

Clive Watkins: Twelve Poems

June 2021

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Precipitation

Not, as Athenaeus reports, fish dropping from the sky,
the lanes blocked, the town rank for days,
or, more improbably, the iron and blood Pliny speaks of;
nor, in this latter age, your grandfather's boyhood boast,
his twinkling hail of frogs pattering down on field and square:

upgatherings and scatterings – whatever lay insecure
about the world seeding the air with stories:
newspapers, washing, slates, babies, stray cats and dogs,
and even that fictive house Dorothy hated
caught spinning into another place:

no, nothing on this August afternoon but the steady rain –
brimming the gutters, slanting into the trees –
that, colourless itself, and odourless,
yet gives to earth and stone their proper scent
and tongues the leaves with light.

Twin

In the middle of our faithful life,
suddenly you fell into a dream.
The world had turned away
to its various expensive hungers,
its vivid atrocities,
club and bullet and bomb,
when suddenly you fell into a dream.

In your exact dream, it is night.
Darkness sighs in the garden,
and the stiff laurels thrash.
The house is alive with lights,
but the curtains are drawn close,
and no one looks out at the weather.
Somewhere, an oboe plays,
perfecting its difficult scales.
Fire burns in the hearth,
the dry wood stacked ready.
There are wine and bread on the table,
and candles flickering in a draught.
Soon, they will come back,
and the meal begin at last.

But now the expected rain
patters in heavy drops
on the flat stones of the path.
The chrysanthemums rattle their heads.
Out in the empty garden
the lost child weeps,
the twin who died unborn.
Though death has stolen her face,
your dream gave her another:
dark eyes that shine
in perfect banishment,
a skin papery as ash,
and that starved mouth whose sobbing
fills the wind with its hurt.
She wants to be let in,
but nobody hears her crying,
and there is no help for her pain.
Darkness beats upon darkness,
but no one comes to the window,
opening the curtains to look,
and so her lament takes wing,
and, high over the vacant house,
through the starless night of your dream,
lifts like a great black bird.
And everything keeps as it is –

the oboe plays its scales
over and over and over,
fire burns in the hearth,
the meal has been made ready,
but no one comes to eat.

In the middle of our faithful life,
in this world of convinced shadows
where our children all must live,
suddenly you fell into a dream.

The House

*A fence there was with gaps the eye
could look clear through at earth and sky,*

*until one night an architect
turned up and, noting this effect,*

*removed the spaces from the fence
and from them built a residence.*

from Christian Morgenstern, "Der Lattenzaun" (The Paling Fence)

Seen from across the park in which it stands
the house shines as if with its own light –
flickerings within, flashings instantly subdued.

Or perhaps the imbricated sheets it is made from
are alive with the light that falls on them –
flakes of opalescent colour, bruise-green, sapphire.

Draw nearer and it is a house of windows,
slits of eyes that peer through into another place –
a town with tree-lined streets and houses of its own,

carts and trams, gardens set behind trim hedges,
bright and contained like the images in a child's history book;
and the men in their coats, the women in their long skirts,

walking there, are not after all reflections of ourselves
but entire lives lived in ignorance of us. On dull days,
or at night, its walls shimmer with their absence,

a polished dark we stand before and see our own faces
staring back. Pale and ghost-like, they vanish and appear
as the coruscations flare and fade, while from within

come rumblings, buffetings, the sounds of sudden collapse.
(Who knows if they look back at us? There are no doors:
no one has ever entered or come out.)

The architect who built this house absconded long ago.
He fashioned it from the dead space that ran
between the things of his world –

the gaps in a fence, the blank between gate and road,
between railway and church, a span of flooded trench.
There are those who want the thing demolished,

its trickery an affront. “Why must we tolerate,” they demand,
“this fabrication set down in our midst,
its iridescent shingles, the scandalous deception of its panes?”

But it persists unasked-for, and so we turn away
to our own world of definite places, our well-lit meeting rooms,
our assemblies, our sonorous and timely deliberations.

Children's Story

When at first light he crawls
from his cave, his den, his lair
or wherever it is he lives
and goes lolloping off
on two legs through the trees
who sees him?

Lolloping? Cave?

But who sees him?

The fire of his eyes,
the shambles of his breath,
his hooked shadow accompanying him.
When he comes to the village
everyone has already run away.
What will he do?
What will he do next?
Will he smash down the fences in a rage?
Will he shit on the rows of cabbages and beans?
Will he squeal and roar and fall asleep in the shade?
He yawns and yawns,
then sits his enormous rump on a large rock
and slowly begins

slowly slowly

to gnaw at his own flesh
devouring
first one foot, then the other,
then a leg, and a leg,
one arm and the other.
His teeth gape so wide his neck strains
and the terrible shaft of his head
is one huge mouth,
his gullet a pulsing muscle of darkness
into which
with a crunch, with a suck, with a gulp
he entirely disappears
leaving behind on the sunshiny air
nothing but a round black stain,
a blind spot in the day,
and the only sound
is a faint bubbling eructation
once
no
twice.

Then the black stain
is a black stone lying in the grass
which a boy emerging from the forest
picks up for its deep opacity.
He will pierce it and thread it on a thong
for his girl to wear at her white throat.

Paragliders

Monte Subasio, Assisi: 15th August 2005

What folk are these who have come,
by car, on foot, up the track to this high place,
gathering after their long climb
in twos and threes upon that shelf of grass?

Look how the August sun
that gilds the scattered stones and the green blades
with ordinary light has drawn
a fleeting glory round their quiet heads.

Before their feet, the earth
falls sheer. From such a height the sunlit plain,
the little town, its glittering wreath
of roads, factory and farm and wood, all turn
to intricate chequer-work:
patches of gold and umber stretch away
southward to far hills that break
in dove-grey strokes of cloud against the sky.

Above, a rush of wings,
a stirring as of linen rucked and quilled
or a fiery exaltation of tongues –
as if, swept up from that narrow stony field
on the cool tide of the air
and borne aloft above the grassy summit
unwearying in arc and spire,
our earthly freight at last might prove pure spirit.

But now another, a girl,
sets down her heavy burden on the turf
and, kneeling, rigs the blue sail
that soon will bear her out into the gulf.

Already the quickening wind
has breathed into its cells and caught her weight,
and she, close-lipped as though she scorned
to tread upon the earth, leaps up to meet

its hurrying blind embrace.
The watchers tilt their heads, a young man points,
and out into the bright abyss,
as if air and fire were her true elements,
she is drawn up. The sun
flares on the ribbed arch of her wing, on the flock
of wings that – turn and counter-turn –
beneath the vault of heaven shift and tack,

till, slanting aside, she sweeps
from the zenith out over gully and cliff through the lofts
of summer air and, moth-like, drops
softly down; and the scurrying wind lifts,
and the trees shake out their skirts,
and earth flows up to catch her where she falls
among hens and scampering children and goats –
and the dusty farm-dog yaps at her flickering heels.

The Lid

This much, at least, is plain: it slips away like
water spilling through fingers,
as elusive as a dream, although more real.

Light from an October sun
setting behind tall trees is reflected off
a near-by cottage-window
and strikes your face where you sit calmly writing,
your gaze lifted to the east,
from which, in a short while, darkness will arrive.

This is an analogy,
a way, perhaps, of avoiding the question.

It's not hard to imagine
the oak tree locked in the acorn, its lofted
full-leaved head alive with light
and air, but what of the tough cotyledon
thrusting up through the soft mould,
or the fine house the ingenious carpenter
will build from beams of green oak?
Indeed, size is not everything. The Zen monk
walking step by step by step,
his mind fixed on the feel of the earth beneath
his sandalled foot, is aware
of other things: wind rustling bamboo, water
running over rocks. To reach
the path's customary end is not the point.

These, too, are analogies,
mere evasions. Whatever it is, it is
not like a Bach Partita,
whose conclusion sings on into silence, or
a poem, say, at whose close
a lid snaps shut like the lid of a well-made
box: open the box again
and the complex fragrance of perfected art
escapes – but is never lost,
an ecstasy of surrender whenever
you desire it. But surely
no act is complete in its kind, preserved in
its own brief fire, an achieved
consummation? – The mischief of the stars, no
matter their wattage, always
there, circling on high as if immutable.

How can we keep our bearings,
you ask, in this delightful glitter-shimmer?
(Was that click a lid closing?)

The Gallery

From the great gallery all the images have
departed. They have left their ornate
frames and taken themselves off to another place
in which at last they need no longer
dread the shrewd impertinence of being stared at
by those who are not part of their world.
The elegant grande dame – wife or mistress of some
fine seigneur: banker or lord – has walked
out through the door that stood ajar at the far end
of her salon. In her delightful
wake the entire room has followed – tapestries, chairs,
curtains, an ormolu clock. All that
remains is the grey gallery wall, the bare frame
and, beside it, a sign that describes
the truant picture. From the hall the sculptures have
absconded, and now, in an elsewhere
that is invisible, nymph and shepherd dally
to their hearts' content, and, unconstrained
by whatever is thought of them, everyone – prince
or peasant – resumes their endless life.
Yet still the visitors return, gather in groups
around those missing masterpieces
to hear the learned guide expatiate on them.
Rapt, they lift their eyes to each detail.
Such symbolism! Such eddies of emotion!
And the artistry of hand and brush!
Magnificent! Cameras are aimed (no flash allowed);
notebooks are filled; the experience
has occurred. Outside in the park a flock of birds
(like a scurry of dead leaves) sweeps off
over the grass, above the granite plinths where once
four stone lions lay in all their black
glamour silently roaring, swirls across the roof,
falls back as leaves at the lake's edge.
Time for the gallery to close its high bronze doors.
The streets are full. The streets are empty.

Pedic's Dream

"the brilliant contraptions spin like discarded coins" – David Selzer

For Pedic perhaps, at prayer in his cold hermit's cell,
Time was already coming to an end, the expected Kingdom
close at hand, and the Last Judgement – Hell's ice and fire,
Heaven's shining battlements and towers. Even here,
in this sequestered fold on the green edge of England,
he knows none will be spared. He survives ambiguously
in the name – naming the church, the motte, the ditch that runs
in gloom beneath the trees, and – faint trace in the grass –
the footings of a long-abandoned settlement. From moist
bushes a flock of small birds skirrs away across
the uneven ground to feed on blown thistle-heads.

But who, in the strong lordship of coal, of oil, of gas,
and the great deniers, will be spared? It is late already.

In Pedic's dream, the angel carved above the door
centuries after his time takes flight, a mineral gleam
in the gathering dusk, miraculous stone wings aflutter,
as she summons into the middle air her diverse company –
serpent, warrior, horse; green man, musician, stag;
two lovers coupling, a smiling sheelagh-na-gig. They turn
and turn – rosary, wreath – above a land laid waste
by the fierce heat of day, by the fierce cold of night,
and vanish, while, in a distant sphere, strange new devices,
securely logged, some brighter in the evening sky
than the first star, maintain their silent watchful orbits.

Kilpeck, Herefordshire

Kilpeck, a hamlet in Herefordshire on the Welsh border, derives its name from the Welsh *Llandewi Kil Peddeg* – i.e. Church of St David and Cell of Pedic. Pedic is an otherwise unknown early-Christian hermit. Kilpeck's tiny Norman church is noted for the richness and range of its stone carvings. The angel that figures in the poem is carved above the south doorway.

Foulness Island

Not just the Seychelles, you say,
Tuvalu or the Maldives,
but here at the tip of Essex –
Foulness, whose windy acres,
won from the North Sea
eight centuries ago,
stand barely six feet
above the insidious waves.

Mudflat, salt-marsh, creek;
weather-boarded houses,
barns and derelict sheds,
the one pub long closed;
fields of yellow rape,
the dusky blue of borage.
But also, high fences,
watchtowers, cameras, gates,
on the foreshore spent munitions,
and everywhere the signs –
Official Secrets Act,
No Unauthorised Entry.
Through coils of barbed wire
cow-parsley springs,
a haze of greeny white.
Out on the glittering mud
the birds gather to feed:
sanderling, plover, duck –
and the avocet, quick-quick
on their stick-legs, that scythe
with elegant upturned bills
the inter-tidal pools.
Yet here in this watery place
they built the atom bomb
that in 1952,
a world away, would burst
in a storm of lethal ash,
an apocalypse of light.
The cold North Sea breaks
on the ancient shore-defences.
The sea-wall is breached,
repaired, is breached again.
Out on the Firing Range

mercury, arsenic, boron,
beryllium and lead
contaminate the earth.

Avocet, plover, duck.
You tell me how the birds
at each new detonation
fly up from the mud –
a flickering cloud of wings,
a ripple of weightless cries –
circle for a moment,
then drop once more to feed.

Invitation in a Season of Plague

for Chris and Jacqui Preddle

a' nostri luoghi in contrado – Boccaccio, Decameron

In this season of dazzling weather, come, dear friends,
and sit with us for a while in our green garden.
Sheltering at home, it is weeks since last we saw you.
Though creeping moss invades the lawn, and the paths
remain unswept, sunlight has honed the laurel,
whose tough leaves glitter as these vernal airs
riffle along the hedge; and the may tree,
its wicked tines forgotten, is drawn into flower.
We can offer you to whet your appetite
neither cheese nor olives, nor can we supply
quail in plum brandy, or pheasant, but must make do
with plain digestive biscuits, though it may be
dark chocolate ones are not to be despaired of;
and since you will come by car from your quiet valley,
we'll not have wine but cheer ourselves instead
with coffee or tea, chilled in a glass if you wish it.
Here on our hilltop far from town we'll sit
in the birch-trees' fluent shade – at a safe distance
as we are instructed – and tell ourselves fond tales
of those whom, north and south and east and west,
this pestilence has held us from so long.
And we'll discuss TV, what's good, what's bad,
our favourite films watched for the umpteenth time,
and the books we have been reading. (Wodehouse again?
Bleak Dostoevsky?) And I will undertake
not to recite my latest dithyramb,
so you will too. But, like a strand of wire,
sharp and unyielding-fine, through all our talk
the plague will twist and knot, and futile rage
at maladroitness and scoundrel politicians
infect our meeting. At dusk, above the garden,
above vacant city streets, where traffic lights
still cycle through their changes, the panoptic moon,
rising at full, will gaze on tower-blocks,
on narrow terraces, care homes and B&Bs,
where those locked down are suffering and dying.
Come soon, for soon this unseasonable weather
from the hot south will end, and wind and rain
will keep us all indoors. The garden chairs
will be brought in, the sun-umbrella stowed,
and, standing at the window, we shall watch
the lofty birch-trees tug at their roots and thrash.

May 2020

A View of Children Cycling

for Zoë

Everything glowed with a gleam... Thomas Hardy, "The Self-Unseeing"

Gripping tightly the soft black rubber grips
of the handlebar, I peer round over my shoulder,
but already you are a dozen yards behind,
out of breath and slowed to a rueful stand,
head on one side watching, as, freed from your hold,

I pedal unsteadily off up the empty street,
you still not far from our gate and growing smaller,
your right hand raised to shade your eyes as if
a sudden brightness blazoned the short day,
till, turning back, my bike gone, there I am

a lifetime later walking slowly between
neat drystone walls, while up ahead two children,
a girl and a boy, have paused in windy sunlight
at the lane-top, one careful toe on the ground
steadying themselves, before, with a quick wave

to mother, who strolls quite leisurely behind,
they push off once again through a field-gate
on the rough bridle-path that will lead them down,
bright helmets glimpsed above the boundary wall,
to the shadows of Stone Wood, and so out of sight.

Liverpool 1952 / Shepley 2020

Tonight's Poetry Reading Is Cancelled (1966)

for David Selzer

"evaditque celer ripam inremeabilis undae" – Aeneid 6.425

When at last we reached the venue, it was veiled in darkness –
no one to meet us in the high-ceilinged hall,
a space charged with the memory of other voices.
Were we early perhaps, or late? Was the day wrong?
Had we come to the wrong place? A mocking colloquy
of ghosts whispered and muttered around us, deaf
to the Delphic satires, the measured ironies we had prepared,
pale typescripts rustling in doubtful fingers, our lines
in that dismal room unread. Baffled, what else to do
but journey back across the turbulent river?

On the other shore, our bus in the urban twilight climbed
from the Pier Head and the granite chain of the Docks
past soot-stained Library and Museum to streets still scarred
two decades on by the War – patches of waste ground
choked with rubble, rough clumps of ragwort, walls once scorched
by hissing flames in which whole families perished:
unequal city, whose dark oceanic history,
its deep occluded past, sang on beneath
the choruses that rose from dance-hall, bar and cellar,
a bright amnesiac surge of wry defiance.

Now, in this older city, we who had not met
these fifty years at last have met once more.
Ranged on your mantelpiece, your grandparents from Vienna,
you as a young man. What private ghosts attend us?
To say they are mere tricks of memory explains nothing.
Here in our altered world, where charlatans
and murderers prevail and the poor planet burns,
we too shall soon be ghosts, and our fine words
no more than the indecipherable script half-hidden
in the exotic textiles hanging on your wall.

Liverpool / Chester

Notes

“Twin”: The occasion that gave rise to this poem was the loss in utero of our daughter’s twin. When, four or five years later, my wife had a strange and harrowing dream that seemed so strongly to relate to this sad happening that a poem began to stir. (Weirdly, Zoë did go on to play the oboe.)

“The House”: The epigraph is taken from a short poem by the German poet Christian Morgenstern (1871 – 1914). The full text can be found here: <https://www.textlog.de/11450.html>.

“Paragliders”: This is the concluding poem in a group of seven set in Umbria. On 15 August, the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, my wife and I found ourselves on Mount Subasio above Assisi watching several paragliders launch off. When a few months later the poem began to arrive, this random coincidence hit me and brought to mind two paintings of the Assumption – the Rubens in the Onze Lieve Vrouwekathedraal in Antwerp and the Titian in the Frari in Venice – but, though gesturing towards transcendence (in art, in the domain of the spirit), the poem ends by very much coming down to earth.

“The Lid” and “The Gallery”: These might be regarded as further reflections on the addictive but illusory power of painting and poetry to fix in place the flow of experience but here addressed in a manner more quizzical and wry than in “Paragliders”. Both are from a group of poems in syllabics.

“Pedic’s Dream”: Like several poems from the past four years this concerns itself with how we have degraded our planetary ecosystem and our climate, possibly beyond recovery. The epigraph is from David Selzer’s poem “New Heroes”, which appears in his collection *Elsewhere* (1973).

“Foulness Island”: The same concern drives “Foulness Island”. Foulness (Old English: bird headland) is a low-lying island on the Essex coast, fronting the North Sea at the mouth of the Thames. It has been a munitions testing site since the early part of the nineteenth century. The poem addresses a close relative who for many years worked there as an industrial nurse.

“Invitation in a Season of Plague”: This was written for a poet-friend, Chris Preddle, and his wife Jacqui. (I recommend Chris’s 2010 Waywiser collection *Cattle Console Him* for its humanity, its technical brio and for the way it transforms and celebrates our Yorkshire landscape.) As Covid-19 restrictions eased last summer, I was moved to pen in verse a letter of invitation to Chris and Jacqui and took as a model a favourite poem of mine, Ben Jonson’s “Inviting a Friend to Supper” (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50672/inviting-a-friend-to-supper>.) Like mine, Jonson’s poem is modelled on earlier poems, in his case by the Roman poet Martial. (My own poem also echoes poems by Hardy and Auden, but the titles of these I will keep to myself.) When I had written my first draft, I realized that by a happy chance it had exactly the same number of lines as Jonson’s. Despite a note of companionable whimsy (which Jonson’s poem also admits), my poem concerns itself with the peculiar imprisonment all of us have experienced, in lucky or unlucky degrees, since March 2020.

“A View of Children Cycling”: The epigraph is from another well-known poem by Hardy, “The Self-Unseeing”, which can be found here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52313/the-self-unseeing>. The dedicatee is our daughter Zoë, our surviving twin, who lives in a Yorkshire village a mile away.

“Tonight’s Poetry Reading Is Cancelled (1966)”: This poem commemorates a signal year in my imaginative life, 1966, and, fifty-three years later, my meeting with David Selzer at his house in Chester. It’s a poem about ghosts and moves from my young man’s disconcerted sense of the voices that haunted the venue in which our reading was to have occurred (a projected event David was not involved in) to the complex and layered history of Liverpool (including its role as an anchor-point for the Triangular Trade) and then, with a switch of scene and date, to the private ghosts that seemed to surround the two of us when we met again in 2019. The Virgilian epigraph – “and he swiftly leaves behind the bank of that river across which none returns”: Aeneas crossing into the Underworld – is at one level a joke against the pretensions of a once-youthful poet: it has always been possible to cross the Mersey in both directions; whatever true Scousers (such as my wife) may think, the Wirral is not the habitation of the dead; and, finally, we were certainly not antique heroes enacting an epic mythos. Still, it is a poem about ghosts. One line in the final stanza is translated from the late poem by the Italian poet Eugenio Montale which serves as an epigraph to the whole collection. Speaking of ghosts, Montale remarks, “To say they are mere tricks of memory explains nothing”; and perhaps that is so.

Acknowledgements

“Precipitation” and “Twin” and appear in *Jigsaw* (Waywiser Press, 2003). “The House”, “Children’s Story” and “Paragliders” appear in *Already the Flames* (Waywiser Press, 2014). I am very grateful to Phil Hoy of the Waywiser Press for permission to post them here. Both books can be found at <https://waywiser-press.com>. The remaining poems are from *Pedic’s Dream* (Common End Press, 2021). Copies of *Pedic’s Dream* are available to visitors to David’s site, in exchange for a donation to one of a number of charities: enquiries to mail@commonendpress.com.

I, Clive Watkins, hereby assert and give notice of my right under section 77 of the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of all works presented in this post.

About the Author

Clive Watkins was born in Sheffield in 1945. His first collection, *Jigsaw*, was published by the Waywiser Press in 2003. *Little Blue Man* appeared from Sea Biscuit Press in 2013 with photographs by Susan de Sola. *Already the Flames* (Waywiser Press, 2014) was a *Times Literary Supplement* Book of the Year. In 2018 he won the Robert Graves Poetry Prize. His latest collection is *Pedic’s Dream* (Common End Press, 2021). He has read at venues in the U.K. – amongst others, at Grasmere for the Wordsworth Trust and at Oxford University – and at literary festivals in the U.S.A. and Greece. His critical writings encompass poets as diverse as Edward Thomas, Wallace Stevens, Conrad Aiken, Eugenio Montale, E.J. Scovell, Robert Mezey and Michael Longley. At his retirement he was the head teacher of a prominent high school whose origins lie in the Middle Ages.