

# **AN ATHEIST'S PRAYER-BOOK**

**Jonathan Wooding**

**2014**

*In a materialist society its theologians are the scientists.*  
W H Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*

*God does not reveal himself in the world.*  
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

*Sematology is a theological dimension.*  
Geoffrey Hill, 'Common Weal, Common Woe'

## CONTENTS

After God	<i>page</i> 6
nothing known	7
silent school	8
oxymoron	9
Stultiloquy I : baragouin	10
open space	11
vanishing act	13
original copy	14
silent school II	16
<i>yud, hay, vav, hay</i>	17
Life Writing I : Berlin, 10 May 1843	18
podcast	19
silent fields	20
God's spies	22
oxymoron II	23
cold light	24
<i>appetitor silentii</i>	25
Stultiloquy II : ecdysis	26
empty vessels	27
oxymoron : decreation	28
not silence, but early days	29
buying time	31
silent school III	32
gospel of Christian atheism	33

Life Writing II : Prague, Sunday 16 December 1911	35
in our hands	36
peacock	38
White	39
Stultiloquy III : parerga	40
Yeshua	41
concert pitch	42
oxymoron : cracked pastoral	43
blind chance	44
Life Writing III : Tegel, 18 November 1943	45
harm's way	46
<i>omnium gatherum</i>	47
<i>pensée</i>	48
<i>spem in alium nunquam</i>	49
shadow	50
Stultiloquy IV : velleity	51
beingstalk	52
cuckooland	53
silent school IV	54
maker	55
Stultiloquy V : amphigouri	56
orchards	57
<i>higgaion</i>	58
glossolalia	59
silent spring	60

nothing new	61
copy from a book	62

## Acknowledgements

## After God

*Dieu est mort! Le ciel est vide.*  
Gérard de Nerval, *Les Chimères*, 1854

get real, raven, on your highest perch –  
winter sun can catch your beak yet  
o, silhouette on the empty sky

larch has lost its colour now,  
cattle hold their peace, lichen  
prosper on the ancient cherry

sunlight attends the land,  
horses pause their *houyhnying*,  
frost has vanished from glasshouse walls –

susurrating eucalyptus,  
cast the gold dust with the grit –  
*Olber's paradox* has it night

should be bright as day – stars  
*even* in a luminous universe –  
no voids for light to hide in;

but stars are mortal too, and  
run with the running universe –  
rays racing to reach us yet!

so, get real, raven, on your highest perch,  
catch the gold dust on your beak – and  
horses will *houyhny* in the winter sun

## nothing known

*There are two atheisms of which one is a purification of the notion of God.*  
Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

unblemished sky, as if clouds had never been,  
windows a squirrel's grey reconnaissance  
of fruitless January trees; jackdaws crack the air,  
soil is ecstatic with frost, and the quince  
too has finally lost its jaunty apples –  
draped now only with snotty lichen, and  
a redbreast robin trills

nothing is troublesome – frosted headstones  
tilt in the churchyard under the clock's  
golden numerals, and three starlings  
glitter and preen in slant sun, gracing  
a crooked steeple's goldproof rooster –  
frostfire grass in the shadow of the church;  
song-thrush sips the air

we have not reached the point  
where God exists, or can *play* at being God –  
we are land-sick with Simone's *deifugal force*,  
unchurched, irreligious, but *surnaturelle* –  
as if there were no God, and we know better  
with each returning day, that  
there is no other life

## silent school

trouble me, in a waft of car-shoved air,  
to believe in an angelhosting sun,  
a red-reeking paraclete,

and in its waterbrizzling feedback  
let me meet the shifting figure  
of a dust-refracted, polite facteur:

“Summer is quoting her augmentations  
as the galaxies shift their ground –  
along these lines our universe expands.

A poet in the metropolis  
may consider this wry hypothesis  
going on over the heads and under the boots

of the skyandearth summit talkers.  
Flash your picking brains into every  
sidereal nook and quantum cranny.

Say what you like by means of anecdote  
and inference, about the *force majeure*  
of data, and the broken lamps of day.”

Over the barbecued river trailed  
the false mercurial upstart, lapsing  
in the lighted smithereens.

Drifting into realtime blather  
I hear a voice departing  
from a microtonal me.



## **oxymoron**

Oyster, tough with treasure,  
candescent inclamation ex-  
posed indifferently –

grammar's stultiloquy; bookfire;  
event peculiar to yourself –  
perpetuity's mirror.

Bound freedom-fighter,  
folly's bedrock –  
fulfilled loss.

Stone standing for yourself;  
scandalous time-keeper –  
appalling light.

You undertake me;  
speak me; show me.

## Stultiloquy I : baragouin

the old *Doowhangam* has disappeared  
from eximious *Tiniskoop* hills;  
now Planck is constant in adversity,  
light duplicitous and with horizon.

fissiparous modes prevail –  
archaic lispings of holohedral fusing,  
its holus-bolus and *embonpoint* –  
an ooidal blind alley! – has failed.

we need an alopecist to deal with this shearing –  
to beard the gamin of our hubbub;  
our auxesis was never so null.  
our anthesis is nuclear waste.

the teleology of smithereens  
in the universe heat-death theory,  
finds corners for the market in accidie  
in the pahlavi of opalescence.

## open space

pale, profuse Indian balsam riding  
river's banks, cannot spur September skies  
to unseizable dawn fire;

I'm walking the grey river, slicks  
of rain-softened cow shit, unvisited by flies,  
imaginary maps at my feet.

Glow in the river's eyes, without doubt  
reflected from without, and unconfused  
with true luminescences,

with *dioskouroi*, Leda's twins –  
struggling between mortal light  
and immortality.

When I say God – in an open space –  
this uncreated space – God is but localized  
and seizable; illuminant.

Pond skaters becalm the shallows  
holding the lens together over  
minnows, broken pipes, a snagged overall,

and lichen fondles each crooked  
twig and branch of the drinking  
alder, its woody fruit in waiting.

A trapeze of ready house martins  
swing multiple arcs in the airspace,  
piping beyond potency –

and look! a snail high-wiring alone  
on hollow, ruined hogweed;  
gilding its labia over brown filaments

of the tall, seeding stem, head back  
and upside-down, in ecstasy  
of transphorescent gloop.

## vanishing act

cuckoo flowers in the graveyard  
herald sooty wings of jackdaws  
clapping round the clock tower  
of this lingering April frost;

marigolds flash on eye  
glancing glacial water,  
and weeping cherry blossoms  
over Solomon, son of Solomon, in his grave

hawthorn, your blossom too is  
unbelievable – a *gladder of the earth* –  
parousian, paschal candles  
giving birth to bliss

cuckoo flowers in the graveyard  
and weeping cherry blossoms;  
hawthorn's bliss and the unseen clock  
of God's greening hands

## original copy

skittish ivy flickers on boughs, where  
buddleia stoops to dense brambles;  
rain is all mist without fall, and  
mottled with grey motions, the sky  
sees black between bristling firs  
in the winter-wooded valley

grass a leafy canvas of aspen and maple,  
sea-roar in leafless sycamore;  
eucalyptus leads the cheer, throwing  
jackdaws in streaming perichoresis  
about the pale, unblooded sky,  
all radiance bleached away

all stars outshone by this grey earth,  
no trace of last week's meteor-shower –  
branches Christmas-green under costive sun,  
its moonish alteration eclipsed too  
by this scallop-shell of cloud cover;  
buzzard files a final gyre above

*connaissance* and breathing space –  
but *zero is our maximum* –  
imperishable, irreducible –  
Simone would not hear God's silence  
were our noise here below with meaning;  
currents of high air high for Epiphany

never not need to pray – unquenchable  
instinct; heart, soul, strength  
and mind – addicted to the *épatant*,  
requiring no spectacles, building

our meeting-house from open air;  
and poetry without words

justice is truth, truth justice –  
a lone bull traverses the lilac sky  
raises his head above the far horizon  
then dips away into an eastern valley;  
God does not wish to be all in all –  
*nihil ex nihilo*

## **silent school II**

I break the primary windows  
of a summer-stilled classroom;  
I'm through to an unkept blackboard  
of a quarter century past.  
What am I to chalk for me to read there?

Aquinas weighed nigh three hundred pounds,  
A dumb ox to all who knew him.  
He wrote that God did not want  
to be everything, nor estimated people  
as windows through which to look on Him.

There are no symbols.  
God has no other legs to stand on  
but your own. Be weighty  
and speechless. Give amnesty  
to the wordblanks alive in your cell.

I rub through the chalked up palimpsest  
and find the starving sentences  
of a teacher taught teaching without ploys –  
imagination is a mind changing place  
from a loss to a compensation.

Outside the infant windows  
I see myself looking in, clocking back  
from this millennium  
to that vigilant word-triggered schoolchild.  
He had no symbols to toy with.



***yud, hay, vav, hay***

*God alone is worthy of interest.*  
Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*

jackdaw, take your turn –  
ravens are breaking bread  
before you, under the orbital eye  
of morning's winter moon

sing *yud hay vav hay*  
before the black ravens;  
before the groaning cattle  
still in valley shadow

brazen sun, blinding eastern skies –  
sing *yud hay vav hay*  
before the hooting woodpigeon  
before the rinsing river

grassblades, ease  
your frosty burden  
into the flick of caught light  
sing *yud hay vav hay*

thunder-jets, blast  
the unlistening land,  
whorl of threat, throated roar  
but *yud hay vav hay*

look down, look away –  
beneath the cold garden –  
cold clamps my toes, and  
i sing *yud hay vav hay*

## **Life Writing I : Berlin, 10 May 1843**

The day after my arrival I was in a very bad way,  
on the brink of collapse. In Stralsund I went almost mad  
hearing a young girl overhead play the piano,  
among other things Weber's last waltz. The last time  
I was in Berlin it was the first piece that met me  
in the Tiergarten, played by a blind man on a harp.

It's as if everything was designed just to bring back memories.  
My pharmacist, who was a confirmed bachelor, has married.  
He offered several explanations in the matter:  
one lives only once, one must have someone who can understand one.  
How much there is in that; especially when said  
with absolutely no pretension, it hits home.

In the Hotel Saxon I have a room looking out on the lake  
where the boats lie. Heavens, how it reminds me of the past.  
In the background I have the church, and its chimes  
when it sounds the hours go right to the marrow of my bones.

The thought that God is love in the sense that he  
is always the same is so abstract that really  
it is a sceptical thought.

## podcast

*In memoriam, Jacques Pohier, (1926-2007).*

sunyolk in eggwhite welkin hides, leaving  
only rose-of-Sharon still  
to burn for autumn's shortening day;  
furling flower-pods wait yet to unfold,  
mocking our sun to run again

over sunflower seedheads buckling  
and popping, dew-bowing grasses  
bearing mercury-droplet rain,  
unharvested Jerusalem artichokes,  
and *every trifle my eyes detain.*

rags of cloud occlude our turning wood –  
mutability is history without shame –  
God is all over the place, it would appear,  
as three scrotal red peppers gurn  
from the glasshouse, over a dish of seeds

and a bowl of home-grown, variegated toms,  
a grapevine on its knees –  
*detotalitarization* of God, (O, Lord!):  
Jacques' crown is broken, tumbling  
with these leaves, beyond the pale.

## silent fields

*Ermington, 11<sup>th</sup> November 2011*

as Ben Hartley has it, a grey-lilac sky  
magnetising fieldgreen, brackengold, pondsilver –  
luminescent light in fetlocks, and forehead  
of that dray-horse's lifted muzzle –  
look! look! through Ben's white window frames  
at eleven, eleven, eleven, eleven.

radio-silence in *doubting light* –  
two saw-flies cling to a lingering  
white hogweed flowerhead, swagging  
and souging in soused wilderness;  
all-over grey but still shifting sky,  
an intemperate smoke in my eyes.

twelve sheep, two blanketed horses graze  
the high field falling to riverline –  
ash and oak tango and rattle in unseen billows  
as rooks abandon ships, and burnt and gold  
horse chestnut leaves palm out frailty,  
skulking and scuttering a winter's song

for our windshook *shtetl*, outriding Eurogeddon;  
I have come to garden's end for the armistice –  
see mossed builder's rubble, cracked tiles,  
eroded bricks, roll of wire fencing netting  
leaves like fish, warped and crumbled  
corrugated sheets, rusted lengths of pipe,

a pile of dampening Christmas trees; *this is*  
*BBC News at two minutes past eleven;*  
I look again, palms out in frailty,  
see unripened berries – pale green – through rain,  
pairing pecked and rotted familial blackberries,  
their white and lilac flowers open

## God's spies

windless this morning; sumac's crown  
shaped in kingfisher-blue skies,  
its stag-horns unlit candles, flames  
withdrawn, leaves burnt away

kindly *König* cold in  
interstellar space –  
Søren's father helpless to fulfil  
creation's earthquake knowledge

wall'd prison, receive us –  
*ideas my only joy* – people  
inconsequent, gilded butterflies  
burnt by God's hand

pray and sing, and tell old tales  
of no trace found

## **oxymoron II**

Storm's teacup – cryptic clarity;  
clamorous taciturnity –  
you're intrinsically apostrophic!

Centrifugal closure,  
blurred scrutiny; disclarity –  
babbling pentecost.

Hypocritical palimpsest  
of the modest ego,  
immediately retrospective;

*negative capability* –  
revelatory concealment;  
not a little litotes.

Play on in earnest, selfsome –  
consuming mass.

## **cold light**

*For many centuries incandescence ['hot light'] has been the universal method of practical illumination; the sun, the torch, candle, oil lamp, gas or tungsten filament have served both to heat and to light.*

*A History of Luminescence, E. Newton Harvey, 1957*

salted scatter of sheep on high meadows,  
and a cavalcade of creeping clouds;  
roadwater runs off a fringe of windfalls,  
crab apples, beechnuts and leaves;  
foxgloves let themselves rot upright,  
and stormbeaten bracken lies still.

dying wasp sucks apple core and is gone,  
fig tree gloves her empty hands,  
hazel saplings vault this sunken lane  
and my boots say *God, God, God, God*  
to the crown of the hill and the backbroken  
ivied oak by the gate and the view of beyond.

the death of God is no real loss –  
we're luminescent still in failure,  
and atheism is mere scientism  
masquerading as metaphysics;  
*take leave of God*, says Meister Eckhart,  
it's no real loss, but a life of its own.



***appetitor silentii***

*Zeaser Gottenyu!* The cold!

horses on the hill across the valley  
move through freezing mist  
behind these ivied sycamores,  
this lavender stain of frosted grass

mist rides apace, obscuring  
morning's sun – sun becoming  
moon to a hostile planet,  
seabirds winging through, dogs  
barking, nettles stiff with ice

there's no undoing midnight's frost fest –  
land carries cold as a curse;  
grass a field of frozen surf –  
supra-temporal, extra-timetabular –  
AND sumac's fires all out

*incomprehensible descension*, Tom –  
this is in fact *summer*, *beyond sense* –  
*the unapprehensible*  
descent of the dove  
on the blackberry thorn (still) still

## **Stultiloquy II : ecdysis**

the orismology we make for pain  
is the scapegrace hermeneutic of night;  
our catachresis is nugatory –  
catachthonian neologisms  
to avoid the tautophony of cries.

the model for us – the ecdysiast;  
systematic eidoloclasm, quantum  
indeterminacy of disguises,  
heuristic predilection for the strip.

our stochastic eidouranion,  
neoteric peroration for plus,  
is the congelation of gluon jitters –  
propaedeutic paralogism,  
*Punchinello's* perambulo of quarks.

in our satrapy, aleatory justice,  
solifidian necessities,  
bushes beaten about with mensonges,  
logophobic silences to sign.

the implex of our sematology  
forms its ataraxia on calends –  
the drift of our earth-bound photopsia  
is the enchiridion of need.  
we scotch the panopticon lie of the snake.

## **empty vessels**

*"The sea is the powerfulest thing in the world."*

moorland waste on the move  
blanching the shores;  
another wave there –  
foaming horses' mouths

gifting extinction  
to God's *metapoiesis*;  
high, white, scribbled cumulus  
mirrors the race

wren, steal attention –  
infinity at your toe-tips!  
shy theology away  
from your bleeding hawthorn

silverfire presences,  
pampas grasses, breathe –  
make minds biology can't make;  
us, then

aporetic, cataphatic –  
God in place;  
sightless, unhearing sea –  
homophonous

speak, Orlando,  
powerfulest boy;  
hands and feet to God  
turning with the tide

## **oxymoron : decreation**

burn on, cauldron of winds –  
bear back waves' foam-seed  
to flame-glammering cliff;

impede stampede – entropy's  
perpetuity; and boiling sea, then,  
pique in iridescence.

cadenza's chaos – flecked pitch  
of ocean's waved avalanche;  
ruinous rhodomontade.

horizon withdrawn in cloud-conquest  
calamitous – leaving fulsome  
brillade; wavebreak's void.

womb's mortification; life's seminar –  
clamant earthwash.

## **not silence, but early days**

*at St Beuno's College, Wales*

biocrats know whether I can speak  
of God at all in disfigured world;  
on Offa's Dyke path God unpreempts  
delivered speeches, withdrawing light  
    from single strand  
of wind-flickered spider's webbing.

frost-buds – grey-haired – for apple blossom  
(not for me to be original)  
and hail falling on *Moel Maenefa*;  
how to forsake “your damned subjective rot”  
    powerless power –  
I never get far enough into it all.

delay is play in this labyrinth –  
simultaneity and separation –  
resistance and reassurance –  
hieroglyphics and let's say birdshit  
    at the centre  
and all this eccentric unseen is *nó móre*.

how I love to take notes (which will never be seen)  
on birdshadow inflecting our following eyes,  
triggered caprices of irate birdsong –  
no omniscience out there, checking  
    on me, *tswit, tswit*;  
shimmying grass leaves in an icy wind,

the way tree roots break the woodland surface,  
bridled and brindled by cone and needle  
and last year's leaf, and the gathering, great

encampment of leaping-dolphin ramson leaves –  
of lilies  
stinking up the narrowing pathway.

primary meaning of God (*Onions' Shorter*)  
as 'what is invoked', whatever that is –  
'what is worshipped by sacrifice' – this mar-  
tyrology won't budge will it? believe  
you me 'He-  
brew' means 'one from other side of the river'.

how do you 'share silence', Greenleaf Whittier?  
must I share silence  
as vinegar bibles into vineyard  
the disfiction of God – impartial  
nothing  
whatsoever changes God, and vice versa.

## buying time

*for Brân Maenefa at St Beuno's College in 1875*

God is not a poem  
but holiness –  
suspend awhile belief –  
wrap time behind

wade the sky, grey heron –  
snap your castanet cry –  
vagrant, hunch beside waters,  
ponder and wait

site of God – unguarded –  
Gerard's unwild west;  
embarrassed with holiness,  
silence of stress

*tetragrammaton*, vanish!  
a weight through waters deep;  
hold my mute tongue –  
bright exotropy!

shame of innocence –  
snowbright sunset  
through orange and smoke  
in the fish-scale sky

white lichen, split rowanberries  
on the churchstone steps  
beyond clocks  
beyond clouds

### **silent school III**

Mute with muddy futility, I  
long for the passional colourings  
as slipped through the air come silently  
the loosed, irredeemable smatterings  
of leafy surrender to ash.

See in that autumn a bruise on my eyebeam,  
a tarnish contracted through pain –  
an anger quenched to a smouldering torpor  
in the visceral self, unregained;  
self-divesting trees make ending plain –

they're postures of yogic holding, turning  
to tensions, sensations we normally  
take as the framework from which we can't move  
into structures of self we are frightened  
to feel; I stick at the shoulders and neck.

To wash in an autumn chill downpour,  
or smokily burn in that crackling park fire –  
to tumble and whirl with a rowan leaf,  
take footprints like grass after freshening –  
these are the emptyings of the epicure.

Treescape of raining dyes and dabs,  
conflagration of kindling rags,  
sky snowing embers of seasonal jetsam  
ablaze under indigo vaults – today my  
*kenosis* is veinous and branched.



## **gospel of Christian atheism**

scratch the scratch track, play the wild track,  
wild sound starting from silent scratch;  
can't write religious without being  
holy; fritillary's flight, after event,  
metaphysical incandescence.

divine silence a *kyrielle*  
of heat-basking scarlet pimpernel –  
poor man's weatherglass in heat  
enough for vineyards; greenfly  
like seed-clocks drift

I can only refuse to speak of the death  
of God, by ceasing  
to speak, in this gospel –  
author of graft, grace preventing  
all hurtful things

at the gates of the morning, honest Kant  
declares talking to God  
a derangement, chimerical.  
So too – so Søren – involvement  
with someone invisible.

in this *orcherd* the *sikerer partye*  
*kepe scilence*; time's smears  
skirmish with sky-writing –  
still the raging – fruit  
unto holiness, wages of sin

and at this abandoned wrought-iron table  
(though correlation is not causation)

sat a radiance of apprehension,  
a miniature vortex of intuition,  
a dance of intelligence among words.

insects' playground, a tortoiseshell's  
slow handclap graces young nettles,  
(where apostrophe is not redundant)  
and the larch raises her arms  
to the cool of invisible sky.

## Life Writing II : Prague, Sunday 16 December 1911

Idled away the morning with sleeping and reading newspapers.  
Afraid to finish a review for the *Prager Tagblatt*.  
Such fear of writing always expresses itself  
by my occasionally making up, away from my desk,  
initial sentences for what I am to write, which  
immediately prove unusable, dry, broken off long before their end,  
and pointing with their towering fragments to a sad future.

I observe the old tricks at the Christmas Fair.  
Two cockatoos on a crossbar pull fortunes.  
(Mistakes: a girl has a lady-love predicted.)  
A man offers artificial flowers for sale in rhyme.  
When Mrs Klug sings there is a warm shadow  
in the soft red of her mouth.

I remember the Jewish streets in Paris,  
rue Rosier, side-street of rue de Rivoli.

Before falling asleep yesterday I had an image  
of a drawing in which a group of people were isolated  
like a mountain in the air. The technique  
of the drawing seemed to me completely new and,  
once discovered, easily executed.

## **in our hands**

skylarks establish nesting  
rights in low summer ferns,  
whilst angelic twitterfire  
conceals airborne cousins;  
polypoid I  
of solipsist pride  
vanish in moorland high

kestrel, sun makes light  
in crescents of your  
crucified wings –  
distant tors surely awry  
with real evanescence  
gusting in  
persuasive wind

lichen as like stone as  
to make stone live,  
grey bleaching the grey  
and the ancient comes to light  
proleptically  
making these lines  
want to pass into this

that God's got to do with it  
seems unlikely, where  
boulders buried only partially  
are like fallen warriors  
on a radiant battlefield  
approaching a summit  
of all places

mind is fugitive, giddy,  
lighting on hawkweed,  
slow-flitting Heath,  
as a *celestial stranger*  
leaving no trace  
as she feels  
shadows race

## peacock

metaphysician's bird – polysemous peacock –  
seneschal of this solarium  
and key for a diamond-green planet.  
Your fire-alarm cry pranks  
all clear, *akkisukpok* –  
all lights deeply indifferent;  
frolicsome aurora.

It's working this attention-seeking –  
your hawkish Venetian mask conceals  
nothing but common garden green  
in concave mirror of indigo feather,  
frizzed electric sycamore  
in a procurator's solar disk;  
ultracrepidarian iota.

## White

tips of her wings in the flame  
of sun's absence, jink and prank  
and flitter  
one another

not looking for knowledge, but dwelling –  
*pieris immaculata*, White, on wing  
unblemished, sempervirent –  
and a pale philosopher's pride;

rain-cold clouds brim  
their grizzled grace, like rippled  
shore, electric grey –  
opulent emptiness ours

### **Stultiloquy III : parerga**

the propagation of immiscible light  
is the condition of information;  
the silence of sight is ever in advance  
of the time-question begging brouhaha  
in the wake of the flambeau of photons;  
nomothetic so-to-says arrive  
before the scratch from which we started.

the goods are delivered in glimpses and blabs,  
in mesons and gluons and quarks.

the poet in the metropolis  
considers the Hubble hypothesis,  
going on over the heads and under the boots  
of the nuclear disarmament talks –  
spring is quoting its dissatisfactions  
as the galaxies are shifting their ground;

Hubble perceived Messier 31,  
beautiful Andromeda nebula,  
extragalactic existence receding  
and approaching through curvatures of space.  
along these lines the universe expands.

cosmological time-charts are human,  
parsecs and light-years bear relation;  
we flash our picking brains into every  
sidereal nook and quantum cranny.

quaquaversal approximations to fact.



## Yeshua

bee and a cabbage-white select  
a radiant dish of sow-thistles;  
see tortoiseshell's *ephphatha*  
on sunhot valerian, whilst dandelion's  
unclocked star brags summer's loss

thus Yeshua's beatitudes –  
mere emendations of scribes;  
Aramaic *tzetels*  
perpetually frail –  
they raise the nap on native finery

sugar-burn in chestnut leaves  
blackspot spattering sycamore;  
under this ginkgo's still dance  
scarlet pimpernel reduces  
to thin pickings

wild teasle gathers dew in leafcups,  
and world is growing cold –  
its breadth and length, depth and height –  
petrichor of burnt waters  
of *deicidium*

## **concert pitch**

striking orange lichen blots headstones,  
splatters church wall, cottage rooftiles –  
it's high on the clocktower, and  
mottles the kissing-gate pillars;

eight claps of the bell for the half-hour –  
nothing's prepared to make a move –  
a new grave decked with flowers,  
green alkanet at the holy well.

nothing is saying anything I've not  
heard and seen before, alas;  
I can't make it can I?  
a nameless bird ticks tunelessly out

of an oak tree – dry pebbles rolled in the hand;  
is any of this worth it?  
A portfolio of failure and irrelevance, when  
red leaves are early in an extra-seasonal sun

## **oxymoron : cracked pastoral**

*perissem nisi perissem*

numenfall in flame-lined fields,  
rapture-red and fire-grained;  
*over an hour of great care*

flamboyant superterrane  
of radiant, raddled mud-mire  
*defiled as it is*

leaves are moths of distress,  
detonated tree limbs  
*fingermarks and blood*

dirt in the weather, rain  
sprackles the wind –  
*shall sun be darkened*

storm-birds in skyplay  
vanish through opacity;  
re-appear

## **blind chance**

goat willow, kick up a fuss for February  
with fur-frosted catkin *goslings*;  
throw up your arms by the still pond,  
its duckweed riming frogspawn

one daffodil finds its face  
too soon turned to the mud, a whit  
too hasty to exorcise winter  
with its eye-outwitting, chitterling gall

rotifers and tardigrades are no *happy accident* –  
ergastrine philosophers sought  
a parent fire, carried live scions  
of fire for barter – not yet *ab initio*

original replicator, *gaseous invertebrate*,  
stretch in the strengthening sun

### **Life Writing III : Tegel, 18 November 1943**

We get up at the same time, and the day lasts  
til 8pm; I wear out my trousers by sitting  
while you wear out your soles by walking.  
I read the *Volkischer Beobachter* and the Reich,  
and I've got to know several very nice people.

Every day I'm taken for half an hour's walking alone,  
and in the afternoon they give me treatment  
in the sick bay – very kindly, but unsuccessfully –  
for my rheumatism. Every week I get from you  
the most marvellous things to eat. Thank you  
very much for everything, and also for the cigars  
and cigarettes that you sent me while you were away.

I wish I could play Bach's *G minor sonata*  
*for flute and piano* with you and sing some Schutz,  
and hear you sing Psalms 70 and 47 –  
my cell is being cleaned out for me – I can  
give the cleaner something to eat. One of them  
was sentenced to death the other day –  
it gave me a great shock – what heavy consequences  
may follow trivial acts of folly.

Those verses that I wrote have also made  
a considerable impression here. The prisoners  
and guards here keep saying how they are amazed  
at my tranquillity and cheerfulness. If only  
I could share some Krossin smoked goose with you.  
Can one send anything?

## **harm's way**

*darksome states-man*, let rook stand in for you,  
*fearful miser*, the carrion crow;  
*doting lover*, woodpigeon purrs,  
*down-right epicure*, the sparrow –

Dietrich, your phraseology  
turns, now, to reality  
and God is beyond  
in the midst of life

grace rings true too –  
an *esprit de finesse*,  
a case of credible  
parthenogenesis

glamorous rook, raucous crow  
purring pigeon, feasting sparrow –  
world's powers untold  
*and all her train hurled*

as penultimate turns ultimate  
in place of worship and prayer –  
as not writing  
plays out without echo

## ***omnium gatherum***

*The truth is that we could not say what an 'illogical' world would look like*  
Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

oddlings, take your bearings, quickener,  
burr and bless from bud to breaking brier;  
caper through lamb's tails, pussy willow –

weave and waver spring's salmagundi  
as, having nothing, yet possessing all;  
dash thy feet over seeded nooks

and crannies, where your treasure also is.  
Then, bathe your peacock wings, *nymphalis io*,  
turn ye even with all your heart

your coppery ommateum  
to sun's ocellus and this pale-blue sky.  
Give us prospicience,

now, and in secret,  
and for all our days.

*pensée*

sparrows sing *fanfaronnade* this morning  
as if God didn't dare to compete;

and a coin is spun at the end of infinite distance  
before nothingness



***spem in alium nunquam***

phone wire hosts invisible walkers  
high on north winds taking hold;  
and spirals of sycamore leaves clatter  
in dung-brown abandon –  
*mindful of our lowliness*

smoke's palette of luminescent greys  
raises an eastern prospect  
of sunfires burning beneath our timespace;  
sparrows flurry and squabble, then  
hunker down beside berries' fires

never put my hope in any other heaven –  
last evening a delta-grid of stripped sycamore  
branches handling a coldfire sunset  
gashed over hills' purpled shoulders;  
*so farre surpassed by Mr Tallys' song –*

strong eucalyptus scored by aeolian whim,  
forty parts (and more!) rustle and sough  
a contrafactual matins  
to a god-forsaken God,  
an ordinary immortal

## **shadow**

within sun's *via affirmativa*,  
a jackdaw trio tramp and spring  
the rusty branches of the autumn larch;

its spread limbs the fissures  
and crystal-cracks of a smash  
in unbroken ice –

glacier of time  
seered with seasonal noumena –  
imprimatur of God's day

jackdaw, black fire,  
token of time's ignition –  
of God's silent pyre

## **Stultiloquy IV : velleity**

the inhumanity of poetry  
is the pellucid theodicy of doubt –  
singular loss as a presence of mind

I change my mind with the landscape,  
giving the benefit of an optical doubt  
to the light on the head of a beggar

## beingstalk

rain under wind-shaken sycamores  
while the unbuttoned sun burns  
its lens of washed air over  
a cock-sparrow hunting a butterfly

goblins – herb-robert – are pricking up  
everywhere; they gather immodestly  
outside the east window, alongside  
wheelie bins, watering cans, wheelbarrow

and red valerian, (kiss-me-quick), puffs  
all along the village wall, reminding  
the rowan to prepare her berries,  
the dead that we do this for you.

the poem's an inconclusive proof,  
(that's Aristotle's *epicheirema*) –  
hopelessly tending towards completion,  
where finishing isn't an end.

*half ankering after bliss*, John Clare,  
compose your shepherd's calendar –  
put time herself in quotation marks,  
and God as a number uncounted

## **cuckooland**

bright bees riffle clover flowers  
about my feet, and Spring's dozen daisies  
are honeystalks, and Chaucer's eye of the day –  
*to hem have I so gret affeccioun –*  
*timor mortis conturbat me*

willow and sycamore are fully fledged  
though buddleia drags still  
last season's burnt flower offerings;  
yellow Indian bean leaves unfold –  
*timor mortis conturbat me*

birdsound slips into alphabetacles  
in the pestering peetings of courting coal tits,  
and liquefaction of the thrush;  
sky-tracing house martins cry  
*timor mortis conturbat me*

befriending Earth, ground of all paradox,  
let us see everything that is there, and  
the everything that isn't; not the nothing  
that is there but the nothing that is not;  
*timor mortis conturbat me*

## **silent school IV**

Three high windows give us  
the movement of summer trees  
and light on a central table,  
water jug, vase, flowers, books.

I sit here involved in how long  
I take to mend things – reality  
keeps breaking in and telling other tales;  
I am freed from a plot to a poverty.

Our liturgy might be a stomach rumbling,  
a shuffle, exhalation, cough;  
we fidget, and swallow, decorating  
this hideout with nothing but ourselves.

Sodden with speech, I turn my mind  
to the plain vase gifted with flowers;  
my eyes linger on the water jug, pouring  
a glass of light unobserved.

## maker

*The more I see of humanism the less I like it*  
Wallace Stevens to Hi Simons, January 9 1940

stay in your window-seat Wallace –  
detect that force which outwits  
nihilism, merely by gazing

*tzaddik*, hear the pilpul of bird sounds –  
*seelensfriede durch dichtung* –  
asides from woodwind's disbelief

there, tipped with ice, each sumac candle  
is minded to give us back to ourselves  
in a January mist not yet willing to rise

shadows longer than the longest tree,  
the bramble-patch weighted with frost,  
crocus clusters cluttering up

where grass is a shattered crystal vase –  
between the sitter and the idling sun  
points of blue, red, green light

are a scattered rainbow dispensed  
by a cloudless, windless sky, casting  
a spell for spathes of spring snowflakes

so the birds have it – their claim on mossed rubble,  
valley's riverrun, oak leaves caught in pond ice,  
and you, Wallace, just being human

## **Stultiloquy V : amphigouri**

the end of tethering  
is suppression of contingency  
in face of sciagraphy – faculae!

our trouvaille, to compute the burr of mischance –  
hard luck's harder, fine story, knocked  
into corona sparks; this

diegesis lingers clock and wise –  
curvature of absolute circle; the  
straight line's determinable zero.

haphazard hall of imperfect mirrors,  
herrings redder than imagined  
in the warp and woof of the beholding eye;

we pull parallax after events,  
sporting paralipsis in hiding, then

seriatim, take up our zetetic,  
hoping for paracmastic calm.



## orchards

Among the minted greens this summer –  
new is nothing under such a sun as this –  
I'm only too happy – words rattling

on my gravid mouth's tongue tipping  
scales from televisual (still!) eyes, reaping  
grace recalcitrant,

and Job's joy is coefficient, (finally).  
Greenwood pleroma – what more! Let's  
commonly call (out) poplar, whitebeam,

alder, hawthorn, ash, oak, beech –  
green decrecates green indifference –  
act exact – rub ochre on the bones.

Is God in good voice? Notable tautology.  
Twenty-first century cribrations turn on  
oxymoronic manoeuvres (sayable),

as these smashed camellias still outride  
broken cuckoo-flowers; and God's broken  
grammar, hailing crushed and clustered bells,  
stands out alone; stone (tacitly) standing.

## ***higgaion***

leave your carriage and walk, Confucius –  
exaltation will not save us – feel discomfort when  
*I Ching* offers its hexagram of grace,  
white horse speeding as if on wings,  
the changing fire before mountain peaks

Fire! on Monday the twenty-third, No-  
vember, sixteen-fifty-four – no God  
philosophers or scientists know

hear rigolo of laughing sparrows  
kerfuffle of gusting winds, see  
raindrops drumming leaf-clogged ponds,

Tom Tickell's *vegetable snow*  
set loose from monastic cemeteries,  
teeming and keeling below

## **glossolalia**

let shadows lie – golden larch –  
embrace long sunshine;  
know that I am God

true task – interrogation  
of silence; whereof we cannot speak,  
thereby remain

each leaf holding  
flakes of gemmed ice – *faville* –  
swiftest sparks, away!

one leaf left on gingko –  
plenteously bringing forth  
fragments – God remain!

jackdaw pow-wow – sacred motet –  
finch, squabble the territory –  
inveterate trespass – metaphor!

conclude rivulet – beat  
and shock your unscientific  
postscript – sabotage!

## **silent spring**

seed-motes falling from crack willow  
fill dewy gaps between leaves of grass  
with a snow of spring's own making

## **nothing new**

like a creature swathed  
in Dante's silk, concealed  
in solar rays' reality

## **copy from a book**

On the day they dug the pits  
Zvi Michalowski toppled forward  
a fraction of a second before  
the volley of shots that killed the others.

The Lithuanian, Ostrovakas,  
sang with his executioners  
as they drank to successful work.  
Zvi's father had been killed.

Zvi went to the Christian homes  
beyond the cemetery, and asked  
a neighbour to take his blood-soaked  
nakedness in – he was told

“Go back to the grave where you belong.”  
Zvi went to the widow whom he also knew –  
she chased him away with a piece  
of burning wood, to exorcise him.

But Zvi returned to her, saying  
“I am your Lord, Jesus Christ,  
I came down from the cross, look at me –  
the suffering of the innocent. Let me in.”

The widow fell at his bloodstained feet,  
“*Boze moj, Boze moj*” – my God, my God –  
and she crossed herself  
and let Him in.

## Acknowledgements

In 'Berlin, 10 May 1843' I draw on Alastair Hannay's 1996 translation of *Soren Kierkegaard's Papers and Journals: A Selection*. In 'Prague, Sunday 16 December 1911' I adapt passages from Joseph Kresh's translation of *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*. In 'Tegel, 18 November 1943' I lineate words from the 1971 translation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

In 'podcast' and in 'silent fields' I use phrases from John Clare's *The Shepherd's Calendar*. In 'original copy' I employ words and phrases from Simone Weil, and from Wallace Stevens. The word "houyhny" in 'after God' is from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Phrases rejected by T. S. Eliot for his *Four Quartets* are retrieved in 'appetitor silentii'. Thomas Wateridge (1611) is the source of the phrase "so farre surpassed" in 'spem in alium nunquam'. I adapt a phrase written by Gerard Manley Hopkins in a letter to Robert Bridges in 'not silence, but early days'. My studies in stultiloquence owe a debt of gratitude to Hugh MacDiarmid. I take phrases from Martin Buber's *The Eclipse of God*, (1953) and from the *Book of Common Prayer*, (Sixth Sunday after Epiphany (Matthew, 24:23)) for 'cracked pastoral'.

The poem 'after God' achieved Highly Commended in the 2013 Manchester Cathedral International Inter-Faith Poetry Competition, judged by Nicola Slee.

The poem 'gospel of Christian atheism' contains quotations from *The Orchard of Syon*, and adopted phrases from one of Geoffrey Hill's Oxford Professor of Poetry lectures.

The poem 'harm's way' contains phrases from Henry Vaughan's 'The World'.

I copied 'copy from a book' from Martin Gilbert's *The Holocaust*.

The poem 'blind chance' owes a certain amount to *The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Life*, theology for scientists.