and had trust, had faith in what you would meet.

Yesterday it was warm again until the evening chill and I was busy inside but Margaret was out in the garden, pruning roses and then mending a gate, a job I had not got round to. It was such a shock. There she was, bending, cutting, twisting, using her strength – not a word to me beforehand but methodically getting on with it. She seemed to be in a world of her own, very far away, beyond my reach although she was there, through the window, a few metres away, busy with her work. If I called I could not imagine that she would hear me. It was like seeing someone deep in prayer, perhaps kneeling, and through their bearing you have access to a world that is not in normal space. The earth has opened up to heaven.

God is not God's true name –
The firm hand of a friend
The spread of a loved tree
A beggar's lowered face.

Little chinks, little tears in the fabric, little shinings. Some modern composers try to stop time simply by repeating, to go back to a chant, a trance, an incantation. I want to find my way out of time but not by losing my mind.

One of us will go first
Either you or me
If only I could give
Some part of me to save you.

She stayed out in the garden until it was chilly. Her hands were so cold when she came in but she did not complain. I made her a hot drink. She had cleared up all the prunings. She had oiled the hinges and now the latch clicks shut and open cleanly.

Midnight and the growing moon
Hangs a golden curve
Above the mute hill.
Who will anoint her dying?

WEEK 26 (Verse 51) – 30.3.10

On my own I'm not much.
Worrying about my good self
Is not enough.
I have a house to keep.

I was out digging, the soil suddenly alive with tiny seedlings of annual weeds, when Jude came walking purposefully up the path towards me and began talking before she reached me. I was still bent to the spade and our conversation took place with a gap between us, me in the middle of the half-dug bed, she on the path. The gap helped. She said she was worried about Stephen. He doesn't listen to her. When she asks why, he says he is thinking. That is all he will say, repeatedly, "I am always thinking". She presses him, she wants to know what he is thinking, but all he will say is that "I am always thinking". And at night before going to sleep he insists that she light a candle so that he can blow it out. That is what satisfies him, to blow out the candle. It was very unlike Jude to ask me. She wanted to know what these things meant. "I want to

understand his behaviour". They only have candles on birthdays. A few days and he will be nine. He blows the candle out and then lies down to sleep. It must be about death, the awareness of the thinking that is more important than any other content which the thinking has. I could not say this to Jude. I didn't really give her an answer. In the end she sort of drifted off back down the path.

The life of nature is puzzling. Yesterday a couple of hundred wood pigeons making their way, feeding, across the field en masse. What were they eating? It was after rain. They're vegetarians, surely. On a barn roof, two dozen jackdaws gather. A waxing moon in a blustery sky at the centre of a thick circular halo of light covering a sixth of the sky. The wagtail is back around the house. Why now and where has she been through the winter, where has she found shelter?

Our wagtail reappears
Bobbing on the roof ridge,
Flits, alights, flies again.
Sunlight on water. Spring.

I found a quieter energy, a slower motion in the woods, where the daffodils were growing up through the dry detritus of the ground, including large skeletal leaves of rhododendron.

Daffodil spears rising
Firm and green towards bloom
Pierce and split dead leaves lying,
Dry mist of old time.

Rising sap, the small songbirds busy in the old hedge, chaffinches probing the cracks between the slabs, seeing what softness has brought to the surface – like the preoccupied flock of wood-pigeons.

The thing I need to record is a very powerful conversation between Margaret and me. I was sitting by the window and she came up behind me and put a decorated plate in my hands, which were as though waiting to receive it. In fact my sitting was also a waiting, unusual for me. The plate is an old favourite of ours, Chinese, not willow-pattern, but similar, a scene, of sorrow and beauty, formal but magical. I hadn't looked at it for years though it was there in my experience of the house. I would have noticed if it had gone, I think. There it was in my hands and Margaret came round and sat so that we two and the garden through the window were three, were a triangle.

“Roberto, I know you want to love me, to help me. To heal me, but I feel as though you want me to be like these figures on the plate, contained within a neat shape”. I am not remembering her words verbatim, I realize that I am making them up but they are what she said to me and she did speak with clarity, putting herself calmly into every word. “I feel you want to draw down an inconspicuous little god into our house to watch over us and make this time safe and painless. I do not want that. I am still searching. I want angels with dirty hands to be my helpers. You are very welcoming, Roberto, a good host, a good listener, but with me you want something comfortable, comforting”. She did not say all this, I am saying it, but she did speak clearly, and I did listen. “When we are together I feel cut off by the separateness you want. I feel starved of air, of food, of life. Our love was always more than just the two of us, the more intimate we were the more our union reached out to others, to the wide world, to the future. I am suffocating. And I think it’s all because of your fear, my darling”. We were quiet. A heron slowly flew into the wind, the small birds restlessly fed and gathered, the cat purred at our silent togetherness. These were birds on the Chinese plate, flying above the stationary lovers.

Look up and you will see
Our little love is not alone;
Others are watching,
Helping us prepare.

I put the plate back in its familiar place by the front door next to an old bell we used to use to summon guests to meals. Now we shout.

A woman stayed this week who, as she came in the door, was announcing that she did not mind being called large or overweight or obese, but please not ‘fat’. She did not want to be described as fat, it was too belittling. That was her joke. It came over very well, even if rehearsed. She was large. The walk for her was an ordeal and it was not really the physical exercise which she saw as significant in helping her lose weight. But the whole act of the pilgrimage was for her a ritual of re-education, of taking control and responsibility for her own life. She was very funny, engaging in conversations with herself, self-deprecating, wry, but not taking over completely, leaving spaces of self-questioning silence, asking for response. She felt that each day she was letting something of her bulk go, discarding it on the path. She was suffering, physically, her joints, but she was taking it slowly. I wonder if this inner conversation with herself carries on when she is walking. Perhaps she talks out loud, perhaps she is silent and can listen. Off she went, dealing with her weight.

Low sun from across the valley
Caught thick-mossed stones,
Made the dyke's rough face
A rock pool's green glowing depths.

A few weeks ago I jabbed my eye with the cut end of a firm rose-stem. The doctor can see no damage but I can still feel the blow, the insult, and it has made me aware of my eye as the organ of my seeing. There's often a nagging consciousness, a nuisance. Sometimes, though, I can get beyond the irritation and just let my seeing be quite impersonal, a matter of light and lens and retina. Out of such detachment I have had some moments of blessed seeing, revelations of beauty, as raindrops drip from a birch tree, or I take in the swirl of opening leaves along a briar rose stem. It startles. I have to work out what is happening, make it mine, make it human. Then back to the ordinary, and the discomfort, the memory of the jab.

Cows stand in the bog
Side by side, backs arched to the rain,
Dazed by driving chill,
Do not move as I pass.

I have a big art book open at the Michelangelo drawing of the Crucifixion which is so important to me. It seems as if he went delicately over the outline, again and again, doing less and less, in order to find the feeling, to balance shadow and light.

WEEK 27 (Verse 52) – 6.4.10

In that field the heavy ewes
Walked slowly away.
Here all approached me,
Stopped, then scattered as one.

A dream going back to my early childhood, in Greenwich, the big empty room with dark chocolate brown panelling and large, delicate windows down to the floor, where my mother would practise singing while I played on the dusty wooden floor. I do not know who is accompanying her. A stranger, not my father, for sure, because he is away at the war. We are Spanish refugees, though I was born in England, in a Spanish-speaking colony on a ramshackle estate at Greenwich. All gone many years ago, as soon as the war was over. That room, with the sickly burnt smell of the dark wood and the flickering green through the French windows, has always inhabited my dreams. I am at one end of the room, she at the other, with the grand piano, practising, for she

had been a professional. She sings in languages I do not understand – German, French, Russian – who knows? Sometimes the same phrase repeated time and again. There was a huge pit of sand to which lorries came in the day and it was my other place of meaning which belongs in my dreams. I was only a toddler and I dream of trying to walk up an incline of sand but with each step my foot just slides back down behind me, pushing the sand with it and becoming buried. With each step, I sink further into the slope of shifting sand. In the music room my mother is absorbed in a foreign phrase and pays me no attention but I love the echoing sound of her strong voice.

Margaret had disappeared and eventually I went looking for her and found her sitting on the bench at the top of the path leading down to the burn. She was sitting in the morning sun and just too late - to allow me to withdraw – I caught the glister of tears on her cheeks. Her eyes were shut but she heard me. A shadow of irritation passed over her face - that I had come looking for her more than that I had found her crying - and then she invited me towards her. At her feet were the fresh first leaves of wood-sorrel lifting the green of life above darker moss and dead leaves. She told me that her tears were for the beauty and the warmth that were reaching her, touching her, yes, she felt well, better, but she was, in herself, separate from this stream of life and needing to acknowledge weakness, how vulnerable she was. “It’s not the time just to get on with life. The sun has something to teach me still”. No leaves yet on the cherry tree we sat beneath, we seemed poised, sensing death in the beauty and vitality of this Spring morning and marvelling at the way that life, her life, could shine through her impending death. “Don’t expect this to last”. These words she did not say but were on the sharp air.

We were disturbed by the arrival of Jack and Jill, the couple who help us through the busy period from Easter weekend to the end of Summer. They are volunteers, part of the charity who support the pilgrim path, Jack a retired Senior Manager and Jill, a writer of cookery and food books, both successful, capable – worldly you might say but quietly devout in their religious practices, their faith the unquestioned landscape of their every act. I am very grateful for them, to them, good people whose company I enjoy. It’s only when I’m away from them and they come into my thoughts that I start to feel uncomfortable and irritated at the way they seem to slip in and out of my life, all on their terms, as they see fit. We left them to it and went for succour to the beach, the first time for many weeks. It is a beach of small stones and many shells and broken shells and tiny grooved fragments of cockles turning into sand. Margaret searched for beauty at her feet and I watched the nervous waders and their quick movements. On the way home, she sat beside me in the car with a collection of shells, mostly pink, in her open hand and I told her about my dream. She wanted to know if I remembered the way from

the house to the sandpit but I can't. The room becomes the sandpit, the music stops, the nightmare begins of the useless struggle up the sloping sand.

At Easter we have one regular pilgrim, a woman who has become a friend of sorts, single now, sixty, quite consciously wild and unconventional, walking in a long skirt with her long thin grey hair hanging loose down her back. She talks of her periods of mental distress throughout her adult life as illness but also as blessing, as giving her insight and wisdom which have helped her cope (a circular argument?) but have also given her a deeper experience of the world, a fuller truth. She speaks very openly of the God she worships. She speaks of "the Almighty". Her God is powerful. She is not ashamed to worship and she sees and speaks with intermediaries. Her Universe is peopled with angels and demons, I think, but the majesty of God is not too bothered with evil. I think this Easter pilgrimage helps her keep her feet on the ground. She said nothing about Margaret's health. At the moment Margaret looks well and Sally, perhaps, sees Margaret's essence which is unchanged by illness. She lives at full volume, with nothing in reserve; even her silence is loud and rough. The walk tires her a bit, that is its value so that reality blazes a bit less brightly by the end and she finds some calm but calm is not her métier.

Easter Sunday became warm by the afternoon and so, before any guests could be expected to arrive, I went up to the high lochans. Where the water from the upper of the two flows into the lower, there is an area of gravel, a small beach and I lay there in the sun. I felt encumbered by my clothes, by the layers of winter and the dark surface of the big pool looked so pleasurable. I stripped off, longing for the feel of the water on my pale skin, my wintry shrivelled body. I kept going as I waded in up to my waist and then plunged under the shockingly cold water. Up and out with an explosion of water and joy and fear that my heart would not take it. I would like to acclimatise myself to this through the coming Summer so that it is not an ordeal but a gentler pleasure. Naked in the water makes it completely different, water over your whole body – exposed, free. I rubbed hard with my shirt to get dry and get the circulation back, dressed with what was left and went home a little ashamed at my boldness. It was only late that night, when we were alone that I told Margaret what I had done. She smiled slowly and put the back of her hand up against my face in a beautiful tender gesture, testing the temperature of my skin, the soundness of my heart.

Twilight time of power,
Day leading us into night,
Night offering us dark,
Quivers of urge and yield.

Waiting for sunrise,
Light plays behind cloud covering
Earth's chill shapes.
New day stirs sorrow into life.

I am sustained by these times of transition in the day as the light changes and the sun speaks in light and darkness. I have, in myself, moments of total emptiness, when nothing is left. I am drained of all impulse, all impetus. At such moments, I hold onto the energy of the day and the night, the turning of the earth, the journey of the sun. But it is not enough, I sense, I know. This mute energy will not get me through, will not get us through. I am waiting for a voice which is out there and also in here, one then the other but which comes first and how does it come and go? Like a duck diving and then returning to the surface, willed to return by the one watching the empty surface of the water. For now no voice, just the rising and the setting of the sun.

A sequence of four poems for the days from Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunday:

Thursday

Hating lives in my shadows,
Somewhere cries my hurt,
“Let me tell you my nightmares,
Hope you will hold me”.

Friday

I am a naked cross
Though forked and easy broken,
I want for shelter,
Cover for my bare skin.

Saturday

Did you tell me you were
Going away from me?
I am unmoving under
Clouds, bright-edged, blinding.

Sunday

Today the wind is breath
Awakening the earth,
The new sun's messenger
Suggesting who I am.

The shells Margaret collected are sitting in a large mussel shell, the valves of which are still attached, connected but vulnerable, so easy to break apart for ever.

WEEK 28 (Verse 1) – 13.4.10

A butterfly! My first!
A tortoiseshell a flick
Of colour on the wind,
Folding to a dead leaf.

Two days of rain, then sun
And the miles of thorn hedge
Are a breath of green,
A show of birth rare shining.

Warm sun after heavy rain and the evenings lengthening into dreamy dusks. It was Stephen's birthday mid-week. There was no party or celebration but we had arranged to go on a trip at the following weekend to spend a night away with Stephen and without Jude. She was at a Union Conference in York. We had an old Jewish man to stay, a genial self-effacing small fellow with an undertone of sadness. In his quiet way he became the host, creating a holy meal, a meal of friendship. The sadness was, I think, because he has no family, he's been a solitary liver but loves the fellowship of cooking and eating which for him belonged most naturally in the family but he had had to find, to create, other groups, permanent or temporary in which to express his longing for love. He talked about his life which had been that of a child refugee coming to Britain and making a life from scratch, never finding a partner or children of his own but being an organizer, a bringer of comfort and kindness into many social settings and groups in his wide Jewish community. And this pilgrimage was for him an act of thanking, of entering into the stream of Christian piety of the country which had taken him in and given him a home, a place of commitment. I could see him bringing his modest flame of hospitality with him along the path.

So, thanks to Jack and Jill, who are now back in the groove, off we set on Saturday morning – Margaret, Stephen and I. Stephen in the front beside me driving, Margaret attentive and well-cushioned in the back. We were all elated by the trip and the bright warm weather. We travelled across country to the coast, through the pure landscape of Spring and the coming of the lambs.

Sunny fields are lamb daft,
Mother and young lie close,
Part, call, call, run to meet -
We see that all are safe.

Three scenes, one for each of us and three poems to catch the magic of this wonderful excursion. For Margaret, the gardens at which we stopped on our way, quite high and wild but with a sheltered walled garden with apple trees and many clumps of daffodils and gently pervasive scented anemones, creamy coloured, the scent lovingly held in the warm sheltered space of the garden. On a big patch of deep blue scilla, there were many butterflies – peacocks, tortoiseshells, even an unexpected comma. The warm oranges and browns against the intense blue drew me in to the beauty of the earth yet also sent my heart spinning away to other worlds. Margaret got down on her knees to come close to the flowers and the bevy of butterflies.

Children squat by the pond,
Poke with broken sticks,
The water seethes with frogs,
Long-legged, intent on mating.

Later we went to a living museum in a fishing village, with some people dressed in character telling the visitors about life for the fisherfolk a hundred years ago. In the schoolroom there were wax figures, life-size, the dominie and children just arriving for the day, one seeing to the small stove, one handing out slates, a couple huddled in the exchange of confidences, two boys in a scuffle, one chewing on a piece of bread and some smoked or dried fish. Stephen loved this place much more than the lively theatre of the guides in character. He took his seat on one of the benches and absorbed himself into the scene. We both withdrew as much as we could without disturbing his living dream, his reverie, but we could watch, almost, the story he was living through of these children's lives in this bare room under the kind severity of the downtrodden teacher's eye. The stillness brought the waxworks to life and their motionless gestures gave Stephen a revelatory insight into this time long gone. Then, after time had stood still, in walked a ginger cat, a live one and came up to Stephen and rubbed against his leg. That broke the spell. We could not have done that to him. We just had to wait till his vision ended. He didn't ask any questions but the mood gradually loosened and then slipped away on the sea breeze.

We look down dark cliffs,
Where kittiwakes wail,
Reach for perilous ledges
Above a far silent sea.

In the pub, crowded with folk enjoying the sunny day and the forgotten warmth, we squeezed in next to a couple, a man and a woman to whom I was immediately drawn. They were about the age, say forty, when Margaret and I became close and they had the look of a couple who had recently fallen in love. They were completely at peace in their pleasure with each other. They did not mind us invading their space because their space could not be invaded. It took in the world, allowed the world to be. Their love blessed us and they welcomed the blessing which everything gave to them because they were bringing love into the world. I felt our love in their love with no regret or envy but with a tinge of fear perhaps but I think I am being over-scrupulous. I expect fear but then there was none. Stephen and I climbed to the top of a now defunct lighthouse up and up the stone spiral staircase. The climbing and the turning really takes you out of yourself. Near the top was an outside platform and we could look down on Margaret sitting on a bench with a bright tartan rug around her shoulders. We waved but she did not notice us. That couple were certainly both likely to have had other partners before, perhaps children but there was a beautiful freshness and satisfaction in the way they were together in that crowded high-spirited bar.

Our journey home on Sunday evening was peaceful and dreamy. Margaret had not been able to sleep in the guest house we stayed in. In the early morning there was thick mist off the sea and she told me what she does when she is in pain. She goes for walks. She remembers walks from different times and places in her life and tries to remember them, relive them at particular seasons with all that goes with it of plants and birds, sights and smells. She didn't try to describe one to me. The words are not the thing. She said that the details are what help.

We came home slowly
Through the long sunset
Firing tall trees, folds of fields,
The backs of sheep, your worn face.

We sat together in the front, Stephen asleep in the back after two days of sun and sea. Next day, Margaret was tired, exhausted. It was only to be expected but something about her troubled me. There was a kind of twist in her gaze, she looked slightly past me, I think, and I was very aware of her bones. They seemed closer but also less alive.

WEEK 29 (Verse 2) – 20.4.10

Dark blossom buds at last
On the winter cherry
And one open flower
Pale hanging on the air.

I have been in a reverie this week. I think it is a kind of protection, helping me not to think about Margaret's weakening. I will not use the word 'deterioration' because I believe it is not, for her, about getting worse, about failure. Margaret has a small and very diverse but close group of women friends from her youth who drift together and then part with casual, unstated but fierce love. One such is Faye, a woman of private means, who has drunk and smoked her way through one unhappy relationship after another. She spent the day with Margaret. Usually she is loud and confrontational, with the swagger of a disappointed life, challenging the gods to punish her for her waywardness. This time she was quiet, still drinking from the supply she brought with her, which did not masquerade as a gift to us. They are immediately intimate, physical, enjoying the warmth of each other's gaze. Faye washed Margaret's hair with her sitting by the low sink in the kitchen, then dried and brushed her hair, and as they were thus occupied they talked in low voices, in what seemed to me broken phrases, suggestions of sentences, more like bird song than conversation. As we ate later there was none of the usual loud laughter, the outrageous and outraged stories, but the last of the bottles was empty before we left for the station. She could have stayed but she needs to retreat to her habit of solitude.

We had an appointment at the hospital, Margaret I mean, not because of the change in the past few days but a regular checking-in. In the waiting area was a middle-aged woman with a young child, a few months old, alert and interested in all that was going on and, for the most part, content. I thought the woman must be the grandmother, but no, it was obviously her, much older of course, mother who returned to the pair from her consultation. This outpatients clinic is mostly a clinic of the elderly. This young child was a light to all who sat and waited – smiling, making comments, reaching out hands to this expectant being. There were two receptionists, one an older woman, a bit of a joker, happy to make a fool of herself, performing for the child, the other a sad, beautiful young woman who was the only one not giving the lively infant any attention, busy with her work but then I saw her turn and look and be drawn in, and a soft smile came to her finely-featured face. The nurse was very cautious, in her physical examination, in her manner. Margaret was quite withdrawn, weary, and I was in a happy trance after being with that child and her patient but quite elderly mother, much older in her being than I remember Margaret to have been when she had Jude, and she was over forty. The

nurse was doing her best, doing her job with kindness and attention, but it all seemed to miss the mark, miss the point. The three were still there as we left, the three generations in a friendly huddle.

In late twilight Venus alone
Defines the dark hill.
I follow the long curve -
Each crest, ripple, dip.

Each evening I have been looking out for Venus because of its unbelievable brilliance which seems to tell me something about light, about the sun, which now is setting just about at the summit of the hill. It reminds me of the power of the depths, of the dark, of the light in the depths, that the sun is not just of the heights, of the expanses of the heavens, but comes also from the depths, reaches up from the depths. I do not know what depths I mean.

The rough gold of the gorse
Takes hold of the wild hills,
The thick scent smouldering
From the sharp, dark thickets.

The smell overwhelms me, is part of my dreaminess. This year we have the sharper yellow of the daffodils together with the warmer orange of the gorse. Then when evening comes, after the fullness of the sun, the cold joy of the star comes as a surprise.

Venus above the summit
As indigo clouds progress.
I look again and
The bright one has gone.

But the light of the star, so clear, intensifies the dream for me, helps me let go, helps me forget myself.

There is a place down by the burn, if you follow the path from the house down the slope through the wood, where the water runs through a small gorge which then opens out, still with high rocky sides, into a flat terrace raised a couple of metres above the now wider water. This place we call the old village for there are clear indications of walls and whole buildings, though none are more than knee-high. It is not marked on any map which I have seen. It is easy to miss it, but now the extent and arrangement of this

settlement of long ago is well known to me. All that remains are rough grassy outlines of stone walls and signs of doorways. In the morning it catches the sun and Margaret asked me to go with her. We went part of the way in the wheelchair for the path is good and the ground dry but the last part she leant on me. As we walked she told me about the fire in her family home, when she was a child of about nine, and how deeply affected her mother was though the house had not burnt to the ground. Her mother had not been able to live in the house after it had been repaired. She said she could still smell the burnt fabric, the damp ash. They had had to move but the memory was always with her. Margaret remembered collecting scraps of paper in the garden, scraps with burnt edges and fragments of writing. She had scoured the surroundings to gather all the pieces that she could. I had heard this story often. We arrived at the old village where I had made a simple bench and we sat in the warm shelter. She told me that for the first time she could now smell that smell of the aftermath of the fire and it was sickening. She could not get rid of it from her throat. She told me too of a time she was thrown from her horse, as a young woman, in a reckless act, and that she had lived through a timeless moment, when she felt she would die there and then, a time of dread and guilt, of reckoning that she would be judged as one who had done harm, who had sinned, who would get the punishments that she deserved. This was an experience which Margaret had never spoken to me about before. I asked if this too was a new recollection. She said not. She said she had lived her life determined to do all she could to prevent the return of such a conviction of guilt. That day she had had an amazing escape – two broken ankles and a wound on her head, some concussion. She bent her head to me and parted her hair to let me feel a scar on the side of the top of her head. I don't believe I had ever noticed it before. Perhaps it is the case that I never thought of the mark as a scar before. "I will not feel guilty, Roberto" she said. I think those were the words though they sound too definite as I write them.

Two trees – both have gathered bees,
A spreading pink cherry
And a dull goat willow.
Both hum beautiful.

Sometimes one remark from one of our guests can stay with me and I will go over and over it. We had a woman staying, Indian by birth, a doctor, articulate and insistent in the expression of her ideas. She had recently been on a pilgrimage in India and was wanting to compare the experience with this chilly, northern journey. In India, as a woman, she was not strictly eligible for the pilgrimage but her force of character had seen her through. She was a pathologist. She said she had chosen this specialism because she had wanted a nine-to-five job without any emergencies. She was happy with her microscope and she had found other ways to heal. I hear that thought again

and again, picturing this powerful woman examining her slides, closing the door of her laboratory punctually at five, and “finding other ways to heal” – understanding disease, identifying disease, knowing her pathogens, and then finding other ways to heal. I do not know what they were, for her, these other ways.

WEEK 30 (Verse 3) – 27.4.10

Two encounters with a chain-saw this week – contractors came to cut down a willow, many times over the years cut down and left to regrow, which was interfering with the overhead supply.

Our scruffy willow felled!
Where old crows sat.
Awkward shape gone in minutes.
I shall miss its confusion.

Our interference had meant it was always endeavouring to find a new order out of the powers of regeneration, but the electricity lines had done for it again, and now it must begin anew from the bare stumps. Then, we managed a short walk later in the week to the woods near the village where there are many exotic early rhododendrons, some ten metres tall. Drips of fluorescent paint alerted me to what we would find down these little-trodden paths in neglected woods – men had been at work doing clearing of dead wood and crowded self-sown trees. This place had always been ours, mine, private, a secret paradise which I could imagine, assume, was my preserve.

In woods long known I found
Piled brush, cut boles, trodden sawdust,
Disquieting spaces -
Such wilful acts!

It was a shock. The work had let in the light, was a minimal intrusion, but I loved the place undisturbed. How long will those lime-green fluorescent marks, guiding the clearance, remain!

We had a lively party staying, who were enabling a young girl, Emily, who has cerebral palsy, to complete the pilgrimage. Her father, a young, fit, determined man, was using the pilgrimage (once a journey towards healing) to bring to public attention the poverty and hardship which many families with disabled children suffer. Emily could walk, though her movements were difficult and she would soon grow tired. There was a team of six. Some of the time they walked at her pace, some of the time they used a modern

sedan chair, carried by four of them, for rough terrain and to make up time. Andrew, her dad, had a design business and knew how to promote and present himself. They were not raising money. He was insistent. He did not want gifts of money to get in the way of raising consciousness of the hidden injustice of the poverty of those who bring up children with severe disabilities. It was a real circus the evening they were with us – television crew, interviews, He was brilliant – persuasive, natural, amusing, impassioned, and by his side this girl with her twisted body and dark eyes and determined smile. Off they went in the morning, Emily with her ungainly slow walk, and the others going with her, used now to these times of slow progress, ready for the effort of bearing her through the hills.

Our neighbour's first lambs -
The weather's kind!
They do not know who they are
But sides will grow firm, legs steady.

Mo, the young girl from the village who has a young baby, Fraser, is now very much part of our household, our day. She has become Margaret's nurse, arriving with Fraser in his buggy mid-morning and now, with the late evenings, not leaving until after sharing our meal. She is very shy with me. No, that's not quite right. I don't really exist for her. I don't matter. I am not the reason for her coming. She and Margaret spend a lot of time together in Margaret's room, with Fraser of course asleep or feeding, or being awake with them. They are both devoted to the other, Mo helping Margaret to wash and care for herself, as well as reading to her from magazines she brings, articles which Margaret would only ever have picked up in the dentist's waiting room, but now she laps them up. And it is not put on, it is not patronizing Mo, I am sure of that. She has accepted the young girl's world, her love, in an amazing way. If it's raining I give her a lift home but most of the time she declines my offers and sets off into the evening. With me she is always reaching up to brush strands of hair, real or imaginary, from her face.

The lambs start to play,
To jostle one another,
Returning to the udder
From a wider world.

She has a bright red shiny raincoat. It stands out so boldly as she disappears down the road.

Margaret asked me to take her down to the estuary, across the marshes. Years ago a massive concrete causeway was constructed, to facilitate the cockle gathering I believe,

and recently it has been restored, more now for birdwatchers. It winds out across miles of salt marsh, out to the sands of the estuary where the tides run fast. It is totally exposed, open, empty. The marshes are a myriad of dark, snaking channels with the ever-moving salty grasses and flowers and insects and birds of this world unto itself. She wanted to tell me a secret. When she was four her mother had had a still-born son. This had never been spoken about in her family. Even the pregnancy had not been made anything of, in Margaret's remembering. When Margaret's mother died, Margaret had found a diary in which the entries ended with the day this still-born boy had been born. Her mother had drawn in black ink a beautiful cross, the name William, and the words ' Requiem aeternam, dona eis, domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis'. She spoke those words like a prayer repeated countless times. The diary was blank beyond that date, August 22nd 1946. Margaret was in her thirties before all this made sense. She had grown up with the silent shadow of this dead brother, with the grief of her mother, with her father's held anger, with her own deep guilt for she knew not what. She struggled to discover all her childhood what it was that had happened, what it was she had done, but nothing was ever said. But, when she unearthed the facts after finding the diary, it was, actually, confirming what she had always known, although she had not been able to put words to it. She wanted to tell me all this because she felt, now, at peace with her mother. "I don't think I would call it forgiveness", she said. "That would be too definite, but I can feel now what she was feeling, perhaps". Also, she said that this history meant she did not want silence between us. "Silence does not help". She wanted us to make sure that everything had been spoken. She said that my speaking helped her to imagine what it would be like to have died, to be dead. My presence, my words, helped her find her way into that landscape, to know it now, to not be afraid. But I must not let anything be unspoken, please, please. Oystercatchers in a tight group, arced round us, settled, then dispersed. A heron stood intent in a twisting creek. The wind bent the grass into flowing shadows. There was no-one else to be seen but we two sitting on a bench in this vast movement of wind and water and light surging and shifting round us. We were on the one piece of solid ground. I think we both drifted off. I had visions of a little girl in a dark house peopled with voiceless ghosts.

How hard I find it to forgive an injury done to the one I love.

A hard spring frost -
Will the warm sun revive
The new growth now crusted, crumpled
Or soften it to death?

As we walked to observe the lambs, up above us was the flurry of a hawk hunting a lark, still singing as it avoided the lunges of the twisting predator. The pair worked their

way over to a group of tall beeches, where they disappeared, the hawk emerging on its own some seconds later. It was mythical, this fight and flight, the singing of the prey, the bright wings of the frustrated hunter. It was happening above our heads but seemed a story, an emblem, a dreaming.

First the cuckoo, now the swallows, each event both a surprise and something to be expected, to be relied on. No need to make a fuss. I had been thinking of the swallows, meaning to tidy the shed and the garage so that they would not be disturbed in their nest-restoring or with the eggs, but I never got round to it. They are whistling in and out, reclaiming the familiar after the long journey round the globe.

Swallows have come home!
Chittering on the wires.
The shed door must now have a gap,
The cat be kept out!

WEEK 31 (Verse 4) – 4.5.10

Once you will have gone
Nobody will hear my voice.
I fear not even I,
Missing a comforter.

What is the right word to describe what Margaret is doing? Not 'slipping away', and 'departing' is a bit too loaded. She is going her own way, going herself, as herself. It is something coming out of growing older, of having been on the earth for a span of years, but also a deed that belongs to a larger rhythm, but an individual rhythm. To see her in pain is hardly bearable for me, but I sense her withdrawing from the pain, but that withdrawal is away from me, is up and out into the light. I went down to the beach on my own on a blustery day when fast-moving broken cloud turned warmth to chill in an instant. Spring was compressed in the strip of woodland behind the beach – gorse and blackthorn and primroses and bluebells and garlic and cherry all in bloom. I moved among the colours and from dappled shelter to scrub to the open beach with the strong southerly breeze blowing along it. I went into a dream, at first rather agitated, then calm, as if the months of waiting, the months of winter, through which I had just kept going, and through which Margaret had been unexpectedly well, were now over. I let go and allowed the blossom and the smells, together with the fierce wind, which though would suddenly abate and let the heat of the sun hit my skin, I could allow myself to be carried on the tides of the elements and of the magnificent Spring. I stayed much longer than I had intended, neglecting my duties! I came into the house in the dusk and

Mo and the baby were still there. She and Margaret were sitting in defined lamplight, Margaret giving her instruction in knitting. They did not notice me come in and there was for me something so beautiful in the scene, and sad. How could this be, by what chance, were these people sitting here? I did not know, for a moment, who they were, or who I was, and I could only wonder and be afraid. They need someone to protect them, each one so lonely, the two women with their heads bowed and the young child lying on the rug. I was so far away and had lost my bearings. Then Margaret looked up and we looked into each other's eyes, each other's gaze, and there was a time of knowing, of being together that was as powerful as any sexual ecstasy, different because it had the quiet clarity of our being together in and through the familiar space of the kitchen. A wave of fresh life passed over her face. It was enough.

On my back I look up -
Blue comes and goes as
Cloud flies and swirls above me.
I have gone from my grave.

Hal came for the holiday weekend. I enjoy having him around, his tough energy, his humour, his interest in everything! All of which absorb the disappointments and outrage he feels at the injustice in the world he inhabits and works in. He is so surprised by what he experiences that his despair (and it is there) is transformed into a determination that he knows will not achieve much, if anything. He is of the unreconstructed left, a man of the barricades, and he and Margaret usually have quite intense conversations, debates, about political ideas. Hal does most of the talking but Margaret engages in a way that would never happen between us. She is the one who questions him, asking him to clarify his thinking, explain what he means by certain words, explore the implications of his argument. This goes on for ages with Hal gradually slowing down, quietening down, the conversation tailing off into a satisfied silence. This time there could not be much of that. Margaret was not really here in the way that would allow her to act as his companion in such discourse. So Hal told stories from his city netherworld, He is a good storyteller, a mimic, and is happy to enjoy what happens and not impose too neat a structure on his narratives for the sake of a punchy ending. He insisted I went with him to an exhibition in the private gallery of a very successful artist who lives not far away. The paintings are a mix of pop-art and surrealism, large cluttered paintings and prints, bringing together figures and themes from mythology (from all over the world) together with emblems of modern popular culture. Bright colours, clearly defined images, incongruities thrust in your face. Fake dreams. I hated it. Hal loved them for what he called "anarchic imagination", chucking everything together. He liked the heavy-metal impact, the assault. He felt there was great skill in the way the disparate elements were held together. It wasn't just random, it wasn't a mess. On the

way home we stopped at the early medieval chapel, now with just one wall partly standing, that was an important point on the pilgrim path. It sits in a narrow sheltered valley, without any modern dwellings nearby, apart from a graveyard still in use. The chapel has no symmetry to its form, its ground plan. No right angles or parallel walls. I am always struck by that. It was built in response to its situation, to where it stood. I needed its roughness after the sterile paintings. Hal tried to enthuse Margaret later about the 'extravagant vision' of the exhibition. "I can see nature anytime, myself". Later when we were alone Margaret wanted to talk about how it had been for her having Hal as a single mother in the mid-sixties. She had not wanted him. It was before abortion became legal. She had decided to give him up for adoption. She had hopes to be an Olympic rider, "and that was before Princess Anne hit the headlines". Even when he was born her resolve did not alter. Not until she saw that he was not thriving, soon after birth. Everything was ready for the baby to go, but she decided, at the last minute, to say no. "That was the worst moment of my life, when I thought it would be impossible to keep him, to change my mind. But it was not. I was so sure of what I had to do, what I wanted to do. The worst moment became the best, when I was true to myself". No more thought of Olympic gold.

Bright dandelions rise
Everywhere – from nowhere!
Flamboyant beggars of the sun
Bold with bronze bees.

I knew about this, of course, but I had never before felt that moment of decision in her life, alone in a nursing home. Thanks to Jack and Jill the pilgrims have passed me by this week. Except for a woman who came through with her two children, about the same age as Stephen. She was seeing to their education. She did not believe in schooling, formal schooling. She wanted them to be happy, without the pressures to conform, to learn, to sit in class and behave themselves. This pilgrimage was education. She was a freelance writer. They got by; they were not well-off but she was adamant about protecting her children from the system. "I will not let their hearts be trampled. I will not let their hearts be starved". This was after the children had gone to bed, very confident young things, making themselves at home, asking for what they wanted. She was very firm, the mother, filled the space she was in. I was sorry Hal had gone by then. I wonder what he would have made of Sally. I wonder what kind of a conversation they would have had. Heated. 'Privilege' would have come into it.

My day's work done
I watch from the window
A blackbird on the turned soil,
His bright beak grips worms wriggling.

WEEK 32 (Verse 5) – 11.5.10

Up here I shiver in the wind,
Cloud shadows below
Quick flow over sunlit slopes.
Dazzle and dread.

This was me taking an early morning trip up into the hills. She is suffering. I hate it. But I will not describe it. I will not hide it from myself. For now, words will not do. For her enduring. Two nurses come, and there is Mo, and Jack and Jill, and even Jude. Her body is not warm as bodies are, often, but we lie together, or I touch her cold sides, or try to bring some warmth into her feet or her hands, but I am grateful that I am not alone with her caring – as so many are. She values that too. She told me. She is glad of our separateness, that I could and did go to the hills and she was not deserted because of that. The separateness prepares us both for the parting, the absence, but more than that, because we are not too entangled, because she is not totally dependent on me for her care, we are allowed to have the silent conversation about our shared lives, our love, to reflect and be grateful, and we are allowed to let knots untie, to forgive and to ask forgiveness for untold, unknown hurts and times when we missed each other, did not find the other in the dark.

Looking down on the shadows of the clouds flowing over the folded hills and valleys was time made slow. I was detached, spread out. Later I was down on my knees weeding and starting to thin a couple of rows of parsnips which had at last germinated. I had almost given up hope but they are often very slow to appear. I love having the feel of all the different seedlings – in my fingertips, you could say. Each is unmistakable – parsnip, leek, beetroot, lettuce. My fingers move to the weeds, free the vegetables from crowding. The seed-bed was another landscape, this one miniature, that I looked down on. I listened to a late piano sonata of Beethoven, the last movement beginning with a simple theme which then goes on a journey of many variations, exploring, inventing. It will come back to the plain tune! Find its way back to the pure beginning! And it does come out into the light. It did not get lost but each note of the simple melody, at the end, is both an effort and absolutely certain, and tender.

The geans come to bloom
With a simple pride.
The show won't stay for us,
Frail light scattering on the breeze.

We are in the time of perpetual light, the sun sets far to the north already and the luminous dusk stays forever, and before night fully comes the birds begin and the day lifts what dark there is.

In the dusk my tulips
Are no longer brash intruders –
Are soft infolded cups
Pure in blue air.

I have been watching our big copper beech, for what it tells me of the light.

Our copper beech
Hangs over me
Restless light made dense.
Beyond the play
I scarce see the absent blue.

Our copper beech
Grows dark in days.
The dome at first
Pink sea-swell flicker
Becomes cave of ruby glow.

The guests have largely passed me by this week. One man I passed in the passage gave me a shock. He reminded me very strongly of my brother. He too stopped in his tracks and looked me in the face with a look of surprised recognition. Then it was gone. We both moved on, but whenever I caught a glimpse of him I was taken aback, sure each time if only for a moment that Andrew was here, and walking, but was not wanting to announce himself! I had a brief but interesting encounter with a man of about my age who had, like me, lived abroad for many years, though he had settled in the high mountains of the Hindu Kush. He was returning there. This, I gathered, was a final visit here occasioned by the death of his brother. He was rather stiff, military, in his manner, but I was really impressed by his humble reserve, his natural habit of self-effacement. A gentleman. He was very attentive to Margaret when she came through and sat by the fire, for the evening was chilly.

Each morning when I am with Margaret early she has taken to speaking to me from her heart. We call it her 'thought for the day'. She does not prepare her script but I feel that the subject has been living in her and she lets it speak spontaneously. I listen. She recalled a moment that has become famous, to her and us, in her life. When Hal was a baby, a friend had asked for her help in making her wedding dress. She already had the material, a gift of beautiful silk. Margaret was known for her dressmaking skills but this was something different. They decided on the pattern and the moment came for the shears, to cut the pristine cloth unfolded on the kitchen table. She remembered that moment, the excitement, the risk of irreparable failure. That moment changed her life. One dress led to another and soon she was in business, and on her way to success and a respected name. "Tell everyone that if anyone calls me an 'entrepreneur' they will be thrown out of the reception, or whatever you call it. We were just experimenting, making a living, enjoying life. 'Entrepreneur' is such an ugly word, an ugly idea. I will not have it said about me". She was serious, animated, colour in her face. Another morning she spoke much less, long pauses between phrases. "I do not believe in GodI do not believe that is possible.....I do not believe that is what God wants or needs to be believed inI wanted to let God live in me....through me....to not be afraid....to live well". Those are the actual words, I think. They came from deep within her, from her heart, but not solemn. Another day she was almost angry, talking about contrasts and how she was sick of them – life and death, light and dark, good and evil. "Why should the world fly apart, split apart into opposites. It is not true. It is too easy to make it all a battle". For a moment she was so emphatic that I felt sad, felt isolated from her determined conviction. But the effort loosened, she let the thought go.

Margaret had arranged for Jude to come round and they spent the afternoon going through Margaret's clothes. She wanted a big clear-out and Jude took away several suitcases of clothes destined for various ends – charity shops and textile collection points. "No bin bags", she had said. "I won't have my lovely things in black bin bags". No, all neatly folded and carried out in suitcases. I spent the time with Stephen. He had brought a big painting of his to show me, from school. It think it must have been the story of Beowulf; the picture was of the funeral pyre, a big rectangular pile of logs with the body of the hero laid on top, with helmets and weapons hanging and the flames all round the body and people in twisted poses of grief and lamentation. Stephen took me through the ritual in great details. "It was all out in the open, like a festival". That was what impressed him. "The people wailed and shouted and sang. You could see the fire for miles". He had drawn and painted the stacked logs so carefully, and the body and the treasure, and then the wild flames, curving round the body but not obscuring it, not yet consuming it.

WEEK 33 (Verse 6) – 18.5.10

Each night, the waxing moon, at the beginning of the week just a precise arc of intense light, goes on a long curving journey through the western gloaming, and ahead of her goes the vibrant point of the evening star.

Late into a pale night
Venus so close and clear
Leads the new moon
Into the glowing of the north.

I sleep little now. By day I am full of energy, superhuman, able to keep going, to be part of the comings and goings of carers and those who come to sit with her or offer consolation to me. I find time, too, to share in her quiet, her silence. At night I do have times of dejection. I could not say how long they last; it could be seconds but more likely it is hours, hours which pass. I know they pass because the moon reminds me, and the bright star, the long arching passage of the pair. There is a fragment of a poem, or a song, keeps coming to me with its tune, though I may have made it up, "Here I and sorrow sit". The sorrow is mine but it belongs to a 'me' which I can both be and observe. And then the birds have already begun before I know it and I am no longer lost in the night, watching myself. Thank God for the birds. Then comes dawn and sunrise and I find myself refreshed.

Time without speaking without
Voices in the background.
Thoughts float between.
We have all the time
In the world.

These scenes of quiet between us happen even when there are others coming and going, and in the quiet I have conversations in which I must supply her voice as well as letting my own speak out. It is like a play and I am both composing the dialogue and acting and listening, and a voice deep down is singing Dido's lament, "Remember me, remember me, but ah! Forget my fate". This fate, this shape to your life that you sense about yourself, sense and yet resist, feel powerless in the face of – I think I am here and now helping Margaret to dissolve that straight-jacket that would bind her tight to the bed in which she is dying. I want to help her not to have to struggle. Now I no longer want her to keep on living. But I am also terrified of her becoming a ghost, a ghost whom no-one remembers or, worse, a ghost whom I try to keep alive only by my remembering. In Virgil Dido builds and lights the pyre on which she piles the very bedding on which she

had lain with her lover and then collapses over the blade of the sword as she presses it to her breast. She wants revenge. Purcell's Dido is less vehement, gives herself to death in the hope that then she can be remembered as herself, can rise, separate her being from the doom spoken by the gods. I come back to Margaret, her breathing, her discomfort, restless at times, then settling, speaking, taking a drink, taking in the flowers on the table, the sky, the birds, I go off back into our life, her life, my excitement and desire when we first found each other, her vitality, her beauty, the lust and trust between us, the vigour of this woman and I bring these living memories into this calm room and the drifting consciousness of this suffering love of mine.

It is difficult – dying
It is remembering
Another place, some other time
Deeper than sleep.

This week had everything in the way of weather – two nights of proper frost, a night of heavy rain, a day of cold wind from the north that broke the chestnut flowers from the tree before they had time to open into light, and then a day of full warmth rising out of the early thick mist, warmth that reached my old bones.

A dry Spring, a cold Spring,
Frost hanging on the air.
Blossom cannot blossom,
Nor bee fruit, in numb chill.

Stephen spent that first hot afternoon with us. He arrived wearing sunglasses and told us the story of finding them in the park and wanting to take them to the police station, but Jude had said it was not worthwhile. He insisted I try them and then asked me why blind people wear dark glasses. He wanted to know what the eyes of those who cannot see are like. Had I ever held a glass eye? Had I ever seen someone without any eyes? Just sockets? Just holes? Would it be very painful if you had your eye cut out! "I don't know where you are, grandad", he said, taking the glasses off my nose. He went over to the bed, intending, I think, to ask Margaret to put them on. She was awake and with us, and made a small gesture of her face and hand to reach out to Stephen's approach, but then he withdrew. "I think they would be too heavy for you, granny," he said, "they're much heavier than ordinary glasses, you know". By Margaret's bed there was a tumbler with some sprigs of mint sitting in water. Margaret had asked me to bring some in as the smell refreshed her and helped with nausea. Stephen was struck by this mint, that it was just leaves and not flowers and he enjoyed imitating Margaret as she rubbed a leaf between her fingers to release the scent. We got talking about herbs and

Stephen wanted to know what else had a strong smell and where were the plants in the garden. I described to him the big rosemary bush and off he went, coming rushing back with a small bunch of rosemary which we all examined and enjoyed. This went on for quite a while – plant by plant – me giving him directions and a description and Stephen disappearing and returning with his next discovery. Each one he offered to Margaret – different mints, rosemary, thyme, sage, some old parsley going to seed, lovage, marjoram, lemon balm, chives, wild garlic – with a wide-eyed intensity, the leaves would be examined, the name said over and over. He fetched small glasses and placed each specimen in water on various surfaces around the room. We talked about explorers bringing plants and seeds from far-away lands, having to take care of them for many months on long sea journeys. “I don’t think that there’s anywhere left now,” he said. “I think it’s all been explored, it’s all been done”. I told him no, that was not true, there was plenty left to discover, plants and animals. There was always more to find out. He was not convinced. There was a kind of dispirited sadness come over him and I didn’t know what to do about it but I knew it was no good trying to argue him out of it. When he was leaving he said to Margaret that she must remember to get fresh herbs from the garden, the ones he picked would soon be no good. He was giving her permission to remove them when she wanted to. I was really touched by that.

Tender growth once frozen –
Potato, nasturtium –
Will not warm. Stasis.
A form disintegrating.

We have sent word that pilgrims should not call to stay for now. We are not closing the door, just asking that people pass by to let Margaret, and, the rest of us, be undisturbed. A large heavily-built man stayed yesterday. All his working life he had been a prison officer. “I was a warder and you are a warden”. He had just retired and this long walk was his way of freeing himself from the nasty taste of his work. Over time his work had become just surviving, keeping the lid on, the doors locked, the aggression suppressed. “It’s me what was locked up. It screws you up, being a screw”. There was no malice in him, no enmity, just weariness. I never learnt his name. For now he was only this role, although the uniform had gone. I hope he can shed it on the walk. Stephen left the sunglasses by Margaret’s bed. I expect he meant to. That boy is, as they say, a deep one.

WEEK 34 (Verse 7) – 24.5.10

Her dying could not be quieter; it is humble but it is not uncertain. There is light within her, her light, and she is going through, she is riding on the tide, she is finding her way

through. I find myself in conversation with her and although I am supplying her voice, her replies, I also know that they are coming to me directly from her soul. Her words. Her soul is awake, or dreaming and can speak in me as her own awareness, sharp awareness of the world, fades.

Light inundates the heavens.
Here below, the green of trees
Thickens into substance,
Hedges tangle.

This woman is a riddle. I think, for her, to be open was the guiding need. No deceit, no deceit. It means that she is unmoved in her kindness. She is one who protects but also one who knows she has the power to destroy and does not deny that power. She is wary of her own desire and I have been wary of her. I have never known her to sulk, to harbour a grievance, and I love the way she does not seek for answers because life for her is not one question after another. Sorrow and innocence meet in her. As I sit with her I sense her wish not to be secret, not selfish. An intense purpose is at work in her frail body.

Unpredictable night –
Time of dream, of love, of pain –
Will the stranger cry out? Knock?
Will my lover sleep?

Her breath is weak, but I feel her hard at work.

Our old friends Bill and Joan came, whom we had not seen since the autumn. We are all at home with each other and I really appreciated a day of natural intercourse which included the time some or all of us spent quiet or in conversation around Margaret, with her, including her still presence, Bill's unseeing eyes gave our gathering a different colour, a depth. He sat for a long time with his hand just touching her shoulder, not the direct intimacy of hand holding hand, but a modest expression of love and longing. I have been feeling that I did not know which world I was in; where, in the depths or the heights, Margaret and I were finding ourselves, but Bill's speaking of and to Margaret from his own light, through his blind eyes, helped me to come back to the beauty and suffering of her lying there, so that I could see the pain and the way she was meeting that pain. Joan is a woman of refinement and through the day moved around and between us, bringing an everyday healing – flowers, food, refreshment, nothing fussy. They stayed the night, but left quite early in the morning after they had spent time with her by themselves. I am glad they left in the morning. An evening departure would

have been sadder. Joan had done a little sketch in ink of our bird table, with siskins and goldfinches, catching in the moment of the drawing all the irrepressible vitality of the eager birds. She had written underneath “you angel you”.

So, no pilgrim guests this week. The word had gone out to leave us in peace. But we did have an unexpected night visitor. The house has a large entrance hall, with an inner and an outer door, where guests leave boots and coats. It’s a lovely space with a high roof and old flagstones and Victorian stained glass narrow windows around the outer door. It feels to me like a little chapel. Going out late one night into the bright moonlight I found a bowed figure sitting there. We do not lock the outer door. She was half-sitting, half-lying and hardly stirred, when I was startled by finding her, and called out in surprise. I recognised her though I had never really spoken to her; a local woman, the object of gossip, her husband condemned as a hard man prone to drink and to violence. And indeed she had come in the night for refuge. She had bruising to her face. She was barely able to speak, mumbled apologies, had not known where to turn, where she would be safe, had not wanted to involve her only daughter. I did not tell her how close Margaret probably was to dying. I brought her in and gave her a bed. “I’m still alive”, she said “I’ll probably go back in the morning but I had to get out”. She was almost too ashamed to say thankyou. I didn’t feel it was my place to intervene. I left her hunched on the bed in the way I had found her by the front door. In the morning she had gone and the bed was made so that one would never know that it had been slept in.

I draw the piled dyke,
Stone and splash of lichen,
I feel weight, touch shadow,
Precarious, permanent.

Each day I draw. Joan has reminded me of what it does for me to look at the world, and take the point of a pencil, the nib of a pen, and put it to the white of the clean paper. I move between the seeing and the movements of my fingers, wrist, arm, the journey of a line going towards its destination in a curve, a vertical, a horizontal, keeping in mind the horizon, the distance, the layering of near and far.

Muggy evening, I watch
Swallows disappear, turn,
Twist across my window,
Feeding invisible.

I am grateful for the swallows, for their acceptance of us, for the way they make our world theirs, and go about their business undisturbed by cats or clumsy humans. I do

not try to draw them, I take simple things that keep still like the stones of the dyke, a vase, an orchid, an ash tree just breaking into leaf. I managed the naked tulip stems with the large petals dropped to earth around. How long they lasted despite their extravagance!

The moon is not yet full but the nights are bright. The sun never really leaves us. I took a night walk up to the high lochans, a still, warm night with an owl calling and the voices of young people, and splashing in water, coming up from somewhere indefinable in the valley. Margaret gets cross with me when I try to see the world as clear contrasts – light and dark, good and evil. She will have none of it. This night was a lesson in seeing through such contrasts. The reflection in the water was perfect, the dark hill, the three-quarter moon, the few stars visible. I felt everything turned on its head, or inside out; I was there, through the beautiful reflection, in the dark depths of the water. I was deep behind my eyes. I looked into my own depths.

Warm night, faintest of breezes,
I am alone with the moon
And the moon's reflection,
Juggling with truth.

The distant excited voices from the stream far below continued. I had my own voices too. What is it that means I do not turn these, my voices, into gods or demons who control me, who will save me, or damn me? Once or twice I have faced my imminent death. Once I have seen my own blood spurting from a wound that I took to be the life flowing out of me. Up at the lochan, in the moonlight, was like that crisis in that I dissolved, but without the shock, the fear. I touched the future in the topsy-turvy complexity of the reflection and the moon, the surface and the depths, voices far away, voices of the heart. There was hope.

Mo has never been able to recognise me, never quite known how to address me, and I am awkward with her though I have welcomed her and the comfort she and the baby have given Margaret. This week she found me in the garden as she was leaving and without any introduction informed me that she would not be coming any more. It was time to leave us to ourselves. She had said goodbye to Margaret. She gave me a piece of paper with her name and address, including Fraser, and phone. She asked me, when I had decided which one was the right one, to send her a photo of Margaret. She used her hands to indicate the size of the photo she wanted. It seemed very precise in her mind. All the time that we were speaking, that she was speaking and I was listening, the big cherry tree was shedding petals onto us and onto the pushchair and the garden. She wanted me to deliver the actual print.

Benign heat of a long late Spring day,
Lambs chase and gather,
Cherry petals scatter
Over seedlings.

I went back to Margaret and there beside the bed was Joan's sketch of the bird table. She is enough of an angel for me, her breath, the rise and fall of her chest with such slow strength of heaven. I do not want angels such as William Blake saw and drew, clear-featured, strong-winged, clumsy.

As dusk drifts
A thrush high
In the leaning pine sings.
Now, each Spring, each thrush,
I will think of her I love.

WEEK 35 (Verse 8) 3.6.10

She has gone, departed in peace, dead now and buried. But she remains. Hal and Jude were there, very tall and still, quiet with her, giving me a space between her lying with her breath slowly fading and them strong beside me, silent I think, letting me go a little way with her, a little way beyond the end, into the darkness, into the light. I was allowed to accompany her. No final wave as the train takes the bend. The windows now of trains are opaque, you cannot see in to identify the one who is departing. Just a vague shape, a shadow.

Jude and Hal were giants, firm and clear and so I could be weak. I do not remember them saying very much. It was such a surprise to feel Jude's firm hand on mine, her guiding hand, the strength of the woman knowing what to do, what needed to be done, what I wanted, what Margaret was asking for.

Each day Stephen has been drawing me pictures, very different from the usual detailed diagrams he draws nowadays with straight black lines. He has been drawing coloured dreamy people, bright colours but vague outlines, particular people – me, Margaret, Jude, Hal, others – but all looking quite alike, with big heads and big sad eyes and a soft droopy appearance. Sometimes the pictures fill the sheet of paper, sometimes they are tiny, down in one corner, but only ever one figure to a page, one individual though all bear the same lineaments of the face.

Margaret had left clear instructions about arrangements. I knew them well but she had also written them down. A funeral soon as possible, a burial in the old churchyard, no bought flowers, refreshments in the nearby village hall, and that I should, without opening them, see to the burning of her diaries and journals. The last request has not yet been accomplished. The rest is achieved. The graveyard was waves of sweet hawthorn blossom, a sea of beauty flowing round us, creamy, a touch of pink.

On the telegraph pole halfway down the track to the house sits a buzzard more often than not. Sometimes he will rise as you drive past, sometimes not. He has been absent. I keep hearing the old carol "lully, lulley, the falcon has borne my make away", a haunting song of resurrection. Our old buzzard is no pointed-winged falcon, he is rather a heavy, lazy sentinel, but still he has been gone and he reminds me of the mystery of departing, the ways of body and the spirit of the body, the body of the spirit.

I was in the town, on business, before the funeral and I stumbled outside the solicitor's office. No harm done. Passers-by stopped to help me up, dust me down. But I could not move. I lay on the ground with all power of motion taken from me. Lifeless. Drained. Then it returned, animation, power to my limbs. I have no idea how long it lasted, complete helplessness.

Jude and Hal were there and the nurse, I forget which one, and we were all together with Margaret as a body without life, without breath. She was there more strongly than ever in the time after her death, like the last strong, sure chord at the end of a symphony which has been waited for and which lasts and grows even as it dies away. One of the nurses was a young man. I found that wonderful, that a young man should care for the body of one who has died, the body of my mate.

Downstream from our house the small burn widens into shallows flowing over stones and tall trees, beech and oak and ash, arch over the river making a tunnel. As I sat there two herons came flying towards me through this long green tunnel above the shallow broken water, weighty wing-beats, the big birds filling the confined space. I have never seen them do it before, go through the long sweep of the covered water, broad wings working the air.

In the graveyard are several tall columnar yews, dark and upright. During the burial I kept feeling their presence behind me, to the side, in front, and time and again I took them to be people, to be part of the gathering, to be watching over us, guardians. I would shake myself out of the idea, but back it would come. I would feel their gaze again.

Jude has been bringing me food. She is an expert cook and has used her skills this week, or whatever it is, to create very small, beautifully prepared and presented, meals for me – lovely colours, shapes, textures. Works of art. Not something I am used to. I won't say that I eat them all. I have no appetite. But her loving skill feeds me. The look of each plate nourishes me.

Sometimes I have moments of panic about our lives together. What was it that we forgot to do? That we did not manage? That we were meant to do? Or to say? Her to me or me to her? What did we forget to do or say? I am sure there is something. It is impossible that we achieved all that was given to us to work through, to digest, to create. We did miss out. That is inevitable. That must be.

Drystone walls have cracks between the stones that let the light through. The stones give deep shadows as well but I have been glad of the chinks of light, the glimpses of what is on the other side of the wall as stone finds its resting place on stone, as the sun goes its long slow passage across the sky. The stones are firm, the wall will stand. The gaps are bright.

I have let myself go with Kathleen Ferrier singing as Orpheus to his lost Eurydice. Up he comes towards the surface of the earth, with her following; the light ahead grows from a pin point, begins to illumine the walls of the tunnel. So close, but then he cannot go on without looking back, once the light of the earth had returned. Then she was taken. He was ever alone after that, some say desolate, depressed, some say mad, savage. Cold or hot.

I met two men, brothers, on the path, the pilgrim path. They might have stayed had the inn been open. They did not know who I was, my connection. We got talking. One was a geologist who had worked in Africa, the other was a music teacher. They were both retired. The older, geologist brother was educating his brother as they walked, teaching him about reading the landscape, seeing the shifts and upheavals. He stood there, gesturing, miming the flow of time and weather, leading us from epoch to epoch. Will the other brother return the favour on their next holiday, I wonder?

One day, it was the day before the funeral, I was taken to the sea and it was bitterly cold, a gale from the north, and the wind and rain made me cold in a way this long hard winter never did. I could feel the bones of my face defined, my breath cold in my throat, tossed and buffeted by the raging wind. Sad to see new leaves torn already from the trees, trodden and broken.

I see a star. It goes away from me. It retreats, but the light comes towards me, the light from the star which I see both by day and by night. And this light helps me to give birth to light within me, within my heart. The star flies away. I can bring light into being. Those days, with Margaret lying as a body in the room she had lived in, were a secret peace, a conceiving, an embryo stirring in death, waiting for an unimaginable birth, a new breathing.

With the day of her funeral the cold wind had abated. Her body joined the earth as the lilac opened, lilac among the thick glory of the hawthorn, whiter than I remember it, the jagged hawthorn with her starry bridal veil, as the song celebrates. It is a veil, a tremor of colour and scent made of the many clear flower forms, hiding and revealing. Opalescent is the word. Layers, not translucence.

Her body covered, sculpted,
Face ours, eyes closed,
Flowers giving her wings,
Window open to our hill.

WEEK 36 (Verse 9) 8.6.10

My brother thinks evil lies in the power of the emotions to overpower our reason. This is original sin, the evil inclination – the speed of the primitive feelings flooding the brain. So, for him, reason is weak and must give way to revelation, tradition, law. Not for me. I will stay with the heart, the holiness of the heart's affections, emotion as the dark path to my self, to those I love, to her I miss. He keeps telling me about the structure of the brain, the pathways as if this is enough to convince, that this trumps all talk of feeling and intuition. The very perfection of the brain, the complexity, renders it impotent to give me reality, the hard knocks.

On the path I pass a young couple, standing, holding each other, their faces hidden, hers turned inward against his shoulder, his bent down against her neck.. Sadness, not passion. A pregnancy or a death? An hour or two later, they were gone. Of course. But they had seemed immovable, eternal.

There is a song, "The Waters of Tyne". The lover wants to be with her mate, to cross the river. She asks for the ferryman, she asks for someone to help her find the ferryman, she will cross over to him, or else he can be ferried to her side. All is uncertain, possible. The river is the thing. It cannot be denied.

Theseus found the minotaur because the path led down, the path into the maze descended and the ball of thread kept rolling. Sometimes I see the head of the minotaur as a bull's head with the eyes and face becoming sad and despairing with human sadness; sometimes it is the face of a man, the head of a man, becoming bullish, the eyes losing the power of compassion, the mouth the power of speech. And when they sailed away, Theseus and Ariadne, they were both made to forget. They no longer knew one another, knew they were lovers. One act of forgetfulness after another. What have I already forgotten? has become a blur?

Downstream from us there is a large pond where water collects before draining into the river. There is a bird-hide there, a shed with a narrow horizontal slit of an opening at eye-level if you sit in the darkness of the hide. You take in the whole width of the pond. It is a quiet place at the moment, a few ducks, a heron, a slight stir of the tall rushes. I find now that I can sit there forever and be satisfied by the smallest thing, by the whole wide, narrow picture of the pond seen through the gap from the dark inside. I never want to move again.

So, my brother has been here, all week, miraculously cured, he says, by Ayurveda medicine. He has tried to interest me, with detailed description of the three dushas and the three gunas and his aggravated vata. "Errors in judgement" is the phrase he repeats, following me around. I can't, or won't, take it in. But I love to hear him singing. He has a fine clear baritone voice. He sings in German, mostly, and I understand some phrases. They become familiar as he repeats them, adding hummed bits of the accompaniment. I hear his voice coming from different rooms to wherever I am at the time. I enjoy that, his voice (leaving me alone) trying out phrases, eventually coming to an ending.

One morning we sat outside in the enclosed overgrown part of the garden. Again I had the feeling almost of disappearing. It had rained in the night and the cup-like leaves of the lady's mantle held those little hollow globes of water, perfect and fragile. Bees were on the broom, amber to amber, dangling over us. In the tangled creepers there were sparrows chirping, a happy hypnotic sound of our childhood, as well as the strange rhythm of the pigeons' calling, and above all a single warbler moving from place to place, occasionally visible, repeating time and again the sharp flow of its song. Higher still swallows passed over, feeding, their sweeping motion the last of the layers of this morning music, which began with the bubbles, the bright bubbles caught in the low-lying leaves.

We have opened again for guests but only slowly do they find their way to us again, like birds returning to a bird table once food has again been placed there after a gap of time.

A woman came with her three children, lanky creatures approaching or arrived at adolescence, and she smaller, lively, warm, a dancer and circus performer, on the trapeze, and with clubs and balls. She did my heart good. I loved her simple presence. My brother was silenced by her vitality. I do not know what if any sorrows she has met in her life, what pettiness or weakness she bears. Such is possible but to me she had true beauty, a humble grace. We were blessed by her coming. Off they went, tumbling, noisy down the track.

We went for a long day by the sea. How can this man be walking so freely when a few months ago he was crippled! Larks were with us all through the day. As one, at last, ended its high singing and dropped, wings spread, back to the rough grass behind the beach, then another would begin, rising, hovering, swaying on the breeze, regaining composure, the song going on. I find the fluttering point in the sky, lose it, find it, let it go. Nearer there was a kestrel, holding herself, spread on the wind, then abandoning herself to the wind before returning to the hunt, light passing through the open tail and wings. In the shallows terns were diving, rising from the water, time after time, to hover and then dive, hitting the water with streamlined force. The vivid drama of tern and kestrel, yes, but it is the larks who still hover and sing in my soul. It is the lark I will not forget. We went down onto the rocks when the tide was out – yes, he was even clambering – to the clefts and pools of this region of mystery, always being covered and uncovered, taking the waves and the swell, then for a few hours exposed for us to explore.

Where we sat in the garden, the ground is covered with old, irregularly shaped pieces of flagstone which had become dislodged, upset, easy to trip over. It was just a small area, maybe two metres square. I spent a day lifting and resetting the stones. It was very satisfying to go slow, to think through each action, each movement, to make a pattern, an arrangement that was firm and level and neat. My brother left me in peace to get on with it, thank goodness.

Theseus went to the underworld to find Persephone and again he was made to forget. He sat on the throne and his flesh fused with the rock he was sitting on. Torn from it, his legs were just sticks forever after. He returned to the surface a crippled beggar. He could only hobble on to his death.

I fell in the town, before the burial, on business. Only now does the fall seem to impede me. Only now is there a bruise, now I limp and feel the pain. Why the delay? I have not fallen a second time. The hurt is from that incident, a good many days ago already. Ten, perhaps.

Where the river broadens to about fifteen metres we sat and, by the opposite bank, an otter came up out of the water to come to land under an overhanging root. I saw her. The otter obviously was aware of us, came back into the water, swam away, close to the bank, then across the river, lower down, to our side. A few minutes later, unperturbed, she returned to the far side, then swam upstream, past us, coming out of the water to run across a patch of flat gravel with a beautiful sinuous arch of the back as she ambled away. I was so grateful to see this shining creature, to be accepted by her.

'The Unquiet grave' – the man wants a kiss from his dead love before he will leave her graveside. She resists, her breath is "earthy strong". Soon enough he too will die, his heart decay. She pleads that she be allowed to rest easy. I must go back to the grave. I have not been but now it is time. I need to see what is happening to my memory. I have not yet done anything with the diaries and journals. Money things are happening. She left everything in good order. A woman of wealth and all gone to good causes. And we remembered never to call her an entrepreneur. But the diaries and journals she left to me to see to. They are heavy, solid, not figures in a bank balance. She gave me this way of separating.

WEEK 37 (Verse 10) 15.6.10

Today the sky is pure blue, birds are lively, bees take their time from flower to flower – this after many muggy days, days of my despondency, an abyss, a waste, a stupor in which I feel utterly useless. So much growth in the last week, overpowering! I cannot easily see clearly with such profusion, such shadowing spread of green. Today I see buttercups, plain yellow welsh poppies, the tiny perfection of forget-me-nots in the flowery grasses. Yesterday evening there was a bee swarm in the garden. It gathered low down on the old cherry, half dead, at the bottom of the garden. That woke me up, the mad movement, the loud noise, this living turmoil and throb oblivious to me. I stood in it, under it, could have touched it. This swell of energy, for this while, did not belong to the earth. It was on a journey to another land, a new country, they settled somewhat, came together, calmed as night fell, so that there were no single bees to be seen, just a dark surface, a mass. This morning it has gone. This was not the resting place, the new home, just a one-night camp.

I walked through the market place when the shooting was finished trying to tell the living from the dead, trying to discern who was bleeding, whose were the wounds. The living breathe, yes, of course, the living breathe, but I felt then that the dead also have their manner of breathing. In Africa you come upon places that seem to have no connections – a beautifully kept war graves cemetery with tools and a visitors' book, a deserted railway station with fragments, tatters, of signs and timetables and no remnant of any

rails or the direction the tracks took from the rotted platforms. My heart is absent. It is through my heart that I can follow her, accompany her. She was a woman who had made her own heart, had taken her intentions into herself even as she gave them out into the world. My heart is trying to follow her but it is not yet strong enough to swim in the currents of the dead. I keep thinking I hear the bee swarm again but it has long gone; perhaps a grateful beekeeper is even now gathering it in.

When I was little and was told I was going away to boarding school, I thought I was being told I was going to die. I remember the tone of the grown-ups, telling me how significant this journey would be. I took it to be death.

Last year, about this time, Margaret and I took a walk by the sea, through dry scrubby slopes above cliffs and steep valleys. We saw, that day, three or four specimens of a rare butterfly, an inconspicuous creature, the dingy skipper, brown and white. There it was, wings spread, basking in the sun on the bare ground! We did see one fly with the quick curving skip that gives it its name. Dingy – but delightful, with its fine white markings. I don't like calling a butterfly 'it' but I just don't know a male from a female! I went back this week to search for the dingy skipper along the same walk. The weather was not right and I did not see one. I found the very spot where we had seen several. I could picture them sunning themselves. I could imagine the flight, but they were not there. I had been sure that I would find them. It seemed just a question of going back and they would be there. Today might be different, the sun is warm, but I do not have the heart for more disappointment. I am sure it was last year, Margaret was still strong then, but something tells me it was two years ago that we went. I can't be sure. She wore a straw hat with a pale blue ribbon. On my way home I called in at the pub; something I rarely do. In the small dark bar there were several people whom I have known long but know little. It was very awkward. I become tongue-tied, stuttering, as we went through unfinished sentences of condolence. It was as though they were a committee waiting for me to arrive, a welcoming committee, a farewell committee. I back out of the door. I was a stranger among their kindness in the dark familiarity of the bar.

There are two qualities of Margaret which I want to record but both are complex and important. I have to try to put them into words. Although she enjoyed conversation, was easy-going in company, Margaret was, in essence, silent. The silence was, first, a space kept free within her, something unfilled, into which she received what came towards her – my words, yours. Also, she was always listening, I think, to something that could not be heard in the shared space of conversation. She was not distracted or abstracted, but present, as well, elsewhere. You might call it "higher", this elsewhere, but I would not want to give it that label. The other quality I want to describe is that she

was both incomplete, unfinished and yet she was whole. She took a step and then came the question, what next? I never knew. She did not know. I am grateful for that quality of being unfinished in her because it is my hope for staying in touch with her now. I have had years of sensing her awareness of what is beyond the immediate, what is over the horizon, of letting one clear step become the unknown next. It could be like that when she was cooking or gardening as much as when we talked or touched. Because she was whole, she could let go, she could disappear but leave a stream, a conduit, flowing, open, behind her.

On my walk in search of the dingy skipper I passed through a group of old, tall Scots pine with thick soft milky-green grass underfoot. The patterned cracked trunks passed by each other as I walked and between them I saw her, I caught glimpses of her in the dappled light. It was not odd or distressing. This was the right place for visions, this protecting grove, with the strong, slightly angled trunks, and the needled shade of the pines.

Pilgrims have returned. I spent one evening this week with a thin middle-aged woman with a face of deep permanent lines, a mask of tiredness, and her grey hair pulled back severely in an untidy bun at the back of her head. She wanted me to show her round the garden and to tell her the names of all the plants. The common names and the scientific. She was fascinated by the Latin, repeating the many syllables of the long names in a quiet incantation. The sun was low but strongly illuminating the taller trees, while in the shade the first purple and violet geraniums glowed, emanating life. The appearance was so strange yet so natural, earthly yet a distilling, an intensity spreading into the ether. I felt there was some kind of being, of living wish, expressed in this blue magic of the geraniums. This perennial blue of June evenings, appearing each year, impersonal, was yet a deed of love, a hidden witnessing. My companion needed names. In the morning I found, by her bed, hand-written in tiny, spidery script

I am a woman who has done great wrong.
I am a woman without a song.
I am a woman who has turned away.
I am a woman without a say.
You do not know my crime.
You will know in time, in time.
You do not know my name.
Now you know I came, I came.

Each full-stop was minute but clear. Sweeping out the entrance I reached under the bench and found Margaret's gardening shoes, ancient sturdy moccasins with a dusting

of dry earth. I knew them so well. They brought her back. I have added them to the diaries and journals. They are part of her testament. I am glad they did not lie unrecognised any longer. Outside the front door there is a bramble arching sharply over the path. Each year I dig it up, root it out, think it conquered, but next year it returns. "And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven". (Walt Whitman), a line I never forget as I tackle the tough vagabond.

I have written very directly about Margaret. I do not, though, want to confine her, to define her. I want her to breathe and you who read this to find your own way to knowing her and not be told by me what to feel. But as I let some thoughts rise from my heart, to her, of her, I am with her, spirit with spirit. I hate argument, debate, long speeches. We conversed with each other, often, through the communing of each with our own hearts. That is the space of freedom, free of interference from all authority, spiritual or temporal.

WEEK 38 (Verse 11) 20.6.10

A young man stayed this week, following the pilgrim path, whose face had been severely burnt in an accident involving a chainsaw and a bonfire, some eighteen months previously. A sudden igniting of petrol, his clothes on fire, the explosion taking away his face. Many operations later he has, for now, to wear a clear plastic mask over his whole face, to stretch the new skin, to give his lost face some definition. He was remarkably open, intent on putting me at ease. There had been months of pain and isolation, then the individual incidents which had helped him discover himself again – a little toddler, his nephew, who had climbed onto his lap to touch his mask in wonder, a friend's wedding which he had dreaded but which gave him the chance to let go in dancing, a fellow patient whose face had been slashed by her drunken lover who believed the wounds, the insult, had released her spirit. He had been a P.R. consultant and had now found a job with a disability charity – a bit inbred, he thought, but a step on the way back.

This man, his face raw and lumpy
Now knows his skin – how deep, how thin.

He looks at himself each day in the mirror for a full five minutes, getting to know this face, getting to accept it. The worst is the fear he engenders, the blind panic when strangers catch sight of him unawares, stare horrified, gawp, turn. Then he must do the introductions, the apologies. He now knew a lot about skin, the layers, the ways of growth, of healing, the subterranean territory of the self. "When I touch my face I know I'm here". His eyes though are still almost lost in the distortions of the flesh.

This week I sent out a card of thanks to all who had written to me, or contacted me or come to see me. I chose a photo of Margaret from about a year ago, with her sitting at the kitchen table, looking up and round at the camera from the work with her hands she is busy with. A moment of surprise, natural and free. Together with thanks I put a verse, a little poem by Rumi:

The birds have flown to freedom,
the cage lies empty,
Your happy songs bring to me
the scent of heaven.
Please keep singing.

I realise this poem means two completely different things to me. I think of all her friends, all who love her, as the birds who sing and I am the one who is left with the empty cage. It is also a poem I address to Margaret, to the songs that I can imagine her to be singing. She is not just one bird; she, like all of us, is many birds, is many deeds and wishes, sparks of the soul. If she were not many birds she could not be one, entire, shining bird. I went round with Mo's to deliver it by hand. I was a bit flustered. I couldn't remember what the little boy is called. She thanked me, held the card to her breast, did not invite me in.

I went with Stephen to the church where we held the funeral, and to the graveyard which is some distance from the church. The church has modern stained glass windows put in about a hundred years ago by the laird in memory of his daughter who had drowned. In the east, behind the altar, there is a crucifixion with Jesus on a high cross and at his feet Mary with the baby Jesus, feeding the child, bent to the child, the suffering one above and behind her, the future speaking to the present, the present listening. To the north are low almost circular windows, in blues and purples and greens, the watery world in which the daughter lost her life. The windows have deep recesses and Stephen could climb into this blue illuminated space and drift. I think he was with her, there, but he said nothing and neither did I. We went to the grave. I had brought flowers, not with stalks, or in water, but a basket of roses, rugosa petals and heads, which we scattered over the clear shape of the unmarked grave, pink and white and deep magenta. We could hear a ewe and a lamb calling, on and on, and found a lamb with a front leg caught in a tangle of barbed wire dangling from the fence that surrounded the graveyard. The foot was badly cut and bleeding. It was a strong young creature who struggled but we managed to free the leg, Stephen holding the straining body, and we carried the already heavy animal to the farm nearby. I was exhausted but happy with the pungent smell of lamb on my hands.

A heron, flying to the east,
Right above the house turns sharp north.

In our shed, laid across the roof ties, there has always been an old open canoe, never touched in my time here. Stephen got interested in it and I managed to get it down. It was fibre-glass, or something similar, and seemed watertight, and there were even a couple of old paddles. It was small enough to fit on the roof of the estate, so we washed it down and loaded it and set off for the big loch. It was all so quick and spontaneous, and we were out on the water in no time. And, yes, we did capsize, thankfully not far from the bank. What a shock! What a terrible shock, it was – an old man and a boy floundering in the water, out of their depths. No life jackets of course. I can't remember what happened. I know all that mattered was saving the boy – and, looking back, I think he was intent on saving me.

We got to the shore. Even the boat and one paddle drifted in. Stephen was chilled, or scared. He started to shiver, but he was safe. I took him home, explained, apologised, Jude was very matter-of-fact, didn't seem quite to grasp how stupid I had been, how thoughtless. She wanted me out of the way. I went back for the canoe but it had gone. I looked out on the water and saw him drowning and me desperate to do something to save him. I could feel myself diving in. Stephen was not badly affected, I believe; no ill effects physically or emotionally. He drew a picture of the graveyard and gave it to me. He had added two signs by the gate, one saying "Keep out", and the other "No Ball Games". There are similar signs on areas of grass near his school, but not at the graveyard. The signs, in his picture, were large and very carefully drawn, the letters neatly spaced and aligned. Mountains filled the picture; there was little or no sky.

A dark strawberry, honey ripe, the first.
I cannot hurry to her with my gift.

I do not sleep. One night I went out walking, leaving the house about ten, just as the sun was setting, and walking through the night, mostly on forest tracks, in a big clockwise circle to the north, returning, with the sun long up, about six, I had the first quarter moon with me for a couple of hours but after that there was still plenty of light and the track was pale and stony and showed me the way ahead. From time to time I would stop but mostly I stayed with the sound of my footsteps and of my breathing and let the night carry me. I walked through tall mature trees and the caverns they contained, and across scrubby slopes. To the north there were shining wisps and trails of bright cirrus cloud long after the sky had turned to midsummer night. As I came home the dew was already gone. I did not eat but went to bed and slept a long dreamless sleep until well into the afternoon. The pilgrims were not my charge that day.

When I woke into the full heat of a summer day I felt very strange, invisible; that I am not needed, I am free. I am free but also that I can start again. I am standing watching. It is the moment in the dance when others will pass by at speed and you must move and join the flow, the pattern. But, I am not needed, I am of no use, and that truth is a liberation. No need to try, no need to make any more calculations. If someone took the canoe, I wonder did they find both paddles – difficult craft to handle when the breeze is unpredictable.

God has his back to me, singing softly
Into the distance. Can I catch the words?

WEEK 39 (Verse 12) 28.6.10

I have not really been here since Margaret died. I have been hovering somewhere in a state of shock, hiding perhaps, protecting myself possibly. The first thing that woke me was the moon, the shocking moon before my eyes.

The moon, gold at the full, rising woke me,
Brought home to me the sun's vast charity.

Just as we came to the longest days, this year one hot dry day after another, there she was, the golden moon reaching up above the valley ridge, pleading with me to get back in touch with the world, to remember words like 'hope' and 'believe'. Next came the roses, the wild roses along the roadside, in the woods, down by the river: the simple pure beauty, sharp and soft. I hear her speaking in the roses, not as a vague and fanciful whisper, but clear and direct like the touch of her hand on my face.

I find her in wild roses – pink prickled dog,
Bright-eyed at the wood's edge, arching the stream.

Moon and roses – both urgent. Third, Jude told me three things: that she has a man in her life and they are going to be married and then they are going to live in New Zealand. Tim is an agricultural engineer. It had all happened very quickly and she hadn't felt able to tell me about it all the time of Mum dying. She had told Margaret. I had two mad thoughts.

First, I thought she was going to ask me to come too. Then, at the same time, I thought she was going to ask me to take care of Stephen, that she was leaving him with me! She told me the plans, the details. It was all worked out. They were leaving at the beginning of September. She did not use the word emigrate. The third thing she told

me was that she had been taking anti-depressants for the past eighteen months but had now stopped. Funny thing was that I did take it all in but all the time I could only hear the tender way she had said 'Mum', very unlike Jude – all these facts and arrangements, and in the middle, her gentle recalling of her mother. So Stephen will not be here. He will know everything by now but I have not yet seen him. I need a little time to know how to help him, what to say, what to do. Two months. It didn't seem a big deal to her – New Zealand!

Old Tom from the village rang me to ask if I would drive him to a hospital appointment, I was glad to help. I had a long wait, while he was being seen, in a confined waiting area with no windows, timeless. People passed by, patients and staff, others arrived, sat, were called, returned. It was a limbo and also helped me, in some way, to rediscover myself. It helped me be aware of the mindless stupor I was in.

Eventually I took him home to his dark little house in the middle of the village. The teenagers gather in the shelter and on rough ground opposite, and he is frightened of them. He made tea and talked about the value of National Service – and how these youths needed to learn discipline and respect. He told me stories of their noise and antics, pointing through his window with its grubby net curtain. I did not know what to say. As I left I heard him carefully sliding home the extra lock on his front door.

Loud youths sprawl and shove across from his door,
Tom in the dark, alone in time of war.

I had one intriguing evening with one of the pilgrims, a warm still evening that hardly belonged to changeable climes. Peter was a tall, dark, intense young man, half Russian, but brought up in this country. He was a writer and traveller, a man of culture and education beyond his years, imbued with a self-possession and intelligence which I found fascinating. He wore his learning lightly; it was part of his nature, not something superficial, this sense for beauty, for telling detail, for illuminating connections and contrasts between events and people and phenomena. I went to my room with feelings of wonder and frustration.

At the big house this was the weekend of the annual Garden Party – a village ritual in which, in addition to a party for all the children from the local primary school, the laird invites a cross-section of local society for a strawberry tea in a marquee on the lawn. There is even a mixed-doubles tennis tournament. I had received a very considerate and sincere invitation. Dress is casual verging on the flamboyant, so that no-one need feel awkward and all are brought together by a shared love of this landscape and its traditions. The house is a conglomerate, with an ancient tower house at its centre and

substantial Victorian outbuildings and stables from a time of estate improvement. I enjoyed the refinement, made conversation, took a walk with the gardener who initiated me into the subtleties of hedge trimming and topiary. I handled myself well. It is a place of invisible substance, the power of tradition, the permanence of man and land together. There is something not quite truthful in this picture but this long afternoon and evening in the sun gave me a mellow time in which I could let my sorrow go. Margaret could be with me, not as a ghost, but as a character in a comedy, a human comedy.

My eyes are beguiled by the perfect stripes.
The lawns recede towards a vanishing.

This week it would have been, was, Margaret's birthday. Of course I knew it was coming but decided not to make anything of it, for myself. The day of her death is now for me the day to celebrate, the day to remember. I looked out a drawing of her I had done some months ago, and one of myself. That disturbed me, the self-portrait. Both the subject and the drawing were lifeless. I tried now to quickly sketch Margaret, just a few strokes of a thick soft crayon. I tried the same with myself, but nothing happened until, without thinking, I started to draw the two of us on the same large sheet of paper, thick matt paper with a slight texture. The two of us – not depicted doing something together; there was no narrative, just the gestures of head and face and body, side by side, just suggestions. That was my birthday treat, to discover us in these free lines upon the open paleness of the paper.

All day I watched her body unmoving,
Sun shadows slow shifting against thin bones.

The hours I spent with Margaret on the day she died, after her last breath, are ever more precious to me, reconcile me, give me a way of connecting before and after, keep her real. So much happened that could only happen at that time, in that place between the living and the dead.

This long day's ascent and slow descent
Is the coming and going of my life.

Another thing I did to stir me from this dullness was to get away from all this green and growth and windless calm. One evening became grey and I went down to the beach and walked along under lichen-cliffs as the tide came churning grey towards me. All was mineral, apart from the brown of seaweed and a few gulls and crows. Barnacles and mussels belonged more to the rocks than to animal life. It was like being in the desert, the sense of matter that slowly shifts and grinds and crumbles, a world of strong

shadows and stars beyond numbering. A family was collecting bleached driftwood for a fire. I want to protect Stephen, to be there when he needs me. That, I think, is now the strongest impulse in my soul – to prevent any harm coming to this child. I tried to write a poem that Peter would respect, even enjoy.

The latch is mended
On the garden gate,
New screws glint like stars,
Like ice, like slow tears
Shed on rusty metal, smoothed wood.

The hare is almost lost
In tall grasses,
She will find her way in –
No bother.
In disappointment hides a joy.

How can I let go, let her go, let go of her, trust?

WEEK 40 (Verse 13) 6.7.10

I am stuck in endless inner conversations with Jude, full of my fears and hurt, wondering why she is going, why she did not talk things over with me. I am so sad that I do not seem to matter to her, but why should I? And as these knotted conversations return and return, despite my best efforts to subdue them, I feel myself losing Stephen, and losing Margaret. Stephen I lose because my tongue, my voice, is lost. I say nothing out loud because these internal recriminations dominate. And Margaret I lose because, like a sudden thoughtless movement in the kitchen sending the woodpeckers to flight from the peanuts, my noise obscures her, sends her away, scatters her fledgling spirit. Mostly she has been with me, just the other side of the beauty I live with – rugosa scent, the darting wagtail, the setting sun edging grey clouds with brilliance – I trust in what comes from across the infinitely narrow, infinitely unfathomable abyss that separates my visible world from hers invisible. What comes helps me make up stories, true stories, about her, about her life. My quiet allows me to be creative. I have permission, but now all my dogged dissatisfaction with Jude is chasing her away. I am left with sentimental fictions and self pity. I hope they will stop before Jude and Stephen go or else I fear these bitter arguments will go on forever.

We make ourselves angels. We can
Create with what we are,
Take light from when the world began
And turn into a star.

Now, Stephen. I went shopping, chose an All-Blacks rugby shirt for him, and one for me; something for us to share. As I stood at the till I realised how ridiculous this was, put the shirts back in the right places on the rack, and left the shop. Then I found myself desperately searching for something interesting on the internet to show him when he came. No good. When he did come, and Jude had gone, a summer hailstorm saved the situation. As we watched the hailstones bouncing on the terrace and lying white for a while across the summer garden, we got talking about the reversal of the seasons and the significance of north and south, and got caught up in the strangeness, and made up various surreal scenarios about Christmas and winter, and summer holidays. I kept wanting to say something tender but something prevented me – for the best, I think, because for now I think I am feeling too sorry for myself to be able to support Stephen. For now he was full of the excitement, of adventure. He spoke a bit about Tim, Jude's new man. "He won't ever be my dad. Once we've gone there, I'll never have a dad". For now he wants the new beginning.

To live my life without secrets,
Watching the changing sky –
Lies confine, dishonesty lets
Imagination die.

One pilgrim impressed me deeply this week, Sylvia, in her mid thirties; she had been a ballet dancer but had had to give it up because of injury as a young woman and had become, developing her existing interests and skills, an underwater photographer, an aquanaut working both as a diver and in submersibles. She had just returned from eighteen months working in the Antarctic with a team researching the break-up of the ice-shelf and the changing breeding and feeding behaviour of the king penguin. Underwater she can dance again, she is at one with the ocean and all the life that belongs to it. The experience of life is intense, as is the sense that this vast oceanic being has been mortally wounded by our blind desires. She had a wonderful way with words – precise, poetic, restrained yet impassioned – she spoke and I listened and we were together. Now she wants to find here on the land, in the world of air, this same sense of a shared world in which the separateness of being has dissolved.

I took her seashells in my hand,
Each perfect coil and bowl.
I see her bending to the sand,
pick treasures of the soul.

To touch Margaret's shells is a big help to me. I remember the beaches where she walked and searched, eyes ready to catch a glint, a shape.

I have had an unexpected visit for which I am truly grateful. I have known John since boarding school. He was a couple of years older than me and for some reason protected me as a new boy. I was bullied for my dark complexion and dark curly hair (golliwog!). Later we rowed together and it was he who inspired me to study Agriculture, following in his footsteps. Late in life he retired from teaching and became a hill shepherd, work he still does though he is over seventy. Even now I think of him as my guardian, my protector. When we are together, we often enjoy silence – walking, reading, playing chess. It takes a lot to extricate him from his cottage in the hills. His care is both indirect, emotional, and also practical. He cleared out the larder with me, asked me about legal matters, checked the septic tank. He helped me print some photos and put them in an album. We went to a concert at his insistence. The first half left me cold – Elgar I think but the second half was the Bruch violin concerto, the soloist a young Japanese woman, very slight of build, but with strong full gestures of bow and body. It opened me up totally; I was in floods of tears – such relief! I was worried that I had spoilt it for those sitting near but John assured me that I had not been wailing out loud or shaking uncontrollably. The floods had been of the heart. Thanks to him I could cry. He's gone now – time for the shearing!

Clover – comforting – nourishment –
Busy the bee passes –
Deep-rooted red is resplendent,
White is sweet among grasses.

By the roadside as I walk I see the mature plants of Summer – foxgloves, yarrow, valerian, - plants of potent healing, plants that offer us astringent tonic. And clover belongs with them, the glory of the curling red, the more lowly white, spread far and wide, ready to give, restorative. One storm has torn Spring's growth from the trees – the garden was strewn with broken bunches of horse chestnut leaves and tiny conkers. John helped me to realise that I have important decisions to make, that in fact I have already made them although I cannot put them into words yet. There is a folk tale in which a young girl, investigating her murderous suitor, a fox, is warned repeatedly – “Be bold, be bold, but not too bold, lest that your heart's blood should run cold”. I think I

must be careful not to get ahead of myself, learn from John and his indirect approach, let resolves have time to gestate.

After I had my stroke Margaret devoted herself to my recovery. She talked to me, read to me, sang to me, got me moving, dancing, conducting music, reciting nursery rhymes. She was determined to reach me, to bring me back, to help me find my voice. Now I want to honour that effort by finding rest inside me and stilling the silent quarrels with Jude. I imagine sad futures. I want these stories to exhaust my fears, not fuel them. Then I will be able to keep talking to Margaret, trusting that she hears.

I walked in wind and sweeping rain,
A sky of sudden light.
Late she came to me in my pain
As day expired to night.

I was wondering about giving Stephen a tool kit, making the box myself but probably it is too heavy.

WEEK 41 (Verse 14) 13.7.10

Sylvia's stories and pictures of the undersea world continue to work in me. I am there in my dreams each night. Sometimes it is the warm world of the tropical coral reef, and at other times the cold fertility of the poles, the sea she knows so well, face to face with vast whales and the seething, sparkling microscopic life. I still have my Senior Biology prize from school, Rachel Carson's 'The Sea Around us', with its first warnings about pollution. Then the oceans seemed limitless, beyond knowledge, able to provide food and to absorb our rubbish and poisons for ever with impunity. Now we know more. The oceans have a geography and a life that we begin to understand. This huge reservoir of life has been ruined in my lifetime. My dreams are a relief from this shocking realisation. I feel safe in the mystery and power and beauty of the deep sea. My other school prize was Junior Latin, a gazeteer of Roman Britain which I still have although as a guide to archeological sites it is fifty years out of date. Rachel Carson knew so little, compared to us, yet sensed the awful consequences.

Soft rain has made a sea of fields,
Grasses spread, held by drops,
Each seeding head defined. Mist yields
To the sun. My heart stops!

Something was unfinished in John's visit, so I decided to go and visit him for a night. No point in trying to contact him because he usually chooses not to answer the phone. A letter would be too slow, so I went confident he would be there. I took the bus, two buses, the second a slow climb through villages into the hills, and then a three mile walk through bare moorland of heather and bracken, and occasional ruins of houses and steadings. John's dog came barking down the track. He was busy with his bees. He greeted me but I kept my distance. I loved to watch his absorbed attention, his careful movements, his pleasure in the task. This was him, he told me later, seeing how the hives were before the heather came into bloom, the most precious harvest with the promise of mellow deep-scented honey. We walked in the evening up the valley to the last ruin sheltering under a ridge and with a surprisingly large hawthorn tree in the lee of the intact gable end. John's presence helped me connect all the events of the past months, to know myself through all the shocks and changes, and to know that soon decisions would be mine to make. We sat on fallen stones and talked where once a family had farmed and one day had departed.

By dark age and insistent winds
Twisted spreads the thorn tree.
Her rigorous beauty rescinds
The dictates of decay.

I walked back by myself to the bus, fearful but determined. I am not going to shy away from life. When I got home there was a letter from a woman, Alison, whom I had never heard of before. She was a member of the Buddhist circle that Margaret belonged to and she was writing to share with me how much Margaret's love had meant and continues to mean to her. I gathered from the letter that Alison is an invalid, with a serious chronic condition, which she doesn't name, and that the two women had been very close and that, in a humble way she also suggested she had been able to help Margaret during her last months of life. She included a picture of two golden fish, rising up in arched movement so that their mouths and tails touch, and, touching, create a flower of some kind. I would guess it is Tibetan – meeting and freedom. I am puzzled about how they kept contact and I do not recall Margaret ever mentioning her. I wonder why she never told me. I am glad to know of this stranger who carries Margaret in her heart but sad to think there might be some difficult reason she kept this friend to herself.

Who will receive what I can give?
No-one waits for the lame.
She was the one who let me live,
Walk naked without shame.

There is a piece of amber which Margaret kept by her and often held in her hands in the last months. I sent that to Alison, with a rather awkward note. I put the two-fishes card in the bathroom where I see it when I am shaving.

A large, loud man from Nigeria stayed this week, a newly ordained priest who has been sent to work and study in this country. He has taken Jerome as his priestly name. I enjoyed his warm-hearted enthusiasm for life but we soon strayed into painful territory. Life for him is all about sin and salvation and judgement, divine judgement. One day he will stand before God and be judged. The old taboos were strong for him, particularly homosexuality. The Bible for him was intimate, minute instruction as well as divine, immutable. I found him very confusing – his energetic physical presence, mobile, joyful coupled with rigid thinking without any shadow of doubt, or tolerance. He was polite, respectful, but he filled the room with his vitality and conviction. His life led to the moment of Judgement that I suppose would eventually be the Judgement of the Whole World. Time is just what leads to the End of Time.

Swirling leaves, hot sun, a bright sky
Dapple my shut eyes' glow.
Yes – this would be the time to die,
Following breath's faint flow.

I have been having intense moments of inner conversation, with whom I know not. One was on the beach, with the tide out and miles of flat sand and mud with sky alive with racing cloud, and the wind loud. The world was big and flying around in it were elements from my life – people, places, preoccupations, a jumble but a mix that carried with it a voice, perhaps my voice, perhaps not, trying to tell me something. Later in the week I went to the grave and to the ruined Abbey nearby. I stood in the roofless building and looked through the huge arched windows of the nave, through their emptiness to the hills. In the shapes of the weathered and broken carving of the columns and doorways and the tracery of the windows there was peace and there was drama. Again the clouds were flying but now across this space of sky defined by the high walls rising round me. The voice here was singular. It was my voice but it was also John and Alison and it was Margaret. And it was more music than words – and then it went and I was aware of the warden trimming the edges of the grass with ancient long-handled trimmers, the careful click-click of the well-oiled blades, and crows flying to and from the tower.

When did I begin to love you?
A crystal winter dusk,
White our breath meeting in the blue,
Fierce root splitting the husk.

I went with Jude and Stephen to the beach, to the best swimming beach, to which you have to walk for a good half-hour. We had planned it for high tide and the weather was kind as the late afternoon became warm and calm. It was a happy day, a day of laughing and love. There are rocks at this beach from which it is safe to jump or dive at high tide so we swam and dived and played and shouted. Suddenly there I was in the water holding Jude and she holding me as we bobbed in the water with the sun shining on her wet hair and face, and then Stephen was there with us, between us, and we all tumbled under the water in a flurry of arms and legs. We made a fire and were silent, I think, for a lot of the time but it was a fertile silence with lots going on between us. And maybe there was more talking than I remember now. On the way back as the day was fading, there was a dead tree silhouetted against a violet sky.

A bare tree by the track – a birch,
Dead branches with dead ends.
No need for crucifix, or church,
On love it all depends.

I shall not forget the sparkling sea, their firm bodies, or the stark tree, witnessing us on our way home.

WEEK 42 (Verse 15) 20.7.10

Jack and Jill are away so I am back in charge of the place, with Hal to help for the week. And Stephen is with us too because Jude and Tim have gone on a short break. Hal is an energetic man. In his company I feel both stimulated and vaguely ashamed. He found my paints and a prepared canvas and he's created an exuberant flower painting from what he found in the garden – roses, nasturtiums, sweet peas, orange and yellow of simple marigolds - a tender, vivid work. At night, when Stephen is asleep, he wants to talk, declaim even. He reads to me from an anthology of radical writing. The time of the Great War is his period – the workers' struggle, with industrial capitalism at its most physical – ships, steel, coal. The conflict was obvious. Then he leads me through an endless recording of 'Lohengrin'. He loves Wagner, the heavenly, erotic power, the sublime, this other world which must remain a mystery. As the music plays he recounts the drama, describes the production he has recently seen, at times becomes tranquil, listening. I am not seduced by the music, but I love this man's strength and

individuality. And of course I see Margaret in his being, in the ways his eyes reach out to me.

I found a sad spirit caught in the gloom,
My own ghost, longing for light, wanting room.

Hal arrived on an old motor-bike, plus parts, which he has been stripping down. This has been heaven for Stephen. Most of the day they have been in the garage together while I potted and enjoyed being at home – Stephen and his uncle Hal, music on the radio, talking, laughing, Stephen cleaning and polishing and marvelling at the careful array of parts. It did my heart good to see this man and this boy happy and comfortable together, Hal and Stephen crouching by the dismantled bike, and by the end of the week it was back together and the garage could reverberate with the crisp dark noise of the renovated engine. One whole day there was rain and strong wind heaving and straining the heavy green of summer with a wild, even insane, force, like a dream in which the dreamer is immobile and cannot move. I could not get away from the summer storm until the liveliness and warmth of the house in the evening brought safety to my spirit – and by the morning the weather was gentle again though the garden was the worse for wear – broken branches, climbers hanging, sunflowers toppled but redeemable.

What is there left for my stretched heart to do?
In a silent house love's chances seem few.

I have been busy about the house and garden, even trimming the old hawthorn hedge. What a shock the thick growth of the year was to me, half a yard with thorns already forming. All this has happened, the sun is descending, the days grow shorter, during these few timeless weeks of her leaving and my grieving. Stephen came with me one day, with some gentle persuasion from Hal no doubt, to look at the trees we had planted in the winter; planted and then left as life became her last weeks. Stephen enjoyed the discovery, the clearing of the weeds, the comparing of growth, the identification of the dead. Most had survived but the numbers did not matter. The field seemed content, familiar. It was a day of warm sun among burgeoning white cloud and a breeze through the long grass – a day of harmony, and the trees which had not made it through our sad, dry Spring belonged with and softened my mourning. I looked back at the house, at the window of the room where she had died some fifty days before. Without Stephen I would not have made it to the trees, not have found such consolation among meadow flowers, and under a turmoil of cloud.

Hard work leaves me with a tired kind of peace,
Weariness undoes sorrow – knots release.

One night I sat with a sad woman, about my age, who had come on the pilgrimage because her daughter had converted to Islam and she herself was a traditional Christian believer. She spoke of this daughter, a mature woman, as though she was a lost soul, a foreigner, whom she had no part of now. The pilgrimage was a sign of separation, of rejection. She also spoke of it as an act of penance, both for her daughter, seeking absolution for her, and taking on the guilt herself. The walk was her act of contrition, expressing her sorrowful responsibility for this impossible sin of her daughter. The woman was in a state of shock. She needed to repeat interchanges between the two of them, the challenges and rebukes. “She said, ‘God is so close I cannot see where’, but I say that God is waiting at the end of this path...she says that God has many names, she started to tell me them, but God’s name is God, ‘hallowed be thy name’.” All the way along the pilgrim path she carried the dead weight of the daughter she had lost. I asked her if she had a photo of her with her. She was surprised and irritated by the question. She was no longer a person with a face.

I lack nothing, am happy, am not free
For she is close, this close, and lost to me.

I was very glad Hal was still here when Jude came – with Tim – to collect Stephen – my first meeting, and I would have found it very awkward, but Hal created a party atmosphere with the rejuvenated motor-bike to celebrate and his flower painting to unveil. Jude loves and looks up to Hal and I had enjoyed this week’s homely interlude so much that Tim and I got on well from the start. I had no idea he was a fiddler, a traditional musician. He had his fiddle with him and was persuaded to play. Once he got going any embarrassment went. One tune led to another, Hal leading the way, and brought us close, the five of us and one or two pilgrims who had arrived. I want to give Tim Margaret’s cello, perhaps for him, perhaps for Stephen. I wonder if they will take it? I think they are sending a consignment by sea. I am not sure how to ask, who to ask. I hope they will take it. The party came to an end with strange rhythms of intimacy and reserve – Stephen throwing himself on Hal, Jude and Tim discreetly close, Stephen keeping back from Tim as Tim reached out to him, Jude and Hal making fun of each other, me happy but detached, knowing I must find my own way into the future.

Her spirit has gone out into night's gold.
She is one star, she is a thousand-fold.

I remember meeting the President of a small African state, a man of integrity and personal power who impressed me deeply. Our conversation was not particularly important but he bore himself with such an active presence that was both intensely personal and also an impersonal resignation, almost innocence. And a week or two later he was assassinated and this man of honour was gone. Gandhi is the supreme example of that selfless strength which silently exposes the lies and fears of the corrupt and the powerful. I think of these people now because in my own small way I am hoping to do something noble with myself, with what is left of my life. Either that or I shrink or moulder. If life is just my memories, my personal experiences then all that I have is loss, and gain, and loss, without rhythm, or purpose, or history. Without history, my heart will sink. Today the apricot-yellow rose outside the kitchen door has begun to flower; another dozen buds are showing intense touches of colour between the green unfolding sepals. I will hang Hal's painting just as it is – big and bold and fearless.

Each rose with scent distinct, a fresh play,
Like the smell of a loved house, a new day.

Hal spoke to me about the parable of the prodigal son. He says that out of it he can create a novel; the story expands in his imagination into endless, fresh detail each time he considers it. He showed me a painting by Rembrandt of the moment of reunion.

I am the son who spent it all,
I am the other who resents,
I am the father forgiving,
And the servant, deep in shadow,
Caught in love's strict give and take.

WEEK 43 (Verse 16) 27.7.10

I have had lengthy communications with brother Andrew. He is spending the summer at a spa in Germany, "taking the waters", with lots of purging and cleansing. He is happily absorbed in his treatment. He has been researching our family history and has sent me vast amounts of information about nineteenth-century court cases in Madrid and connections across the ocean to Chile. Details of cargoes and dowries but no clarity about our father's death in the war or about our maternal grandfather who disappeared during the Civil War, disappeared under something of a cloud. Our mother would describe her childhood and she would sing songs that he had taught her, sad and comic

and strange, grotesque folk ballads and folk songs; and she took on something of him as she sang, his mischievous gravity I would call it. Andrew was asking me to recall a game we would play when we were young, a kind of battle in which we each had a den in the woods, a fort, and we would seek to attack and occupy the other's, taking him captive. There were all kinds of rules which he wanted me to remember or confirm. I remember nothing about it. I can picture the woods, a sandy dell and watching fox cubs playing, but I have no memory of dens and battles. He will not believe me.

I had a day-trip by train to a country house with a collection of objects d'art from the Far East, assembled by a banker who made vast fortunes out of the opium trade. It was there that Margaret saw a very old, massive, engraved wood-block, showing a seated Buddha, which belonged to the very earliest days of printing. The figure was so clean and substantial and yet dissolved into the immaterial, into the strokes and swirls which the carving had left behind. To the eye the block was like weathered stone, and alive like ancient leather. This block was holy to Margaret; it expressed her way of living with the everyday and the ineffable. It was what took her towards Buddhist practice in her last years and I wanted to be near it again. I defied the instructions and leant over to touch the raised patterns carved over a thousand years ago in a monastery in China. On the way home I had a long wait at the small station on a still warm evening. One train did not run and I had to sit and wait for the next. A young man was also waiting – just the two of us. He could have been eighteen or twenty-eight, an innocent unmarked face but with a transparent fixed mask upon it, a mask of damage and self-protection. He had a partner and a child and he had come from the town, following some very slender hope of a job, with a cottage, on the Estate in which the house I had visited sat. His talk led from one plan and disappointment to the next. I could feel him asking something from me – a confirmation that it was worth trying, that life wasn't always going to be stacked against him and his hopes. His whole being seemed thin, undernourished, but there was a toughness, a resignation, a numbness that would see him through. I can feel him now, half-turned to me, wanting some comfort – which I did not give, did not know how to give. After the long wait in the evening warmth, when the train came we did not sit together on it. The interlude was over. The world passes by a train in a very pleasant way; there is intimacy in the yards and gardens you pass, yet a distance which the tracks and carriages create. Sitting in the nearly empty train I felt old, but grateful to be old, freed from responsibilities, unencumbered. I don't think any detailed incidents passed through my mind but I felt like a man given his freedom, acquitted, whose failings and regrets seemed trivial, taken up in the motion and noise of the train, the glowing countryside shaped into fields by walls and fences, the open heights beyond, the sky colouring towards sunset. I need no longer worry about what I had done in my life or what I had not done.

I have been with Tom to the hospital again. He is very concerned to present himself in a favourable light, polishing his shoes, cleaning his glasses, brushing his jacket. And to maintain an air of dogged stoicism. But he doesn't really listen to what the doctor or the nurses are saying to him about immediate arrangements or longer-term possibilities or prognosis. They do their best, me too, but he is overwhelmed and bluffs his way through. This time the hospital was unusually empty, and a gentler humanity in the people could be felt, but I was still aware of Tom's incomprehension and contained panic. When we got back to his place, the distress about the young people in the village came to the fore instantly. Here was this man, who had been left for dead at Dunkirk, now restlessly returning to his window to pull aside the net curtain to see if any of his persecutors were hanging about. I tried to shift his attention somewhere else. He is a man with wide interests – once upon a time. Now his world has shrunk to this petty fear and to his little terraced house as a prison. As I left he said he hoped he wouldn't see another Christmas – “blessed oblivion, blessed oblivion”. It was the first time he had smiled.

Jude and Tim took me to a Ceilidh where Tim was playing in the band. It was some distance away so there was no-one there whom I knew, but I was made very welcome. in a way that has not happened before. I kept expecting to see Margaret appear in the swirl of the dancers as they passed by me where I stood or sat at the side. Each time the expectation was as vivid as the last, if not more so, even though at the same moment I was telling myself it was not true, but, yet, there she was, that arm, that shoulder turning towards me out of the crowd! I cannot remember seeing Jude happier or more beautiful than as she danced. Mostly she was not dancing with Tim because he was playing, but that did not matter. I think she was glad I was there though I bet it was Tim's idea to invite me. There was such a deep mix of peace and exuberance in her movements. I danced too, mostly so as not to spoil things by watching her too intently. Her happiness did become that missing part of me that was discovering Margaret in the dancing throng. Tim is a shy man. This was a fine way for him to tell me about himself and about their love.

I cannot say when it was that I made the decision that I would leave here – some weeks ago, but only now can I voice it to myself. The deciding began deeper and only now could be recognised, could come into the light. The evening I realised this I sat in the kitchen and watched the weather change over a period of about two hours.

This late evening is light's sole, silent song.
Gulls with the blue, sun with the trees, belong.

Across the bright west, dark clouds rose and spread –
Far blue above – my life hangs by a thread.

A gold moon in a deep sea sky. Below,
White mist lifts and leaves a space of slow.

Heavy cloud grows across the trees of night,
Like a forest of rain drowning out light.

At last the downpour starts with heavy drops
Then all the darkness bursts, and stars' pulse stops.

I was not content, not moving, listening to this music of the sky and light, a little hypnotised but aware, waiting on board, with a calm sea, for the voyage to begin. Yes, as the cloud came over, and night fell, I felt the sea, I felt myself being drawn towards the sea. The clearing out must begin – and Margaret's diaries must be destroyed.

WEEK 44 (Verse 17) 31.7.10

I bought some peaches today; big, ripe peaches from Spain. I have eaten two and two sit, their furry skins deeply coloured, ready with their juicy flesh for me tomorrow. I have spent many hours this week deep among the currant bushes, absorbed into the garden, picking the dangling fruit. Then today, in the shop, there they were, these foreign fruit, full of a stronger sun, and, I felt I needed the intense flavour of the Summer's heat. Here already there is a touch of autumn as the days grow shorter and the glory starts to fade. A young hare, perhaps something of an orphan, has been my companion in the garden. He appeared one morning as I sat in the kitchen on my own, outside the big glass door washing and grooming himself, and enjoying the short fresh grass and the exposed clover. He is about the size of an adult rabbit but so different in shape and habit, with a defined head and neck and elongated ears so mobile. Those ears take a lot of cleaning, outside and in, as he bends his head to the ground and used, alternately, both front and back paws. He is much more upright than a rabbit, and always on the verge of a quiver or a shake. When still, sometimes, his nose shows his alertness, while at other times he seems to be gone, in a stupor. The marvel of the first day has become almost commonplace by the end of the week. I now expect to see him and he has become almost tolerant of my presence and my movements. And the cat has accepted him too, and he the cat. I observe him often, for many minutes at a time.

I do not know why he has come and I fear each morning that he will not be there. The other companion to my garden life this week has been the bees in the great lime tree. I cannot really see them, just hear the thick hum of the bees on the flowers. It is as if the whole tree, reaching high above me, were a swarm, a ball of bees. As I stand beneath its dense green I feel lifted by the unseen activity and desire of the bees' vast harvest. The rowan berries are colouring. Perhaps that is the sign of autumn's coming that has registered in my heart. When I have not been peacefully buried among the fruit bushes I have been, for the most part, contented in my room, going through an emptying, a mental clearing-out. Having the intrepid little hare outside the window has helped.

I have been reading Marcus Aurelius and perhaps imagining myself in my tent on some military campaign, life pared down to the necessities, ready for action. He creates calm in himself and thus in me. In one passage he analyses life. Either all is impersonal Necessity, or a gracious Providence, or Chaos "without design or director". If the first, he must accept; if the second, make himself worthy of consideration and help; if the third, be gratefully aware that you have within you "a guiding Reason". He faces each possibility with equanimity. I think I know all three and often they are mixed and confused, but this week, in my room, among the bushes, I have recognised Necessity and Providence and Chaos and that each has its rightful domain.

As I picked the berries I knew I would not be the one taking them out of the freezer, or the jar of jam from the cupboard shelf. I have spoken with Jack and Jill. They are willing to take over, and the trustees, I am sure, will be agreeable. Hal phoned, not knowing my decision (outwardly at least), inviting me to come to stay, and telling me about a flat in a housing co-op in which he is involved that is becoming vacant and which he thought might interest me. As we talked I was having a separate conversation with myself, imagining a life in the middle of the city, leaving this house and the memories and reminders of Margaret. I felt both profoundly sad and also excited, stretched between the fullness of the past and the glimpse of the future. I will go to stay with Hal in two weeks time.

In the garden there is a sculpture which was made by one of Margaret's friends in her Buddhist group. It is a thick concrete slab in which are carved two footprints, stylized so as not to appear accidental, with very clear, smooth definition as though of someone walking with light but firm direction. They are the Buddha's footprints, the mark he has left in the world. I believe it was a common, early way of imagining his being or nature. I keep it clean and free of stain or growth of lichen or algae. It will stay here not really because of its weight, though it would be hard to move, but because it is the thing that will help me to stay connected to here and to Margaret. My imagination will be able to land in those footprints, wherever I am. It was made thick enough that it cannot be

broken by frost or a dropped hammer. I love to feel the indentations – heel, ball of foot, big toe.

We had a couple stay this week whom I remember with a tender awe. The husband, Bill, in his mid-sixties was quick to tell me that he had been diagnosed with dementia. He and his wife, Shirley, had decided to undertake the pilgrimage while he was still able to cope and as a way to stay engaged with life. They were bravely humorous about their life. Bill was, as far as I could judge, moving between different degrees of self-knowledge about his own state, his changing levels of forgetfulness and confusion and unpredictability. He liked the path because it was always different and all he had to do was to keep walking, so that the confusion, or loss of personal continuity of awareness, could be absorbed into the vicissitudes of the journey. For now they could exchange banter and gentle mockery of themselves, each other, their situation. “I’m still all here, really”, was his refrain. But there was a startled fear in his eyes behind the wink and the chuckle, and despair in her voice as she gently nagged and cajoled him to get his boots on in the morning.

I wanted to take Stephen to a favourite place of mine, a little island in the middle of a loch not far from here which has a medieval chapel, in ruins, hidden now among trees, and remnants of a burial ground. It is where I had hoped or imagined Margaret might be buried. The loch belongs now to the local Fishing club and I had arranged to borrow a rowing boat. Depending on the wind it is about a fifteen or twenty minute row. As we were about to leave Jude asked if she could come. I was taken aback and, for a moment only, resistant, then was able to welcome her into the expedition. I took both oars once we were there and in the boat, Jude sat in the stern, and Stephen was behind me in the bow. It was Jude who was the most obviously excited – by the wind and the water and the boat, and by the mystery and power of the hidden ruin on the island and the adventure of landing and discovery. I was suddenly aware of how seldom, if ever, I had done anything like this with her as a girl. Her childhood seemed a blank. I could remember no times of shared exploits, of playful companionship. It was shocking. Stephen, I think, enjoyed the trip, enjoyed the sense of being alone, being left alone, while his mum laughed and pretended to hear ghosts in the tangled growth of the burial ground with its half-buried fragments of worked stone. On the way back Stephen sat beside me part of the way and had a go with an oar, but he was not tall enough. He did not seem to mind but returned happily to his place in the bow.

To mark my move into the future I have written a different kind of poem:

My heaven is not floating, fluffy,
and if I speak of angels, I will not be fake.
With my eyes shut I see
my own scruffy landscape –
bright peaks, abandoned shafts,
moods, dreams – all are my charge –
and slippery things I fear and cannot reach
until I stop and let them near.
My labour is dear to me – digging and mending –
saving candle-ends for winter.
I create what comes to me
with a little love, the odd laugh,
dealing with facts and splinters,
combing the tide-line on the beach.

Silently trees grow, earth turns.
For shelter my self yearns,
and heaven – for now it's all an act,
it's all my acts.

Marcus Aurelius writes that nowhere can you find a more untroubled retreat than in your own soul. I try to make that effort at least once a day but so many small and insignificant events distract me and disperse me. But in that retreat I find the freedom which I sense that Margaret has given me in her death. She opens a door for me.

WEEK 45 (Verse 18) 8.8.10

“Do you want the moon the play with?” – words of a lullaby in the dark. Safety, a safe place. When she comes to me, joins me (though I do not see her) then I can hear the man and the woman (who are us ourselves, Margaret and I) passing by, going through the house, living and looking for something, talking in happy whispers (and the treasure is the house, I guess).

“The stars to run away with” – when I go to sleep I go to join her and we look down to the Earth, on her vivid colours, blue to the east, red to the west. We fly, she and I (and the treasure is the heart, is the heart's light). And those figures who hover, who bend over my bed and sing softly the lullaby, they are the invisible ones, us in the house of our love. And when I wake, opening my eyes, it is they (she and I in our old lives, in our comings and goings) who have woken me, told me it is time to get going. And the Earth is again just green, beautiful comforting green-safe, a place of safety. I get up and find

a spider in the bath, very dark and with long legs, and at night moths bang against the lampshade, the light hanging from the ceiling, if I leave the window open, and the curtains open (and I must, I have to), and the light shining (hanging from the ceiling), facing the last sliver of red in the west, below the piled slate-grey clouds. The clock ticks unusually loudly and our voices, their voices (she and me) are somewhere out there in the garden, the secret garden.

Marcus Aurelius is now my companion. To Himself he called his writings as he camped gloomily in the Danube marshes; less pretentious than Meditations (the modern title). He recalls the dead and asks, of their dying, “how, pray, are they the worse for it now – more especially those whose very names have been forgotten?”. To be no worse off for having died. Of course! This week the inn has been busy – an old feast day of Mary yesterday brought many people on the way so it has been a week of hard work, of scrubbing vegetables and washing floors and the pleasure of domestic work and hospitality. And that work disappears into our guests’ bellies and their smiles and satisfaction, their well-being and nothing for me is more healing than that. All those pairs of boots which have passed through. This Mary feast is not the modern cumbersome doctrinal feast – Assumption, Dormition, Immaculate Conception – straining to connect Spirit with Matter. This was a feast of the seed, I sense, of the mystery of conception, of bringing new life, new truth, new intentions into being; the purity, once natural (now needing our attempt to develop it) that can bear something new, allow it to be born, be borne. The house is empty today, the celebrations are over. It is a day of slow-moving, ever-changing cumuli passing over the house, the fields, the trees with silent strokes of light and shadow. Physical birth can only be immaculate; conception can only be pure. And the heart becomes pure, if we just keep on trying? Or forgetting?

The young hare is still with us, early in the morning outside the kitchen, feeding, washing and grooming, and then returning at odd times through the day. I also see him on the road, running and stopping in ways that could easily lead to disaster. I look out for him now. He has become my concern. And there are wrens again, calling in the garden, glimpsed in the thick roses. The winter did for them, and for months there have been none to be seen or heard, but the large-voiced lightweight is back, spread from some remnant, some little ball of wrens trying to keep each other warm through those frozen weeks. The penguins shuffle round as they survive the winter, so that they take it in turns to face the cold, or return to the protected centre of the huddle.

I wanted to give Margaret a plain stone, a simple arched shape, without a name, or dates, or words of love, but it is not allowed. She must be identified; her place of rest, her place of departure clearly marked, and she, too, by pieces of information. Always

on the old stones the name of the house, the farm as well as the relationships. You went to your grave from the house of the family. I wanted to ignore all that and just have the vertical stone with its sharp arch pointing to heaven. It is not important to have a place to find her here. I think that is true for me for I see her face, I see what others cannot. I am not interested in historians reading names. All I want is the shape.

There was no opportunity for quiet conversation with the guests this week because the house was so busy. One woman took over on one evening, a slight figure, pale-skinned and with black hair and large dark eyes – a natural goth! She was a writer, a comedy writer, not a performer, but working for comedians and comedy shows. Some people talk as though they are telling a joke; the punchline is foremost in their thoughts as they work their way towards it. She was not like that. She was darting here and there in her thoughts and responses, exploring whatever anyone said, or revealed about themselves, drawing out the possibilities for humour, absurdity, contradiction, misunderstanding. An utterly restless mind, I think she was drawn to the pilgrim path both as a source of material and as an escape, because I could sense that she was troubled by her own spinning creativity and was trying to dissipate it, still it. Of course everything she said about herself was also unsaid, contradicted, undercut in the moment of her saying it. That kept the conversation alive; the inquiring on the go. She was not talking all the time, herself, by any means, more keeping things moving, seeing what would turn up. Her fascination with people, their lives, their language seemed to hover on the edge of love and the edge of disgust.

Stephen cycled here on his own for the first time. I knew in advance of course so I could watch out for him coming – and there he was about forty minutes after setting off, waving as he came freewheeling down the hill. Later he managed to tell me something that was troubling him – another first, another achievement. His teacher, when Stephen had told him about going to live in New Zealand, had made some remark about it being the safest place to be when global catastrophe struck and civilization collapsed, that it was a place where you had a chance to survive. This remark, however flippant, had stuck in Stephen's mind. He wanted to understand. He was frightened. I was shocked by how clearly he could express himself as much as by the strength of his emotions, his fear and anxiety. I started with trying to present the facts, as far as I could, the arguments and agreements and attempts to make things better. I was getting nowhere and I knew then, vaguely, what I can see now more clearly – that he didn't want knowledge. He wanted love, the surety of love. I did not give it to him, not directly anyway. Perhaps it cannot be given directly, to a boy of his age. He needs to feel it, not to be told it. I shall miss being part of his growing up. He did not cycle home as well. Next time?

I was cheered up by a visit to Sandy. I took him some veg from the garden. He was our neighbour, living in a dilapidated cottage with his sister which had not changed, I would guess, for half a century. In the last two years his sister died, he had a long debilitating stay in hospital (-acquired infection!) and has moved to a council maisonette in the village. Sandy is deaf and now has a huge tv screen on his wall, on all day with the volume up very loud. This is part of the furniture. It stayed on throughout the visit, making communication between us even more difficult. The house is miserable in a way that the dark and damp cottage never was. And vegetables hardly belong there, though he was until two years ago a constant gardener. But he has not lost his sense of humour, his mixture of wariness and generosity, an open-heartedness in the face of life which he expects is out to do him down, or sell him short – but he will be loyal to those he knows and trusts. You see all this in the smile and the tension in his jaw as he listens. He could never quite cope with the strangeness of my name and always calls me just “Toe”. “Keep going”, he told me was his aim, “keep going, Toe, that’s all there is to it”. The vegetables were not a good idea, a bit beyond Sandy now. It should have been a bowl of soup, a stew.

WEEK 46 (Verse 19) 15.8.10

They will fly on my birthday, barely two weeks, rearranged because of a likely strike. Nobody noticed it was my birthday to start with, least of all me. My birthday really does not matter anymore. I feel free of the need to trace the pains of my life, to keep on constructing a biography. I did go back this week – with Stephen, to a hostel, a youth hostel, high in the hills to the east of here. It was due to be closed a few years ago but a group of old-time hostellers bought it, renovated it and keep it open despite its unpopularity. I wanted to go on a last trip with Stephen. The hostel is close to a famous waterfall, and there was the promise of spectacular shooting stars. I had not been there for fifty years and it was the same wood and corrugated-iron building though now with cars and vans outside, rather than bicycles and earnest pipe-smoking youths. Stephen was withdrawn, the waterfall did not impress, but he came alive in the kitchen, as the different individuals and groups prepared food, and the community of strangers started to form. He found some boys of his age and we joined their family for our meal. Later there was a fire in the field and people came and went, waiting for the meteor shower. I stayed by the fire while Stephen explored and played with the boys he had met. I too went off into the dark when the shooting stars began – the wonder of the waiting, the sudden streak, the beat of the heart, the after-image, the brief trail against the slow permanence of the night sky. Stephen loved the fire, by now glowing hot embers, and the jokes and fun with the dark all around. I got talking to a young man, whom at first I found very distressing. He was open, friendly, but spoke in broken phrases with strange emphases, the words voiced with what seemed like pained or angry insistence and

accompanied with stabbing movements of his body or hands. Yet there was an innocent joy in his face when he was attentive, or listening. He seemed to me to be frightened of speech, of meaning, of saying anything definite from himself, about himself. He could only deal in fragments, and these would rush out of him, one leading on to the next, with him becoming ever more frustrated until it all subsided and he was silent. The silences were lovely and he enjoyed me telling him stories from my life, and we shared our love of trees and wild places. Later singing started and from somewhere a guitar was in his hands – Mark was his name – and a new gentle dexterity came into his body and being, as he quietly finger-picked and strummed to the songs being sung, and in between as people made suggestions and tried to remember words or how a tune began. The tension and discomfort were gone. Stephen was in a dream by the dying fire which still had that mobile glow with ripples of heat and occasional hisses and cracks, and the meteors still falling, spreading across the sky. In the morning it was grey and windy and the world seemed confined, with us all crowded into the dining area sharing our plans for the day but still touched by the magic of the night. Mark was shy and awkward in saying goodbye; sitting on the log, side by side, facing the fire had freed his troubled tongue. We gave each other a clumsy hug.

The memories I have had these days have been of moments of clarity when I look upon my life. As a whale dives and its flukes arch into the air and then flow through the surface of the sea, returning to the deep, a pure, smooth circle of calm water is left for a short while, formed by the disappearing of the tail-fins. A window (or is it a mirror?) between two worlds and I have had moments, more than moments when I could look through, times when I was able to look up, to see through this smooth surface of my being, for once transparent, to my being above. One was long ago in a little chapel on an island to the west, looking through a narrow arched window to the aquamarine sea and the mountains of the mainland beyond, purple and green and grey. The pattern, the landscape, was me. Later in life I went into a walled garden which I had not known, before entering, and which had gone wild, had not been worked for years and was a tangle of beauty – borage and tansy and fuschias and vast spreading roses and clematis and honeysuckle. The walls were there, the greenhouses, the paths could be seen or believed in, the art and hard work of years could be recognised, but all now abandoned. But I can remember feeling myself so powerfully present in the shock of this forgotten wonderland. It was death and birth. That is why I am not bothered with my birthday.

The young hare comes and goes. I think he must be an orphan, left to his own devices earlier than is the norm. He comes down to the house most mornings to graze on the clover and grass and wash and groom. He is less and less troubled by me, the cat, the noises of the house. Three weeks and he is part of my life!

A young Polish woman stayed this week – a tall, graceful woman with a reserved demeanour and soft, slow speech and deliberate irony, that I found a bit confusing at times – was she being funny or not? She was obviously a woman of education – her English was impeccable – but she worked as a cleaner in London – a high-class cleaner for a specialist firm servicing the sensibilities of the wealthy, not one of the invisible night-time army of illegal immigrants. She liked the anonymity, just doing the job. This pilgrimage was in honour of her grandmother, who had recently died, almost ninety and who had taken part in the Warsaw Uprising as a young woman, acting as a nurse. The heroism of her grandmother, her participation in a great tragic event, was very important for Kasha. She had done all she could to gather together the records of her grandmother's actions and testimony, and had researched the events of the Uprising. For the grandmother it was probably just confusion and terror, and the long years of getting by and upheaval since the horror of the war. The war in the East of Europe was a different thing, total desolation, annihilation, blood-saturated land. That world of frozen armies and starving peasants is an imagination of the East that has been there, dark, endless, all my life. I went to Poland in the late Seventies, just as Solidarity was beginning. I was in a time of crisis and I sought out this region of suffering. I went to Auschwitz. I wish I could remember its Polish name. I would like to give it its Polish name. Now there are hotels and picnic tables, Kasha tells me. Then it was almost empty, decaying, the buildings starting to crack and sink, the railway lines to disappear, the fences to fall, the evidence of the panic of abandonment, the crematoria themselves burnt, blackened, tangled, twisted metal. Now it is being preserved, she tells me; the ancient plastic toothbrushes, the spectacle frames. Conserving the crumbling Bakelite. As it all disintegrates I can believe in it more strongly. I remember the railways, standing by the end of the line and imagining the tracks stretching across a continent, the intricacies of points and branch lines and signals and connections. The rhythm of the wheels passing over the joints, the rhythm of necessity and adventure. I miss that endless rhythm of the train passing over the gaps. There were more crows than people the day I went to Auschwitz and I can remember taking them for vultures. The dead cannot be in a museum.

I have an army suitcase of my father's – possibly the only thing of his I have. It has his name and rank and number stencilled on its top and an old leather strap to keep its clasps secure. This week I have been going through my books and I have decided to keep no more than will fit into this ancient case with its beautiful patina on the stained and scuffed leather. It has been an easy task. The chosen ones have selected themselves. I was never in any doubt that the case would not overflow. Books are what gave me myself – covers, titles, the mystery of chapters leading to the turning of a page, eager or lingering. Margaret loved to watch dancing, contemporary dance. She

liked to go alone. I did not appreciate it. I spoilt it for her. She loved the intense focus of the movements, the dancers' hard work, precision, practice, and then all gone in a turn, a twist, a leap, bodies passing each other, holding, carrying each other, tumbling, rising. I could experience this in her, after the performance. She was enlivened. She did not want to talk about it. She loved the dance. It was beyond me. I did not understand what was happening. "Don't ask", she would say. "Don't ask me".

Six of the small trees
I thought were dead have come alive.
Still time to thrive
Though autumn's long declining.

Auschwitz

You want shock and disbelief
At its very existence.
I want it to disappear,
Consigned to hearts by telling,
Truer than persistence.

WEEK 47 (Verse 20) – 25.8.10

A week in the city staying with Hal and already I am used to retiring into myself and allowing the privacy of others, the maintaining of a personal interior made easier nowadays by wires and earphones, screens and phones. The speaker, the one I watch, is connected to people and places unknown to me, unknown to those who stand in the same queue, pass in the street, sit on the same bus. Others are absorbed in books as they make their regular journeys. No need to be attentive to where the train is – it is known unconsciously. I like to read the titles – 'The Forgotten Continent' (an exploration of Atlantis), 'Lies our Leaders Tell Us' (an investigation of modern conspiracies). A little girl, in a perfectly neat dress and hat, a dreamy intensity in her eyes, is studying, on the tube, her little book of Hebrew, mouthing the holy words under her breath. Twice this week I have seen a man and a woman kiss in the street; long, abandoned kisses, the two entwined, oblivious to the hurry of the people streaming by, stepping round them. The city is scary but its arrangements seem designed to tame the savagery that is both troubled remnant and lost ideal. Life is fierce! But, also, so many tiny gardens in the city, hints of paradise, days of childhood play remembered in the dark tunnels.

Religious women go covered,
The wordly ones go bare –
Hearts blank, or full, or with secrets
Untold, unnamed, unborn.

Hal's flat is by the river, the top floor of a converted warehouse. He has one large cluttered room with everything from books to bike parts, and bits of his plans and dreams scattered and forgotten. His bedroom, by contrast, is bare and white with just a bed and an old delicately-patterned Eastern rug. My little room at the back looked out, not on the river, but at a wall about two metres away, a brick wall I have grown fond of through these days. My room has a large full-length mirror which Hal must use for something, though it seems most incongruous and I didn't like to ask what it is for. I love Hal's inner fire, the way he relishes hindrances in his life, his inner power and his outer force. He is adamant that he will not be sharing his life with anyone – in the conventional sense. He is deeply committed to his work but, after all that engagement and giving, he wants to be solitary. He needs to live alone. But I do wonder about the mirror. Perhaps he never actually looks at himself in it, but needs to know it's there in case he ever needs to get a visual check on his face, his eyes, the light in his eyes, what lies behind his eyes.

My eyes are drawn into the city,
The city fills my eager eyes,
Flickering lights, sirens
Rush to accidents
Beyond my
Blinkered
Sight.

On Sunday morning I went with Hal to a park, to a café by big glasshouses with different atmospheres – palms, orchids, cacti – little worlds, defined exotic environments preserved inside, as the northern weather passes by. A group of friends have a casual arrangement to meet there each week to talk and play. Many of Hal's friends are now parents, have moved out of the city centre and now rarely come. Others have joined the group, other solitary characters, who come for jokes and games and, also, here and there, two slightly apart, heads close in conversation. There was a healthy mix of public and private, people behaving as citizens, talking politics, and also making friends, taking care of each other. Friendship is so important an element in our mortality. We help each other to speak of growing old, to acknowledge death, as well as catch frisbees, kick a ball, solve a crossword.

Bright morning in the park,
Idle conversation,
Spread out on the tired grass
We are timeless, ageless.

I have had good times on my own this week, up early, out late, excited and exhausted by turns. I went to a piano recital one lunchtime, very civilised, a young man playing, first, some short pieces – Liszt, Schumann, Chopin – then Beethoven, the Diabelli variations. The Beethoven was too much for him. He took it too seriously and so it lost some of its imaginative power, the sense of invention and flow. And why do people applaud so long and hard? I am not used to this intrusive applause. I also went to an exhibition of beautifully crafted little objects in various metals – mostly copper and bronze with silver and lead. They were small semi-abstract but intricately realised “boats”, ancient boats with foil sails and ropes of fine wire. There was, for me, the feel of the underworld, the journey after death, fashioning the vessel for the crossing of the river. Are all imaginations of the afterlife ways of celebrating our home, our family and friends, the life we love and do not want to lose? These boats were precious. Their being small made them more real. I was able to come close to something whose size suggested it was distant. Each was separated from the viewers by a vertical Perspex sheet. You could have reached over and touched but it would have been a violation of the clarity of those burnished vessels which could have sat in the palm of your hand.

Activity means
Imbalance. If I keep still
I hang from blue sky.

There was a roof light in my little room and whenever I looked up it seemed as though I always saw a plane passing over. I was never sure if it was taking off or landing. I became weary of this continual traffic in the sky, this almost unnoticed toil. I met many of Hal's friends and colleagues this week. There is such pressure, such energy, concern for method and efficiency, to get things done. Yet, they are so careful with each other too, not to impose; to cultivate a public closeness and sociability, yes, but so that another private closeness, for each, can happen, sometime, somewhere. Life for them is what they make it, no more and no less. My life has been so intertwined with the Life of Nature. I have relied on sun and moon and stars and birds. They rely, but not too much, on companionship. From my little room I kept hearing a magpie up above, among the roofs, but I never saw it. It was the right bird for this world where you needed to be on guard, a bit sharp. Outside the entrance, between two buildings, there

was a large pear tree, bearing many large green fruit. Some had already dropped into a fenced and rubbish-strewn patch of ground, accessible to no-one.

Wary of night's streets I watch
For slight shifts, flash in shadow,
Making sense of strange spaces,
Imagining sudden blow.

Hal has a friend of about my age, a reporter, now retired, who still has his regular seat in the pub and who waits for the next story as he has waited for fifty years. He holds the history and the geography of the city in his mind, as he talks, watches the bar, lifts his glass. We get talking about the times he had had to go knocking on doors after a death – “death knocks” is what he called them, hundreds of such knocks – wanting information, reaction, and being on the receiving end of anger, anguish, the need to speak, tears, irrelevant facts, rash confessions.

Hal also showed me the place he thought I might think of living, moving to the city in late autumn. He has been very kind to me. I will give him my decision this week but I have already decided to say yes, to go back to the city, to its grubby mystery. I will live differently in the city; every celebration has a hint of irony. I shall miss the night sky and lying snow. Perhaps I will find I need a mirror.

WEEK 48 (Verse 21) – 31.8.10

They are in the air now, somewhere far to the east, beyond Europe. They have gone, flown. Coming back from the city – so much has happened in the intervening days – coming back I had a moment of despair, of grief and loneliness. It was on the bus which took me from the station to the village, an empty, rattling bus that threw me about as the driver hurried to get the run finished. The walk from the village began in exhaustion but by the time I arrived home I was saved. And saved is not too big a word to use. Margaret was with me, in this familiar landscape. I had brought something valuable back with me from the city – a tiny space inside me, fragile, but free, with new possibilities that were almost lost on the jolting bus. But then I felt Margaret in my tread on the road, reaching each bend, each small landmark, reviving memories and connections. She was back beside me though I did not look to catch a glimpse. As I came near to the house I saw and heard the swallows, busy and noisy, chattering and feeding over the marshy field then clustering on the long sweeps of the cables.

Swallows on a wire,
Close gathered as I come home,
Longing to be gone.

From the birds, old and young, gathering themselves for a huge journey, I took a sense of innocence, of a new beginning although they were fulfilling ancient instincts. I stood still before going into the house with its lighted windows and familiar comforts, and the desolation and emptiness I had felt so strongly in the jolting vacancy of the bus became transformed into possibilities. I was unencumbered. I can let go of past mistakes and not be bothered by the fear of making more now. I had all the time in the world. Before going in I left my bag and went up the hill to the high lochan. The full moon was rising and the air was cold and fresh after the grime and mugginess of the city. The reflection of the moon in the water, the still water, was hypnotically clear though slightly shifting, and behind, below, the image I sensed the thick depths of the water, far deeper than the actual shallowness. I lived through the week with Hal in my memory, recalling the good conversations with him and others, new thoughts, warm connections, people encountering each other in a random way and offering each other accommodation, tolerance. In the lonely magic of the moonlight I felt grateful for the joyful strength of companionship. Then, down, my shadow obscuring the path, to the lighted house.

Mist in the evening –
A round moon, clear sky, trembling –
Mist again at dawn.

I sat one night with a guest, a woman of about my age, who asked if she might draw me as we talked. She had been engaged in drawing plants, specimens she had picked during the day and kept fresh in a special case designed for that purpose. She set to work on me and I was able to look at her as she drew me though I was not facing her directly. It seemed to me that her absorption in her task made her almost transparent. I could see the life in her eyes, her hands. And as she looked at me, and drew, I sensed that she was seeing something which I could not see – behind me perhaps or above me – a great wide-winged bird, hovering, which could have been her spirit, or even mine. Then a young man came in. It was her son. I had not realised that she was not alone. She changed instantly into one responding in an ordinary way, with interest, consideration. Between us, as she drew, there was something almost inhuman. She left me the sketch. We had sat together for quite some time but the drawing was simple, only a few lines, apparently done in a minute or two. It grows on me; it shows the quality of her seeing, the depth of her vision, her awareness of the bird, and of my bones beneath the skin.

From across the world, almost daily, comes news of one disaster after another. From here each seems unimaginable, the end of the world, but when it is your child who has died, or your house that has been washed away, it is, of course, devastating but also an event that is accepted. This has happened. I see the evidence, I smell the evidence. It is reality as well as my personal tragedy, my loss, my dead son. Is it possible to free oneself from these ties of fate? That is what I want, I think, to detach myself from necessity. There are those pilgrims, in the East, who, growing old, slowly, very slowly, desist from eating, from feeding the heat of the body, so as to make their dying still an expression of a life, an act of integration, a decision. Once, in Sudan, I parted from a friend. I was setting off on a dangerous road, a journey that needed me to be alert, and lucky. He went round a corner and found himself in the middle of a riot and was dead twenty minutes after we said goodbye.

One turned up a cul-de-sac,
One appeared in a sniper's sights,
One so cold with broken glass,
Three men dead, forever young.

Nothing is so sad as to outlive your child.

We have had the wedding, the birthday (mine) and their departure. The wedding was a modest affair, their friends mostly. Jude was so joyful, Jude who will always be something of a stranger to me. She has found her man. Stephen and I were the outsiders, me the old one, he the young. Jude has prepared me for this. The reception was at a hotel with a swimming pool and she had suggested that Stephen and I might disappear for a swim. I didn't think it would work, but it did. Stephen led the way. Perhaps he realised, somehow, that this was our chance to say goodbye, to be together. It was a small outdoor heated pool, very luxurious, and we had it to ourselves on a breezy afternoon. It was small enough that we could feel it belonged to us, but large enough for us to play and not feel too closely pressed together. The water freed me of my age, and here was this boy coming close, touching, pushing, diving, splashing, needing the physical closeness to this old man who had always loved him and from whom he was parting in two days time. We were both in the water, our heads just above the surface, when Stephen spoke from behind me, quite close to my ear, "One day I might have a brother, in New Zealand, and he wouldn't know you, he wouldn't have you as a granddad". This was so obvious, yet I had never thought of it, that of course Jude would have more children. It was a shock, but a good shock. Wisdom was working in Stephen to tell me this, to prepare me for this while they were still here, while I could still look at Jude and take her in as a young woman, a lover, a mother. We talked about what it might be like to be a big brother. He had thought

about it, worked out the problems, the unknowns, the demands, the puzzles. I just listened.

Their birthday visit to me was also their farewell. I was not going to the airport – the first flight was late in the evening. They brought me a present, a drawing done by Jude's friend Rosie – of Tim, Jude and Stephen. Tim is playing the violin, Jude is mixing ingredients in a bowl, Stephen is just in the act of kicking a football, his right foot about to make contact, his left arm raised above his head, his eye on the ball. The picture is not one scene, the three figures are separate but belong together on the thick white paper. It is beautiful. I cannot decide if I want to cover its delicate texture with glass or leave it vulnerable but with the feel of the pencil and crayon so close to my own fingers and face. Here it is, right in front of me, while they are now further away, high in the sky, or landed in the heat of the desert, on the other side of the world.

Whence comes my sharp mind,
The questionings of reason,
The small claims of guilt?

WEEK 49 (Verse 22) – 7.9.10

My nephew Stephen has been in touch by email from Ethiopia, worried about his father whom he has been unable to contact. I could reassure him on that score – Andrew has been on a six week silent retreat in a Buddhist centre in Denmark and is completely incommunicado. This I knew but what Stephen could tell me is that Andrew has a new partner, a woman more than twenty years younger than him, a large jovial woman going by the photo Stephen sent me. Quite how the new woman fits in with the silent retreat beats me. Andrew defies conventional expectations and constraints. I sensed a deep distress in Stephen. He is working very hard, both treating patients and training local health workers and doctors. He himself describes the conditions of the displaced people in the camps as unbearable, that his work insulates him, the pressure, and that he is frightened what will happen when he stops, though stopping seems impossible. The day's tasks consume him. I hope the act of writing will be helpful to him. As he wrote he seemed to be gaining an understanding of his situation which he did not have before. Exhaustion can be a kind of protection.

Sunflowers bend
Heads darken
Seed hoard
Heavy borne.

I have started to say goodbye to this place. Six days this week I have rung and arranged to call on one of my neighbours, all people I know well without being intimate, and I have walked over to their place and told them of my plans. Each journey, half a mile, a mile, took me past familiar landmarks that are part of my landscape – the big spreading beech scarred by the loss of a huge bough, the fine old stone bridge that crosses the burn but now leads nowhere (the road having been re-routed), the path through the birch wood which is blessed by thick bluebells in Spring. I did not come that way once this year. I made a pattern by my week's walks; I traced, on my home territory, the shape of my life. Each meeting so particular – the young couple with their pottery, and, the day I called, a sick child clinging to her mum, the eccentric scholar working on the same detailed catalogue that has been his task for twenty years, the shy retired librarian whose voice is a distant whisper. I told my tale, we drank tea, talked of vegetables or offspring or the weather, and then I would leave with a handshake or a hug. It has been a great help to me – to lay my decision out on these small journeys, to hear my voice confirm the coming changes.

I saw the hare one last time,
Up to the road he ran then
Turned (never before) uphill
Departing for pastures new.

We had a big event among the pilgrims this week, a proper String Quartet making the journey, including the man carrying the 'cello on his back like a rucksack, in a light plastic case. They had a couple of helpers as well, these four young Czech musicians, two couples, the violinists two sisters, and the other two the men who were their partners. They are following the path, playing in halls and churches each night along the way in honour of the girls' father who died recently. Any money they raise is going to the charity which runs the hostels. They played in our village hall on a quiet, soft evening when we had a few showers of warm plopping rain, the first for many days. They played a quartet by Pavel Haas, a composer I know little, with the lovely title 'From the Monkey Mountains'. One movement had a vast, peaceful solitude that was both inner and outer, an unnameable presence of what you would name as God, rising up out of my beating heart. This music then turned into something spirited and social, a party, a dance, that was just right as a consummation of this mystery, and earthed it in the energy of motion, of opposition and attraction, hands and legs and lips.

Late sun
Butterfly wings
Spread wide in
Settled weather.

It was Jude's birthday this week. We did make contact via Skype but I found it very unsatisfactory. I looked into their lives, saw the room, the bodies appearing and disappearing but it seemed more foreign and unavailable to me than a voice from a phone, or handwriting on a page. Stephen came and went and was beyond my reach. I did celebrate her birthday in my own way. I invited some old friends from the Chess Club, now defunct, who used to get together regularly, often in our house, though Margaret was no chess player and kept out of the way. We had refreshments and played some chess – there were eight of us in all. I enjoyed the hushed restraint in the room, each one a friend of sorts, with their own good qualities, even their own style of play. There was a lovely combination of privacy, concentration, silence and, later, sociability, laughter, exchange. This was my way of celebrating the birthday of my daughter now on the other side of the world – here the eve of her birth, there already in full swing. I felt that our happiness and sharing would reach her, would ray out to her more strongly than messages. I did mention it was Jude's birthday. That helped them with any awkwardness about Margaret, about coming here and her now gone.

Day's end a dream
Lilac valleys
Translucent sky
Cold stars coming.

Elephants return to the skeleton of a dead relative, a matriarch, a daughter. They come and they touch the bones with their huge, sensitive feet, their dexterous trunks. Land and memory are one. When those young musicians played there was nothing stiff, nothing that hid the very emotions that the music could stir, no tapping with the tip of the bow on the score laid out on the elegant music stand. They were brave, they were gypsies as well as finely trained, disciplined musicians. Let souls embrace, but not just shadows of souls, out there, having left our bodies behind. Joy and sorrow, joy and woe belong together, are one. To live with the day is to embrace both daylight and night, light and dark, not just to long for the light when you find yourself in the dark, or yearn for the dark when pure light overwhelms you. They played Brahms too, a disjointed piece but powerful. Were he and Clara lovers – that's what we want to know – was there the pressure of flesh, the untying of strings, the spilling of seed? That seems to matter although we know from the music that these two were as intimate with each other as two people can be, that their souls met and knew one another wholly.

A wren in the shed
Tiny spirit panicking
I ushered her to light.

Years later, with Clara dead, Brahms knew he was dying but did not want his doctor to tell him anything unpleasant. He was dead within a year. He did not want to know.

One of the chess party invited me for a day out at a beach some distance from home. Her elderly mother came, and also her daughter who is pregnant; so I was with four generations of one family! It was a benign, mellow day of late summer sun and flat calm sea with ripples and eddies of light playing on the peaceful flow of the tide. We took folding chairs and a picnic and the hours passed in gentle conversation and observation – the tail-end of family holidays on the sand, a few dinghies longing for some wind. I helped her daughter up from her chair at one moment and the bump of the child she is carrying came in contact with my abdomen for a moment. It didn't matter at all but I was struck by the firmness, the lively hardness, of this growing child, this swell of being. I can feel it still. It went right through me, the energy of life, of weight. The swallows have gone. I have not seen them through those clear, settled days. A north wind had blown to begin with. Perhaps that took them. Now the skies are empty and free of commotion. The old mother said little, but enjoyed it all, with a surprise at being there. I wrote a poem in her honour:

Old age – if they ask
I will ignore the question,
No more of my story, please –
The hospital and the hearse –
All spit and polish –
The sky darkening
Children's voices reach
Across the water
Lost in the bushes –
No fights, no lies
No need for old enemies
No more, please,
No more.

WEEK 50 (Verse 23) – 11.9.10

Many different threads to my life this week. I have been like a muddy river with eddies and silent flows. The sediment will settle. This week I have let the sadness in, ceremoniously you could say, with small rituals of grief. It is not sulking, skulking, in the shadows but is here with me, a guest not a dull dog.

The ache of her leaving,
Of separating, lasts –
Lower than the heart,
It hurts in my guts,
Love's dark flooding.

This release began with listening to Berg's violin concerto, by chance, on the radio. The music is tortuous to begin with, turning this way and that, then opening out into the measure and space of a chorale, a minute or two of peace and resolution. There was no need for it to last longer – a minute or two of resurrection is enough. This piece was a lament for a young girl dead, and Berg himself, bedridden, about to die, composing quickly.

A death stirs us
Like nothing else:
Not here, not here,
Eternal search.

The brief peaceful beauty of the music was hard-won. Grief is love's work, a summons.

I have also been busy thanks to Simon. Simon is the new recruit to the team at the hostel, a retired union official, post office, "communication workers", a man of method and persistence. He has helped me get my affairs in order, pack my things, proposing and disposing. I half expect him to be asleep at the foot of my bed when I wake up he is so much my faithful servant. We also had a day doing repairs to the big shed – mending the gutters, patching the putty on the windows, realigning the track for the sliding door; each job thought through, reusing materials, finding bits and pieces to improvise a satisfactory job, taking our time. This week has felt endless and yet also like the span of a single day from one moment of falling asleep to the next through the quiet of the night, the pink of dawn, the journeys of the daylight, the rest of evening. I was Simon's mate, he the one in charge. He says his life has been one of holding back, assessing the impact of what he intends to say before he says it, negotiating, hiding weaknesses. He enjoys now to be free, to be dealing with tasks out in the open. Two weeks plus until I leave, and thanks to Simon I am in the clear. These last two weeks in my home can be a holiday. The grief is a tender gift, it does not eat me up. Home is not now a stale place of death.

An honoured guest this week has been a gaunt Indian gentleman, a true gentleman with grace and perfect manners and that precise and old-fashioned use of language that comes with a certain kind of South Asian education. He has been a hostel keeper, one

who cares for a rest house, a dharmasala, used by travellers following some kind of spiritual journey, inner or outer. There was a beautiful reserve in him; his questions and responses seemed to come from far away, or, perhaps, they were already there waiting to be voiced before the remark of mine which prompted them. But this serenity had something powerfully sociable about it. His gaze was of bemused acceptance. "The world is as it is!. I will look it in the face. It will go on as before, people have their ways and will not change. Let me see how I want to deal with them, how I can be of help". The world for him was one opportunity after another to see what was in his power – to do, to be, to know. I learnt little about him on the conventional, personal level beyond his name and the facts of his working life. I had never thought of our hostel as a rest-house before. A house of virtue too is what he called it, and I felt that was right for what has lived here, in the home Margaret and I made, in the welcome we gave. And I remembered her mending the latch on the gate when all the strength was gone from her body. In this house virtue has not been about behaviour or propriety; it has been about truth, about people walking freely through the rooms, passing through, arriving and departing, and the virtue of the house has been the medium in which they have moved, that which has allowed each person to come into being as they move.

Just now the trees are beginning to turn and the architecture of the trees is becoming defined again. The light catches the leaves and I can find my way to the depths. In Spring the dancing transparency of nature takes me beyond the visible, out into space. This drier autumn truth gives me depth, my own depth. Simon and I worked in the garden too, clearing, sowing some green manure, thinking of next Spring. I will not be here. And, of course, the robin came, not yet red-breasted really, but eager, anxious to be part of things, to see the open soil, to be there with our working. I told the watching robin that I would not be here when the serious work began of singing and nest building. Margaret helped this be a house of virtue, a house that allowed people to be free. I am now free in a different way. I am divesting myself of responsibilities and connections. And the third thread of this timeless week, together with the busyness and the grief, has been flashes of my freedom, sometimes frightening, intolerable, sometimes exciting. I dreamed I was in a bright-blue rowing boat on the open sea. A monster rose out of the deep, lifting my boat on its back. Next, just the remnant on the beach, the broken, bleached ribs of the boat, but inside the strong scented flowers you can find in sheltered places by the sea, purple and lilac flowers with a powerful scent, growing in the broken carcass of my boat, the scent held by the curves of the boat and me looking in over the gunwale not wanting to disturb this secret garden. I am not sure what is taking me into the future, this strange alone freedom. I do not have plans or inclinations or intentions that I could put into words. I could disappear and no-one would notice, it seems, but I feel as if I have a kind of mission to be invisible.

A child stands in autumn sun
The wide world at his feet,
Trepidation and sharp thrill -
Bright clouds between darkened hills.

Distant pleas across the valley,
Ewes and lambs now separated
Entreat lost comfort -
Lambs here by me,
Ewes away on the hill.

As rose hips redden
From orange to blood
Rogue magenta blooms
Float occasional.

The swallows have come back -
Sixty-five on the wires
In a gusting east wind,
Surely soon gone for good.

One night, late, I found a small body on the road, warm still. It had been hit by a car, it was somewhat burst. I was confused. I could not tell if it was my hare or a stray rabbit or even a cat. I laid it on the verge and left it. Next day there was no trace of the body, just an insignificant stain on the road when it had fallen. But I thought, in the light of day, remembering the feel, the look (in the dark) that it was a rabbit. The next night, more than half a mile up the road, there she was, the hare, the daft hare, startled, stopping, starting, darting under a gate into a field. It was definite. A sighting, a reappearance. For now, she survives. Before I think I thought of the hare as he, but now she is she. I was wrong about the swallows. They had not gone.

And I wanted to say about the monster in the dream – at first it was under the boat, under the water, and terrible but its appearance as it emerged was no more than grotesque, in fact comical, pathetic. A rubbery mask.

I went out into the evening garden and there the hare was. I have not seen her properly for over three weeks. She has grown. She seemed at home, knew her way around, was almost accepting of my presence. I am sure Simon will remember to paint the windows once the putty dries.

WEEK 51 (Verse 24)

15.09.10

I am inside a rainbow!
Close she is below me
Enfolding my eyes,
Her colours floating round
My own bright iris shine.

Yes, the rainbow was in the valley below me, surrounding my field of vision, drawing me in. It was just what I needed for it was both exciting, matching my own mood of release and anticipation, and also peaceful, helpful me feel a calm beyond my busy brain. These are now my last two weeks in my old home. I feel them like a holiday. I feel myself freed from old responsibilities, and in danger of losing touch with reality! Margaret is close but I can feel her moving away, going out to sea, and I can feel, too, that I could use my life, its disappointments and resentments, as a way of flying to her for comfort. It is important for me to free myself of injuries not accepted, of injustice suffered. If I continue to hold on to her in this way I will not be true to the way we trusted each other in life. I want to keep walking, on the hills, between the tides, to prepare myself to be a pilgrim, and to keep close to the visible world and let her live for herself. So I am recalling old hurts and hoping I can just let them be, look them in the face, and let them dissolve, fly away. I do this as I walk hard into the weather.

The curve of the bay far below,
I see and feel the thin waves break,
The close wind buffeting my head
And crows hoarse on the crags behind.

Wet pebbles glisten,
The dry go dull.
Surf's surging listen,
Your heart is full.

A pregnant woman stayed last night, the swell of the child just appearing. I watched her this morning sitting by the open door in the kitchen, looking out into the shining morning. She was looking deep into the world from which her child was coming, the sunlight bringing strength and quiet into her being, surrounding her womb with truth. I want no angels separating, separating – suddenly the gulf, my life evaporating. I will not exaggerate the claims of love in order to confirm my doubts about the greater nature in

which we rest. Our love has been moderate, not asking or giving too much, appreciating the hand on the shoulder, the strangeness of a smile so, now, she can still talk to me, tell me that there is no more need for me to hide, to take life as a punishment of some kind, to conceal my faults from terrible angels. This house stands open like the face of the woman with child. She shines but does not keep apart, does not become an image of a beauty beyond the earth. What else can compare with this fertility, this giving birth, this pure painful work?

Roll and surge of the blind sea
Finding the empty beach.
Against soft grey and green
One white gull beating.
Far out a slit of light.

After the pregnant woman came a tall well-built young woman with a tiny baby carried in a long, simple length of cloth, the child pressed between her breasts, snug in a nest. This was perfect union, the new one released into the world, now feeling the movements of the mother in a different way, feeling, even if distantly, the air, the light, the abundance of the earth. The pain of giving birth – what has that to do with dreams of paradise? And paradise now means blind sacrifice, suicide, blown to bits. I hope I did not ask Margaret to be the one who hid things from me. Is every lover a mother too, taming the storms, lighting the comforting lamp? No more easy questions – she and I were friends, allowing the other to explore the interior world, the private passions, to begin as an individual. Through my life I have been glad of simple tasks and here in this house of rest I have been helped by chopping vegetables and logs, cleaning floors and bandaging small wounds. These honest tasks have quieted the panic which hovers at the margins of my heart. May that noble young mother help her sleeping infant cope with the creatures of the night.

In the dusk I am one with the bronzed bracken.
The sheep just lift their heads, touch the salt air,
Do not stir as I pass so close.

As a child I was solitary. I watched people and kept apart, played alone, kept the world at a distance. Africa warmed my heart, brought me back into the circle of firelight, but I had forgotten about love, about loving, until Margaret put her hand on mine. There is no one skill she taught me but I feel her as the one who took me by the hand, or who placed her hand over mine, and guided me in the task of living, of doing some little good, of being kind. That little baby bound to his mother's breast, what do the rough jolts on the path do to him? Will his mother's foot slip on the scree, will she stumble? I

hope his mother's boldness will help him love the sharp rock, the narrow ridge, love the danger. As a child, as I stayed apart, I was trying to keep myself safe, untouched. Margaret's hand has gone. I am going to be alone, and now I am old and stiff, but I do not think that I will be afraid in the same old way, afraid of shadows on the stairs, of loving, of losing my footing on the mountain paths.

A sail out to sea at last light
Caught in night's coming calm.
I cannot tell her size, her strength,
Landscape gives no measure,
She by dark a beacon drifting free.

20.9.10

I have memories of rooms, as a child, rooms filled by a figure who is not there, a forbidding spirit, who will arrive unannounced to punish and berate, who will sweep in and make me freeze in shock. At last, thanks to her dying, I do not fear the one who will come striding through the door. I have that fear under control after all these years of not quite realising the nature of my forboding.

Wet footprint on the warm flat rock
Dries out before my eyes;
That on the firm sand has deep toes,
Stays till the salt wave sweeps.

Bill and Joan came to stay for the night and their visit coincided with a troupe of four performers who were following the pilgrim path, doing shows along the way – circus artists, clowns, acrobats, jugglers, a wonderful mix of ages and sizes – a sad, big man with an air of inertia and melancholy, a nimble, thin man with a dark moustache, a younger couple, man and woman, muscular and deft. They did a show at a local castle and we three went along, Joan giving Bill a commentary because, of course, he is blind. Bill has been my friend for nearly fifty years but had become, I now realise, closer to Margaret. I began to find Joan and Bill's intimacy irritating, the delicate understanding that flows so openly between them, the refinement of their sensibilities as they share an experience such as the performance in the ward of the medieval castle. The performance was so subtle – the older, sad clown could take the mood to the edge of despair, the certainty of failure, the abyss, and then let his thin side-kick, through his foolery and cheekiness and wiry strength, rescue the situation, to then allow the young couple to display their skills and daring, all done with a casual ennui which would suddenly explode into virtuosic passion and flare. I left with a humble gratitude for my

own meagre skills, for the mistakes I have been able to enjoy and overcome, for the jobs I have just got on with. Late in the evening the performers were in our kitchen silently digesting the show even as they were dismissing its significance. Bill and Joan were again the sensitive observers, enjoying their closeness which Bill's blindness has led them to have. Why should I mind? They are good friends. All I really want is to let them live in my heart. Why do I get envious? I am drawn to the beach everyday as I go through these last days of the rest house. On the beach the prospect of freedom.

Soft waves flooding soft sand
Disturb my balance as
I walk through shallows' swirl,
Follow the skeins of surf
Eddying at my feet.

WEEK 52 (Verse 25)

21.9.10

In eight days I will leave and this week ahead is my final preparation. I want to leave with nothing to hide. I want to leave in freedom. This week is still the search for freedom. In the city, the place I am heading for, in that week of a month ago, I felt the freedom of anonymity, of all the faces on trains and buses who become a mirror for me, and me becoming a mirror too, a bit glassy-eyed, absent, protected by the speed of things, the racing stream of impressions. I want another kind of freedom as well, beneath that surface, the freedom of my own choosing and doing, feeling myself as energy, action, motion; not as substance, fragments. When I am truly alive in my actions and decisions I am also able to observe myself – as though I had already died without being aware of it and could now both be and see myself.

Up on the hill – mist
Dampens my spirits,
Lose heart in the gloom.
Why this path? or this?

Bill and Joan left me a book – about an unknown artist, a refugee in the 1930's who spent the rest of his life in obscurity in a village in Lancashire, teaching and painting. Simple, living nudes are what impressed me – drawings and paintings with a fine harmony and balance but also, always, something restless, suggestive of some reality beyond, but not separate from, the loved body, the body wanting love, the person waiting for love. I shall miss the certainties of nature, of trees and seasons in the raw,

and with the certainties come mysteries, for none of us knows how a tree grows. But to run one's hand along a smooth rail of oak, like the one on our stairs, is to know numberless hands, is a secret door to a solidarity with those who have gone, and that is a freedom, a freedom of knowing.

Fine stays of midday sun
Lance the dappled clouds
And touch the muted sea
With daubs of shining.

22.9.10

Thanks to Simon I am back in myself, with my feet on the ground. We went on a long exhausting climb to a remarkable iron-age settlement on the very top of a mountain, with clear remains of the ramparts and the circular dwellings, all in dry stone, visible in the peaty heather. Here people lived, survived, two thousand years ago. The climb had cleansed my head, asked of my blood that it go surging to my muscles, opened my lungs, and out of that immediate feeling for my own life – keep going, keep going – I could recognise the simple reality of those ancient folk in their meagre existence. Simon asked me about Margaret and my inner wanderings could dissipate as I told him about her, gave him the facts, shared with him our life. We sat on the sharp stones, high above the world, and I could soberly tell my stories afresh. I wonder what they did with their dead? A special cairn where bodies became bones? What kind of inner life did they have? Was all their meaning laid out in stone, and in the arcs of sun and moon? Our task is in the inner space where we create with what we're given.

Thin dark cloud patches moving
Fast across the slower moon,
A blotchy veil turning the full
To a shadowy tremor.

23.9.10

I am tired after yesterday's climb and I am limping. I feel a little as if I am back in the time after my stroke. Then I was blessed with a strength, a will to be healed, that was given to me by grace. I shall never forget that gift. Now, older, I think I have to work harder in myself to find, or generate, recovery, renewal. Those words aren't the right ones because I am both looking back on my life, and then turning and looking through death. I am not so concerned about my identity but I am so aware of time, the sun's journey, my journey. A man stayed last night who reminded me of a scarecrow – not

because of his scruffiness, though he was scruffy, but because of his stiffness and innocence. Like a scarecrow who was intended to be scary but was in fact almost invisible, the birds perching on his shoulders, small animals at his feet. And his feet seemed not to touch the ground. He dangled. I met him in the garden where he had just helped himself to a bunch of red roses which he was displaying to the evening. No hint of a request or an apology: the roses were there for the picking. He wore an old three-cornered hat; it could have been a sailor's or a priest's. It belonged in the costume cupboard. We talked about magic and chance. As he talked he danced round the darkening garden with the red roses.

Scattering butterflies
From brambles at cliff's edge;
Red and black flicker for
Warm juices, purple fruit.

24.9.10

I shall miss the simple things that are part of this house, part of our lives here, things that are absorbed into my being – the bridge I made across the burn, the garden gate, the apple tree which was tangled and diseased when we arrived and now, after two or three years of hard pruning, and several years of regeneration, now stands with a good crop nearly ripe, the apples glowing like holy flames on an altar. In this place my grief too is a simple thing, an acceptable thing, as real as a fountain or a window. There is a bowl which Margaret made which means a lot to me. I decided to bury it in the garden – and did so. But I was not at peace with it lying there, dug it up, placed it by the rose bush, the one the scarecrow picked his bouquet from. Strange, he made a deep impression but I cannot picture his appearance, his face. His memory will not stay still. I look out at the shining apple tree. Only once will it be so, will I sit with the fruit hanging as it does now. Only once, only now, but if I accept these apples as I accept my grief then the tree will be forever, will have a measure of eternity. I will not be preoccupied with the Beyond. The robin darts from perch to perch with strong wings and sharp snatches of song. When I went to dig up her bowl at first I could not find it. It had disappeared into the vastness of the earth. Hands are made to shape bowls. Bowls are made by shaping hands. She is there in the space of the bowl nestling by the crimson roses.

My last late summer swim –
The waves come running to meet me
Splash up my small body –
I flinch then plunge the breaking force.

25.9.10

Thanks to Simon I have done the deed, burnt Margaret's diaries and journals as she requested. Simon pressed me to tell him what was on my mind – the undone deed. As we set about it he told me about his forty years of living with depression, the slow changes, the ups and downs. He has learnt to be patient, to cultivate awareness so that he can control, guide. What once would have lasted five days or five weeks can now be five hours or even five minutes. His willpower goes towards awareness – of himself, of others – not into physical or mental control of events, into satisfying impossible expectations. There is a lovely, gentle, sad humour about the man. He really does seem to have nothing he is hiding. Can that be true? Is the meaning in suffering there from the start, or is it always a matter of us finding it, creating it. I was cold last night when we went down to the beach but Simon is still in shorts and a tee-shirt. He says happiness is a false god.

Evening. Low tide. Wind dying.
Little to see on the beach,
A man pulls at nets, a dog
Plays in the shallows. I'll pick
The last berries as I climb.

28.9.10

So, tomorrow I go. I have had two weeks of a daily long walks, mostly by the sea; my backpack has been packed and unpacked many times and, with Simon's help, the final selection of what to discard, what to include, made. I will be walking for seven days and, after that, I will have truly entered the unknown, and be making my way to my new life in the city. Yesterday Jude and Stephen were very close to me. I had tried talking and seeing on Skype the day before but I had found it awkward and disconnecting. For them the talking was another thing happening in the room. They wanted me just to be there with them as they went about their business. They were welcoming but I felt myself becoming disembodied – not here, not there. Today I have been talking to them and I have done each of them a farewell drawing which I will post, physically post, to fly all the way to New Zealand. For Jude I drew the house from the field, a quick pen drawing which I like very much. There is the feel of the autumn in the trees and the sky. For Stephen I tried some caricatures of me – grandad as a tramp, grandad as a hippy backpacker – but they didn't work so I did a drawing of the bridge over the burn which I had made and Stephen had helped with, handing me nails, holding my tape. Day 1 is not too demanding. For Day 2 I have chosen the long leg through the high hills, wild

country, rather than the lower route. I want to be out there on my own. No more to say, no way to put into words the feelings that are flowing through me – grief and elation, dread and hope. Margaret’s voice has gone quiet. She is letting me get on with it, expecting me to get on with it.

Down the cliff’s clean fissure
A waterfall finding
Beach stone, sand, then salt sea.

Behind hanging ivy,
Fresh and tangled vines, hear
A robin’s song not lost.

In the beat and swirl I
Catch his sharp call clear through
This water’s cold longing.

Cold nights, ground frost. The boiler was playing up, which gave me the chance to introduce Simon to its idiosyncrasies – very satisfying. Will I sleep tonight? I feel like a child in a way but not the dread of a new term beginning. I have done this. The cat has been all over me today, draping herself over me, my things, my papers, purring, weighty with affection, need. She knows I am going.

WEEK 53 (Verse 26)

29.9.10

So, I have made it. The day is nearly ended. I have arrived. I am now the guest and soon I will be eating my pilgrim meal, two other guests at least. I have not travelled that far in miles but I am in another country, another way of being. I have been in this hostel in the past, the next one to ours, come by car but this is different. I am the stranger, being welcomed unannounced. I set off at first light, in rain, persistent rain, me enclosed in my waterproofs, hood over my head, hearing only my breathing on the long climb away from the house, visibility so poor there was no point in looking back. No, I avoided that threshold. I went over the brow and felt the house disappear behind me. I kept going with my own breath for company and the tread of my boots on mud and rock. I rested in a church porch at midday, dozed then woke to see blue sky beginning, far to the west, gently, slowly, to come to meet me. My last hour was walking in bright sun with the trees still releasing single drops of water very loud and clear after the incessant rain of the morning. My walk ended with a long avenue of mature beech trees arching

over me like a guard of honour, their trunks still polished with the rain. I felt very whole, fit, healthy.

Walking into the sun
Setting I am dazzled,
See feathery gnats float -
Invisible in shade!

30.9.10

I am writing this by the close light of an oil lamp in a little bothy, high in the hills, miles from a village or even another dwelling. This was not the day I had planned! I joined with my two companions, a couple, the man rather absent, monosyllabic, his partner a large exuberant woman with an enjoyment of the absurd but warm and thoughtful with it. He has very poor sight, she is not very mobile but they were determined to take the high route through the hills, as I had been, but it was obvious to all that they couldn't go at the speed required to reach the next proper hostel in one day. They asked me to go with them. I think they asked directly but anyway, we set out together having decided to head for this bothy which is a recognized stop on the path but which is little more than a roof and four walls. We have walked bare hills under buoyant clouds and always with the sound of running water. The big landscape has contained and guided we three vulnerable little figures. We have made a fire and eaten a meagre meal. We have talked about suffering, pain. "What's the point?" Eric kept saying "What's the point?" Izzy spoke of suffering disappearing, being absorbed into the world and that it could reappear in another place, another person, as love – jolt someone unexpectedly towards love, kindness. She told it as a story, with humour, yet with conviction. We are lying on hard wooden beds. Simple cold water. The others are asleep. I will put out the light now.

One eye for the rough ground,
Feeling out my next steps,
One eye to the far ridge,
Path snaking through heather.

1.10.10

I am exhausted and worried that I will not be able to go on tomorrow but let's see what sleep will do. At least, at last, we made it through today and the three of us, not sharing a room this night as we did last night in the bothy, have found our way to this renovated wing of an old monastic building, very beautifully restored, warm and clean and simple.

Our day began with a sunrise of golden clouds but, as we set off, the rain, heavy rain, began and carried on into the afternoon. The hillsides ran with rivulets as the rain swept into our faces. We soldiered on for several hours, measuring time in hours became meaningless. We came to a deserted house alone in the landscape with the remnants of a steading and a garden and sheltered in the kitchen uninhabited for at least thirty years. Inside there was some animal dung, a few dead birds and some scattered pale, magical barn owl feathers but no sign of a nest. We settled ourselves on the floor and Izzy told stories with that fascinating mixture of confident delivery and a diffident look in her eye. The rain abated and on we went and found the anticipated, perfect dolmen, six clustered vertical stones each two metres high with a huge jagged boulder laid horizontally on the tops of the standing stones. We knew, arriving at this well-known feature, that we were not far from our destination. Funny, I had thought I was travelling with them as their support. I realise now that they thought I needed the company.

Circling the dolmen's weighty space,
Inside I could crouch in shadow,
Be dead, be reborn, come alive.

2.10.10

Today was an amiable day, a day with autumn's signature, a day of leaves scuttling in a sunny breeze, with above a lively delicacy of cirrus cloud. In the middle of the day I sat by water and drifted with flicks of light and brushes of the wind, ducks and geese passing by in small groups and goldfinches flashing by through the bushes. We had parted at breakfast, my bothy companions and I, each the saviour of the other! I was glad to be solitary and to have a day without stress, ambling in autumn, in balance, a feeling of harmony. Tonight I stay in what was once a boarding school. The feel, the colours, the ancient paint, the empty corridors and grand staircase of dark wood – all this took me back sixty years. The school hall was being used by a local wedding party and we, the pilgrims were invited in. It was a couple about the age Margaret and I were when we found each other finally. It is late now, well after midnight. I was infected with the spirit of warmth, fun, sexual attraction, a certain abandon. Life, laughter, dancing, food, drink. "It's just a kiss away". I hovered on the edge of all this, touched by it, lit up by it but still a spectator. So I sleep in what was once a room for four small boys.

I am too old for flesh,
The wonder of lust.
My shock and sorrow,
I could come through; but
My dry heart undoes me.

3.10.10

In the morning, which was grey and threatening, as I set off and walked though the next village, I saw that a harvest service was about to begin in the church. I think the weather drew me in but I was glad I went. I could feel the old and the new, the timeless fruit and vegetables and the concern, the despair mixed with hope, about the despoiling of the natural world. Words and loaves together. The rain was on by the end of the service and I was sent on my way with good wishes from the congregation. My way was through a sheltered valley, a protected landscape of good farmland. A brother and sister in their thirties, caught up with me and we walked together for an hour or two. They were on a charity walk in memory of their father who had died after a long illness. There was lovely light and laughter between them and their good spirits helped lift mine which were gloomy with the heavy rain. We sheltered together and then they went on. The brother could not get over the, to him, unfairness of his father's death. The sister would remind him of their father's acceptance. By the late afternoon the sky had cleared to give a vast sunset of apricot cloud and vivid grass lit by the low sun. I found shelter in a small house where I met the brother and sister again. From my window I can hear a fast-flowing river below me. Up here all is peace and quiet.

Whisper in this still dark evening;
Smoke lifts straight from village chimneys,
Separates. Below, the river's
Far noise carries the last days' rain.

4.10.10

My day's travelling began with a long climb northward through a gorge with steep wooded sides and a river running full through rocks and falls and pools. High above the sun was lighting the trees at the top of the gorge and higher still I could see kestrels hovering against the pure blue sky. As the sun rose and came towards the south and as I climbed slowly higher, then the warmth and light of the sun could start to penetrate the dark of the gorge and shimmer the fine spray with rainbow drift. I was joined by a boy of about sixteen, Tom, who was my companion for the next hours. Eventually we came up by the last waterfall and out of the wooded cleft into bare, grassy hills grazed by sheep and a long open walk in the glory of the autumn sun. Tom spoke little and told me nothing of his life. He had no stuff to speak of with him and I couldn't be sure he was a pilgrim but he was a traveller, that is for sure! His silence seemed to be asking me to speak and so I did. He had an innocence that was wanting to know, to be given thoughts and pictures and dreams to feed on. The day went on for ever but I arrived

here refreshed. They seemed to know him here at the house I am staying in but he is not in the house. I can imagine him out in the woods sleeping rough. This house reminds me of my old home, friendly but you have space. I still hear the river's tumult.

The flow is force
Held back, then stretched
Power plummets
Through water's shapes.

It is very early, the night still, no light yet. The evening brought sudden heavy rain and strong wind but that has cleared and now it is dull and hushed, no stars showing, I think. I will probably not sleep again now and this will be my last page in the diary. I do not want to write at the end of my journey because that will already be a new beginning. I know what I will find – an old weathered standing stone, the height of a man, with two plain circles carved in it, one now incomplete due to the weathering – two inscrutable circles. I am not sure if I will go into the chapel, the promised end of the journey, but I will stand at the lepers' window, the opening in the wall which allowed lepers, who were forbidden the church itself, to see the priest raise the host, for the moment of the bread becoming the body of Christ. That moment was their hope, their salvation. Not for us, not for me, not in that way, but I want to look into the space through this window of the outcasts, the ones who long for arms to hold them, lips to kiss them. There can be no climax to this account, to this journey, no innocence, no ecstasy, no absence. The weaving of feelings satisfies, is enough if it is true to its beginnings, to what I was given. The pools into which the waterfall plunges are as deep as the fall above is high. I would be true to the depths behind the brightness and the shadow of your eyes.

Love is a shy trade,
No master, no slave,
Takes in paradise.
Love is of the earth.

Afterword – the Calendar and the Soul

Bob Clay

One of the first books I bought with a direct connection to Rudolf Steiner was the neat cloth-bound translation of The Calendar of the Soul by Daisy Aldan which sits on the table in front of me now, its delicate gold lettering almost worn away by thirty-five years of handling. When new, I had pasted, inside the back cover, part of an article from the first copy of the journal 'Camphill Correspondence' which came my way – September 1976. This article describes how to match the verses of The Calendar to any specific year, given that the weekly sequence of verses begins at Easter, and the date of Easter changes each year. I must have been intrigued, even then, by the need to be alert to the significance of Easter, both as historical event and present Festival, and, implicitly, to the movements of sun and moon above us which will determine Easter's date. The soul is attentive in many directions.

When I first discovered Anthroposophy I had the wish to become involved both in community living and in the care of the land. I wanted to see how individual development might become rooted, in ways belonging to our times, both in active community life and in the life of nature, in people and seasons. Our lives increasingly become emancipated from traditions and necessities that bind us to physical reality – building shelter, providing food, the rhythms of dark and light, warmth and cold. We have freed ourselves from these natural constraints, but not without threatening our very survival. Out of this freedom can I find new, creative, healthy connections to the natural world and to community? I think, even then, all those years ago, this little volume carried these questions about discovering new sunlit paths to self-knowledge and social renewal.

Prior to finding my way to Anthroposophy and to Camphill Community life, two of my interests had been Drama and the culture of China. Drama draws you to action and to the present moment. A verse, say, by Li Po, a master of Chinese poetry, will dwell in a moment of moonlight reflected in water, but will invest that moment, as does Hamlet as he holds and speaks to Yorrick's skull, with a universal quality. I mention these aspects of my personal history because, coming to Anthroposophy, one meets many plans, patterns and schemes, there to help understanding of, say, personal development or cultural evolution. Thinking that is based in Anthroposophy values such symbolic or abstract (neither term is meant pejoratively) generating principles and patterns because the primary interest is in Life, in how phenomena come into being, develop, pass away, return anew. Anthroposophy celebrates archetypes as realities which generate the individual instances we experience, more immediately, with our senses. We move

between individual experience and the universal plan. Again, all those years ago, this little book, although beyond my grasp, was offering me this dynamic picture of reality – my understanding needs to be kept on the move! As an example, how do we deal with our fear of death? We can dwell in our emotions, be afraid or purely sentimental, or we might create a separate world of “spiritual” phenomena alongside, or above, the everyday. The Calendar of the Soul – and this makes it difficult to work with, I think – is asking the reader to integrate different levels of thought and experience. It is suggesting that the spiritual need not be supernatural, that the symbol is more than a device of the mind.

Coming closer to this written work of mine, this Diary of an Old Innkeeper, which is my homage to The Calendar of the Soul, the journey through the soul’s year leads, for me, quite naturally to the figure of the pilgrim, the one who journeys, who is a stranger travelling through the land (the origin of the word). This is each of us in our earthly life, wanting to find a home here, yet also knowing ourselves to be isolated beings who are, in a sense, homeless. If we are to do more than just wander, we may well seek patterns or principles which give our separate lives a meaning.

So, this Diary tells of pilgrims, and it is set in a hostel, an inn, a place of hospitality. Welcome is the necessary response to pilgrimage. Karl König returns often to the image of the human being as a wanderer, and to the idea of community as a place offering shelter, an act of welcome. This is, I believe, the fundamental impulse of the communities he founded: to be welcoming shelter for the traveller, the stranger – and that is all of us.

We live with the changes of Nature, birth and death, light and dark. We develop thanks to many influences, not least through our creative perception of the world around us, of the beauty and vitality of the Earth. We each make Nature personal. In the Diary you will find many short poems. I have adapted this form from classical Japanese literature where a prose travelogue will contain short poems which hold a moment of experience, or express a mood.

Here, through this form, I am exploring the same conundrum which I have alluded to already – how is it that attention to specific, everyday events and things connects to other dimensions of our soul-life; into the heart of the self, out into the space and time of the mystic?

One important quality of this more dynamic sense of reality is that relationships between things, levels, instances, become as significant as the things themselves. We respond to the whole; we live in the gaps, the correspondences and tensions between events,

people, things. In The Calendar itself, the difficulties in understanding the individual verses start to dissolve, I find, when I connect the different verses which belong together in the compositional scheme, although they are spread over the course of the year. So, we expand our thinking into these wider thought-structures which arise out of the relationships between the verses. In the Diary, the short poems are intended to interact with, and balance, this wider thinking by creating moments of clarity which light up the flow.

The Diary is one man's mind and world. It contains his reflections about himself, his relationships with his family and friends, and his experience of the natural world. It has, each week, his encounters with one or more of the pilgrims who pass through the inn. Each week – and I wrote the Diary through the actual course of a year, week by week, in accord with the verses; each week I would start with the verse, which would already be familiar to me, and with the actual experiences of nature which came my way – weather, birds, trees, the sky. Karl König's responses to The Calendar, through word and picture, were important ingredients in my preparations. Each week I took a sheet of A2 paper and gradually developed the content and thought-shape for the Diary entry for that week, using the small poems (which I would be composing during those days) as seeds for the crystallising of the whole. The verse would be there at the centre, as the initial inspiration, but would disappear into the events, images and characters of that week's Diary entry. The pilgrims would "arrive" in my imagination during that compositional process, unannounced and unknown beforehand, just as pilgrims would arrive at the door of any hostel.

I was, through the year, faithful to my plan of writing the weekly instalment during one session of writing, using the already composed poems within the already imagined 'shape' of that week's entry. I wanted the writing to have the feel of a diary entry – spontaneous and artless – yet to have an architecture which honoured and relied on the order and form of the verses, and of The Calendar as a whole.

Two dear friends who walked the Pilgrim's way to Santiago de Compostela introduced me to the magic of the "refugios", the hostels which welcome and feed the pilgrims. I translated one to Scotland. My attempts to learn Spanish at a later stage in life, together with my wife, now that our son lives in Spain, gave me Roberto, the character on our language CDs who helps us with pronunciation. He is the foreigner who is not-me (who is not the Scottish Robert who is me!) but through whom, as a separate, unique character, I can express my human soul. Roberto and I keep a friendly distance between us.

I want to say a little about why death and grief and love have such a big part to play in Roberto's story. Through the course of the year, in Nature, we meet growth and death, decay and renewal. It is a big, but predictable, step from such natural processes to, say, the regret we might feel at growing old or at the prospect of being dead. The next step is, I think, of a different order – when, out of the womb of our natural life, we waken to the truly human encounter with suffering and mortality – for ourselves, for those we love, for those we have never known. As isolated selves, our natural awareness of death is likely, I believe, to shrink to a dread of death as extinction. I have found that The Calendar teaches me to look out and listen for what is coming, what is being asked of me, what seeds of development are germinating within me. The Calendar is a pattern in which I can recognise my own processes of birth, death and renewal, and which allows me to let go of the confined and contingent self for whom oblivion is the determining fate. Working with The Calendar of the Soul confirms, for me, that our human nature is one that looks to develop, is open, throughout the course of our lives, to regeneration. If I sustain this liveliness of spirit in myself, then dying will become one of the constant currents in my normal life. The simple rhythm of day and night, sleeping and waking, keep us in touch with dying in an innocent way, as we let go of, and then enter into, our everyday consciousness. The more complex patterns of the Soul Calendar bring comfort and creative impulses to our engagement with our own biography. The cycle of the year repeats but both inner and outer weather are never the same. Out of the changes our inner path finds purpose.

I have emphasised the image of the stranger, the pilgrim who seeks and receives shelter, and who then passes on. That image can lead to an appreciation of the lasting relationships in our lives. I wanted to have the familiar in the flow of Roberto's soul year. So the story includes those who people his soul – most obviously his wife, but also his family and friends – those with whom he has those relationships which as Adam Bittleston puts it in a prayer of thanksgiving, "bless the life of earth with the hope of eternal being". Love is about the wish to help growth and so love will work with processes of dying and recreation. I wanted to earth the universal insights of The Calendar with sufficient detail to make it, clearly, one man's soul journey. The soul reaches out in many directions. I wanted to bring that diversity into the Diary the better to realise the living, dynamic oneness of the Human Soul, the human being, "giving, receiving, and forgiving each others trespasses"

(William Blake Jerusalem Plate 34)