

**The Other Animal :
Poems**

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Preface

Overheard one night was part of a television documentary which chronicled the making of a showcase on the African elephant. The rigours involved in filming such unpredictable subjects featured strongly in the interviews with each member of the film crew : the length of time required to develop a relationship of trust with the animals, the ever-present variable of the weather, and, most generally, the fact that the animals never performed on cue. The cameraman was heard at one stage to elaborate upon the frustrations of the latter : when, on one occasion, a perfect shot presented itself (a brooding early morning sky, the emergence and proximity of a family unit with several calves, the elephants' permitting the crew to approach the waterhole), there was a glitch in the process of loading the awkward and oversized Imax camera with its roll of film. The herd, sensing the cameraman's growing anger as he battled with the machine, moved away.

His natural response was to lament missing the shot. Being passionate about his work, the setback disappointed him. The camera not filming, he viewed an instant that was truly representative of his subjects' nature, embodying, through their acceptance of the film crew and complete lack of fear for the safety of the calves, the very sense of the elephants' human family dynamics around which his documentary centred. He felt that his inability to present filmed evidence in some way diminished the moment, its inherent quality. He held in his heart a moment, an image, the significance of which he could not testify to on his return from the assignment. Many other shots were captured and the documentary completed satisfactorily, but the project took on, in the cameraman's mind, the opposite effect. Instead of bearing witness to the nature of his subject, bringing closure, testifying to its existence and a

man's presence inside its world, instead of being an edifice of some kind built in the likeness of an experience, the assignment revealed to the cameraman an unmediated representative image of the animals and, importantly, the extent to which he and his documentary failed in their attempt to render this. He returned to the editing studio with miles of footage but less than that with which he left : the sense of what remains unarticulated about the world he had made it his life to render cinematically.

To assess whether or not his endeavour was a failure (while nevertheless a commercial success), one needs perhaps to explore the cameraman's motive. In their interviews the members of the film crew voiced another shared opinion, this one about the profession's trials. Being away from home and family for long stretches, living out of backpacks far from conventional comforts, constantly striking and breaking camp in pursuit of subjects, living in the pockets of comparative strangers, maintaining and transporting expensive equipment in conditions that were less than ideal : these all needed a significant counterweight, justification or reward. One could label such individuals free spirits and say they choose such a profession because they love the life, but what instils that love? What is it they are chasing aside from elephant herds?

The search for a catalyst may end, or rather begin, with these words by Camus :

...at least I know with sure and certain knowledge that a man's work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover through the detours of art those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened.

Preface (1958) to "Betwixt and Between"

Camus' words speak of a persistent drive to return to a stimulus, impulse or impulse-type that is different for each individual, yet commonly archetypal, representative,

heraldic, a standard an individual can fly that is emblematic of his life; that is, in short, totemic. Camus' "two or three...images" are "great and simple", requiring rediscovery through a process that circles around them for a time before coming upon them, a process which is complex, circuitous, taxing, inefficient and indirect. The greatness and simplicity of the original impulses, the catalysts of this process, have sufficient inherent unity and value to act as the glue that fixes the process to its destination, keeping one on one's path.

That path or detour is art. The apparent failure of creative processes and attempts to render, embody or build edifices is not always failure in itself since, as Camus suggests, these processes operate according to a different directional logic. By analogy to Camus' quote, one's mode of engagement with "great and simple" totemic images differs vastly from one's mode of engagement with other concepts which are described in spatial terms : one finds, grasps, arrives at or reaches for concepts and ideas which are "out there" at a remove from one. Causality governs these concepts : discovery follows search. Camus' class of images resists discovery, though : an innate, intuitive realisation, the "(image) in whose presence (one's) heart first open(s)", pre-exists the process not of discovery but of rediscovery, of finding again what is already there and of what has always been there, indeed of what it was in the first place that set one on one's detour. Camus' "slow trek" is a journey back to the self's centre, its totem. By analogy, an example of the former could be a religious system, whose tenets of faith and institutions form the backbone of and precede its conceptual organisation. Once instructed in these the individual embarks on a journey towards understanding and revelation. Spiritual life centres itself around a process, its ideal an epiphany.

For good reason wildlife documentaries are seldom, if ever, classified as art. That there are parallels to be drawn between the latter case above, the cameraman's sense of failure, and other artistic disciplines is not difficult to see. The cameraman's frustration at missing his shot, as with the writer, painter or musician's perceived failure to create an edifice worthy of one of the "great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened", robs him of the clarity needed to see that the very existence of art testifies to the fact that one cannot ever "have" or identify one's totem. The technical problem the cameraman experienced while filming ensured the continuation of his attempts to render his subject, setting him again on the detour towards his totemic image which is at the same time the course inwards.

This collection's title poem works similarly. In it the difficulty of pinning down for observation a totemic image is given a vehicle in the form of a composite animal. It is an animal whose "rustle" represents the literal stirring of something unnamed or unidentified, in a decentralised or alienated position. It is "outside", occupying an alternative physical space, but frequently intrudes upon this one, dragging with it like a tail some features of the otherness of its origins. It comes from a place of great antiquity; its "mossy, lichen-like" appearance ratifying the order it represents by virtue of its sheer primitivity. It is both its own and our origin, pre-existing us and our "slow trek" to rediscover it. It is partially concealed, awakening in one the desire to see it fully revealed, but remains "unaccountable", resisting categorisation and description.

Its strangeness, though, is inescapably familiar; it is a "collage", composite thus pervasive, from and in everything, evident everywhere, but still impossible to define in terms of what it is. It is identifiable only as being decentralised

and as not belonging in the realm of the social or empirical. The evidence it leaves of its presence is maddening : “spoor” always “ends” as it moves persistently into its own space, its tail disappearing just as one catches sight of it. It is not habitual, resisting biological classification by “never nest(ing)” and having “no call save/Its lemming lure to gorges and the sight of it/Unobscured”. Its elusiveness will drive one to extremes. Its appeal is as unfathomable as the instinctual mass suicide of lemmings; its powerful magnetism stands in dark contrast to the self-effacing urge to be drawn, the willingness to die trying to find and see it. It reminds one that one stands to it as a terrestrial creature to a whale, having a pitifully small chance of ever viewing the whale in its astounding entirety. Its existence testifies to the knowledge that the lived is part, only, of a potential.

It is a problematic totem, then, if a totem is what it is about a group or individual that gives it its strength. In tribal life the choice of a totem bridged two worlds, calling upon the natural world to aid in the social one. This in itself was a tacit admission to the pervasiveness of the former. Totems existed as guardians against not having totems and were thus concrete and functional to the highest degree. The “unaccountable animal” is totemic in another sense. It is an individual’s totemic animal that cannot be carved because it is composite, a collage, obscured and eclectic. The poem’s carver lays down his tools not in surrender, resignation or defeat, but because he has come upon a task that is already completed. He has run up against one of what these poems interpret as Camus’ “great and simple images”. He cannot carve the animal he has not yet rediscovered; his gesture of laying down the tools becomes an edifice, a carving, in itself. The totem becomes representative of all that resists representation in that moment.

There existed always the hope that the poem, and those that follow, would take the “blank wood” and whittle it into some form on the plain, the hope that the carver would be ready, ripe like the “late afternoon grass” for the discovery of a totemic image. Instead, in another convoluted detour, he is led to see that for now the totem is all around him, not rising up but flat like the grass, that along with the blank wood, the tools and the grass, his standing still is the edifice.

Poems

The Other Animal

The rustle that something makes that's not you
Is always downstairs or outside,
And sleek, or feathered,
And pine-scented,
Mottled, mossy, lichen-like,
And waxed to its prickly end.

From the bedroom it's neither the fridge
Nor a lover come home early, wanting
On the stairs.
It's the unaccountable animal,
The quick collage of owl-wing, furred snout and pads.
Though hot, it smells of cold lake
And lots of open air – pure premonition.

Its spoor ends as a dragged tail disappears.
It never nests and has no call save
Its lemming lure to gorges and the sight of it
Unobscured, the way alternate fluke and fin
Is never enough whale.

Uncarveable totem, it leaves blank wood
On a buffalo plain,
And in time a carver lays his tools
In the late afternoon grass.

Rare Afternoons

Rare afternoons
Repeat the certain way that light
And distance play on hills
Receding, far;

That way: the air's salt,
Undiluted from the sea,
Distilled; its yellowness, and that far hill
Worked brittle as a shell.

Calcified, the memory –
That hill's edge, finely honed,
Salt-scoured,
Held to the breast and prized
Like some saint's chalky bones,

One shard of shingle,
Relic of the conch whose spirals
Sound the sea.

After a Death

The kloof walls thrust and close,
Curve, and look on their water
As if on an unknown thing.
December dry. Small rivers
Of you own streak near
And blister dust.

Inside, a clay-like quiet
Seals this fracture. Water moves
From underneath, its deeper currents
Oiling under surface stillness,
A meniscus, like another skin
Whose surface tension strains
Under the weight of what is gone.

Frozen dassies bark and flatten –
Their dry alarm,
The coarse pelts in their voice
That well up, tear through silence;

Something in the throat
Uncoils, must follow,
Makes its arched escape
For a crack of sky.

Northwards

There is a black alpine corner
Here where the city falters into breadth
And green,
Black pines on a rise road-fenced,
Rain-blackened in a backlit squall.

Urged north by south-east
Gales, the burden of their latitude,
Their arms have lost their pitch:
A flattened canopy
Filled with migratory birds.

Still, they lean
Into these nights that swoop upon them
Though the wind has long since died –
These nights that yield the cross,
The belt, their pole-star out of reach.

Here on this corner's rise
That's lost its place for you,
(Nothing like that alpine sheerness
From timberline to glacial torrents
That you can still recall) –

You, too, just rest a while, –
Recalling, this far south,
Rain's falling has the quality
Of soft remembered snow,
Pines all the desolation
Of a kind belonging at the other pole,
Their vigil also yours.

Out at Sea

There's wind,
And an inch of hull
Between your feet and other bellies,
Between wild sound and the pressing
Quiet that, stone-like, sinks

Down to thicker water, silted,
Its richness poisonous, fathoms-deep
In such still and inky veins down there

That fish are driven shallower,
Bright arrowheads of that domain
So deep, that even when
They slap the deck, white-bellied, becalmed,
Their gills gaffed open, heaving
Less and less,

You know the forests underfoot
Are there, tossing quietly in their storm;
You feel the dragnet of that other world
Whose watery ceiling they've just breached
To bring with them

No less than this breeze brings
As it again begins to roar: the swing
Of boom, of dead-rolled canvas swelling
As it unfurls, the yacht's nose lifting –
A small one easing forwards
On a vast sea.

Under Sleep

One year they came as far as Tapas.
Kilometres of silt and they find the mouth,
Headless, silt guiding them to the narrow channel
Without beacons, shaded to me by the Western Head.

Sleep finds me, there. The oyster beds
Of waking hours are krill pens – that other, Antarctic,
Red tide hemmed in blocks of floating rope.
I kick inside the seething mass
Of pink and microscopic things, afraid
To cross the rope in case the krill get out.
Whales flap
In closer lethargy,
Blowing vapour I can smell.

The Humpback's grooved throat swells
In filter-feeding. Giant squid and seabirds, whole,
Are sometimes found in beached ones,
Partially digested, bleached.
One dives. I am less than fluke-sized
And know that when it comes up it will be
Under me, and gaping.

Even in sleep I know the throat
Can take me, that I am
In the krill and it won't know it,
That I will slip through hairy baleen,
And, when it breaches,
I know that I
Will breach along with it
To see, at last, the screeching ice-pack I've
Burned to, always.

This Harmless Thing

This time is truce for most – yellow eyes half
Close as bellies, beige as camels, are offered
To the shrill cicada quiet. Now, where the ground
Is soft, the sand runs hot, the silence

Thick as hoof-churned water in its mud.
Yet something not resting under the parched
And brittle sky, that's scurrying across a range
Marked with oily scent-like civet,

Looks back. It sees sun whiten to become the sky.
Pelt of heat, it pants now from the running;
Tracking to the centre, searching for the cool, it moves
To where the carcass started yesterday lies crusting,

Belly-up. It's hunger's there. Ears prick
For the wet, young six, just caking dry,
Still cauled and milky blue. But here,
It finds the kill was never made –

No buzzing meat nor splintered, beak-chipped
Bone, just disbelief, the crushing, lidded silence
From the den, the heavy dugs, the terror
At the nothing that had not taken them,

And as it looks, finally, up --
No thing pads behind, no twigs snap in the clearing –
It's there, what's infinitely high and curved
For some descends on you alone,

This whole cured sky, bone-dry and strung.

Man-eater

A rough thing of cartilage, dead eyes
Wide, eating cold meat in a cold salt sea,
Its grey form seeping from the grey
For just as long as its own body length

Then back, slicing into the grey-deep murk.
Flanking you, your own remoras:
This harem of them,
Drawn into your vortex
By your cold love's sway,
Steeped in you and the mute
Sea-grey. They move under your span,

Some riding upside-down on your white gut
With their white bellies glued to yours,
Half-hidden by your fins, half-
Hiding you.

Before you, far back as your length,
Before lips, snarling, bared these gums,
Your bloodlust scudding in soft clouds,
You nudged this sac –

A cell within a current,
I see you turn, still, in it,
Roving with them clasped
Inside the mermaid's purse
You've let their service make,
One eye
On me.

Things Far Stronger

Storms and a warm cat wake me
Four, five times a night,
And when I should
Make my length long against you
And the cold air, the too-heaviness
Of the breath in your filling and crumpling
Lungs speaks of a sleep too unperturbed
For my ease.

Some trees will be broken by first light,
Tossed to death, snapped by their own crowns
As rain plies groundward into mud.
The worst storms come at night, like
Raids and executions
Pulling bedclothes from your naked legs –
The finger in the corner
Of your night-staled mouth, your mute forehead
Unstaved and hearing the music of her voice
In that vacuum, out the back
Of your head, under the bed...

A gust, and in sleep I swipe
At that other trunk, your alveoli tree –
You are felled,
And lie across my morning road;
A tide waxes as your leaves choke drains.

Heat Loss

Tonight, something other than the body
You can feel your way around blindfolded
Crouches by the bed.

Something in the air, its emptiness,
Under the wideness of the sky tonight,
Is siphoning, slides itself
Between the closest bodies
To drink what you decant into another's pores.

It lingers for a time,
Sees moist things dry, warm
Cool and dust descend.

This crouching thing
Beside the bed tonight
Levies every action in the universe,
From a sky that goes on widening
In its emptiness, to the body
You once warmed to,
Warm, now, only as the air;

Its energies returned to dust,
Its flesh crouched over by this thing
As it demands its due.

After the Last Breath

That Highveld morning,
Frost burned dry-iced, doused later
By a watery sun
That tracked too low to warm the city.
You found it, then;

After the last breath
You find it easily, that place,
Daylit and vast,
Distinctly under a sky,
Flat, long-grassed,
And dry with a promise
Only openness like it holds.

Its animal residues
Returned with you, the one
Whose feathers touched you
In its low-warm swoop
Towards a distant massif welling cold.
You moved to follow -

Can't forget resisting
The rough grasp
That threw you hard
Against the city morning
When the faces brought you back,
Returned you to the swarm
Towards the gridlock at this city's heart,

Feral pigeons scattering.

First Things

From a dark place,
A moor that steams at dawn,
Her cries were carried down;
A strangeness in the house
Stalked her from inside,
In dark mud to the femur.

Her litter's first hours were amphibious.
They paddled through them on feet
Oversized, slick on the smell
Of a womb like dank mist hanging full
And low to the ground.

Surviving the slow drying,
Something leaves her eyes,
Her call now more alluvial,
Shallow from the shallow throat,
Than sieved through her body's
Deeper silt.

Still, written in the brood's wrinkled faces,
There is what has rinsed out of us
Long since with the water's settling,
The wetland map we knew once,
Its eyes still sealed.

Prehistory

Perfect fossils lying sideways –
Their horn-built brains pushed,
Tiny, into tiny foreheads,
Though measuring little
Beyond food and threat,
Must have known the limits
Of a soft and heavy flank.

No trees unreachable –
All shoulder-height and fallible at whim.
The nostril of the carnivore menaced
In their place, always downwind too close,
And sniffing.

Felled now,
They lived once on a high point,
Docile, nothing like
Their clawed, spring-loaded stalkers,
Just tall enough to gut one,
Always faster :

No ringing cry, no tremor;
Just a sinking into ferny mud
Whose dust skids now
Across a parched and snake-skinned plain.

White Horses

One of these white horses must be you,
One of these dark-lipped swells
Must break on you as your finless back
Breaks the wind's rays.

From this mountain road,
Wind-rise at the bay's mouth
Grids your heaving, falling world,
But you, unplotted, sink -

Just wind,
The wild and tattered herd you brought;
Each one's mane might be your blow.

Yachtsmen say sleep buoys you,
That at night your back becomes
More lethal than an iceberg:
Unlike ice, your diving
In a hot systolic surge breaks
The vessel's back.
But from up here, the doubts -

White horses may conspire
With the bay to hide you, let you lie,
Newly arrived, and catch your giant breath;
You may be just a confluence
Of perfect light, swell and spray,
And of all mariners' watery fear,

Centuries old: sea-monsters
At the fringes of a map.

Second Sight

Here, a speckled back
Glances off white stone,
Light off both,
Stone and a quick
White side
In altitude's
White-water light.

Brittle water
On this paved bed of stones
Where shallows give to black pools
Paced by cold. There now,

The glinting arc of a cold body
Thrilled by cold,
Cold blood at speed beneath
Rainbow skin.

Your head is light,
Light bright,
And even closed, the eyes
Still deeply, greenly cut
By flashes,
Even here, two days,
A mountain range away.

Undertow

(Peninsula Valdez, Argentina)

Each year, when blue ice packs
He comes alone in yellow oilskins -
An alien to these blunt cliffs
And lava stones that steamed once

At the seafringe. The backwash
Strands few whelks here
Near Patagonia: their turgid feet
Would split in its pebbled ebb.

His eyes, freed now from boots
That crunch where waves still slap and beach,
Scan once more that other lapse
As if pulled tidally. He knows his pod

Will soon wash loose. Waves run aground.
All day the smell of rain is rolled in fog
Until, in late sun, cliffs are lava-red again.
And then the blow - a small volcano

Venting out at sea, the forging island
Of the first wet back. They ride in,
Rolling in the sand beyond his reach.
All night their song condenses,

Trickles down the cooling cliffs,
A song retaken, filtered back
Through shingle. It's pulled
Into the undertow, this concentrate;

He hears it fade towards that lapse,
Their place where floes break
Into floes that dampen swells. The ground
Erodes beneath his boots to leave

Two crude impressions. Watched
By stunted rock, he's stranded
In the yellow whaleskin of his kind,
More alone now that the cliffs teem with sound

And the bay is churned by calving whales.

Ghost town

Circle the city,
Tighter still,
From the brown-smogged bowl
Its mountains make,
An impact site that smoulders.

Drain from the far rim
To where the hum is heard
From dark till dark,
Kept there by a lid of fumes.
Move through the littered sprawl
Of flatlands, wetland gagging
On hyacinth, to a run-off carving
Its clear, cold name.

Follow it;
Press onwards up its slope,
And find its source clear
Of the cloying haze it plunges into,
Seeping warm between
The anchorage of roots,
Stale among bladders that buoy up
A choking weed.

The beginnings, here –
This infestation overlooked
Like the grass that works
Its prising runners under roads.

From where the air is clear,
The city's quiet; your vision
Of it, fled and overgrown :
A Namib ghost town,
Strandwolves on its sandy streets.

Fallout

The counter-gale of silence
To the fallen wind,
And, drifting back,
Odd mutters of the night's
Unease at its quiet self.

Greater quiet sounds
In stirrings.
A lone car, the last,
Skirts its escape as things
Break shelter to hunt renewed.

You, though, remain;
You break sleep's curfew,
Witness to a night of overwriting.
Night-blind, your forward-facing eyes
See only big tracks over small

Until dawn's rinse
Reveals the night to you,
In pieces :

Sketched here
On the verge of a mountain pass
A wedged tail,
Half-opened wings, closed eyes,
Then closure
In the dead face of an owl.

Shrike

I

This dark, too far advanced
And terminal for night,
Yet still this stretch
To the sky's pre-dawn sickening,
That tilt, the giving way of ground
That slides you tractionless
Into day.

A gust creaks in bark.
Rubber leaves slap wetly,
Then give up, given up.

The front is weak, shot through
With holes in cloud. It boils
To spew the one wet squall
That will unpin you from this sleep.

II

You're fastened to another time,
To the year's cold half in which
The black eye of a shrike
Spends murky days watching
For that same first sign –
Mackerel sky.

That easy fluid gliding
As the front runs up against the peak;
For all their chaos,
There is a processional order
To the storms the southern ocean breeds:

And this pied bird in the grey,
That flits from branch to branch
With soft deceiving agitated sounds
In its flight for shelter.
The front's soft belly snags
And tears along its length,
Beading the bird with silver drops.

III

Not trickling now,
The mountain dries in summer gales.

The beak works harder ground
To flush larvae from their tunnels.
Trees siphon cell for cell
The moisture in cold, softer earth,
But, this late in the year,
It turns to vapour in the sky.

These winds are fruitless.
Now the black eye watches for the pall
As mist and fire-smoke chalk the peak.
A tide of insects flees this other front,
Its black and baking wash.
Each night, like you,
The head beneath the wing
Wards off these fronts,
Holds off the aftermath
That is the dawn.

Appendix I

In “Under Sleep” the image of a whale coming unnaturally far inland tries to work as a metaphor for the physical breaching of space involved in a kind of poetic map-making. The whale itself bridges two biological habitats, being air-breathing and aquatic. In addition, in the speaker’s dream it encroaches further on the terrestrial environment by leaving its deep waters to enter the lagoon, emerging from the depths of the speaker’s subconscious to the shallows that lap onto the waking world’s experienced reality. There is a sense of movement far back in time to a pre-human world, from the poem’s opening account of an actual instance where the whale entered the lagoon “one year” right back to a vision of that lagoon as it was before civilisation, or, at least, as it was in a time of early civilisation (the lagoon’s resources are being cultivated in the poem [“blocks of floating rope”] but primitively). Krill, too, is a virtually prehistoric organism, only slightly more evolved than pioneer species such as zooplankton. The speaker is also alone in the dream, and the final vision of the ultimate, Antarctic, landscape is one of complete remove from inhabited and survivable environments.

Distance, in both space and time, is suggested also by the poem’s double metaphorical remove. Its descent into the subconscious world of the dream is the first which evokes the second, the metaphor of the whale. This distance aims at transporting the reader out of his terrestrial “waking world” into another unmapped one; this may be what Heaney implies when quoting Anna Swir –

A poet becomes then an antenna capturing the voices
of the world, a medium expressing his own subconscious
and the collective subconscious.

and in his own words in the same work, The Redress of Poetry –

The poet is credited with a power to open unexpected and unedited communications between our nature and the nature of the reality we inhabit.

Both Swir and Heaney speak here of mediation, of the poet serving as a medium between two worlds, the empirical (that which we know) and the numinous (the world “as it is”, independent of and pre-existing us). That this ability to mediate is described as a “power” whose effects are “unexpected” infers that the channel of communication between the worlds is naturally closed, opened only rarely. This must be so by definition since the world of the numinous pre-exists us. The numinous stands to the empirical as a mystery requiring translation. The existence of poetry demonstrates the desire to explore this inaccessible world, the sense, perhaps, that its translation into different terms will clarify certain aspects of “our nature”. We look to poets for the cipher, the verbal formula, that will integrate elements we experience as either jarring and disquieting or just inconsistent with a life we are obliged to conduct in a social realm.

Poems, then, are the products of the “one moment” during which a poet “possesses wealth usually inaccessible to him” (Swir). In that moment the poet is empowered through inspiration to access the cipher of the numinous, something that is at the same time the poem’s encrypted writing and the key to this encryption. To use Borges’ terms, during this moment the poet is closer than ever to the discovery of his Aleph, the key to his experienced reality. Camus’ “great and simple images” constitute a creative or poetic Borgesian Aleph, the first symbol, the ultimate verbal formula expressing in substance another of the poet’s encounters with a “heart-opening” stimulus. The poet decodes the numinous into accessible terms, bringing his totemic images intact into the social realm where they in turn can transport his readers

back into the world of the numinous, at best, or, at worst, where they can attest to the existence of the numinous through naming, in itself a creative process.

The numinous resists naming by definition since it is “as it is”. To name it would be to recreate it in human or social terms, to taint it by incorporating it into “our nature”, to project ourselves onto it and compromise its integrity. In full knowledge of this many poets maintain it as a source of their own humanity despite the fact that the poetry that renders it must surrender the human intellect to an extent.

Heaney paraphrases Stead’s reading of “The Waste Land” in these words :

Stead’s reading is a vindication of a poetry of image, texture and suggestiveness; of inspiration; of a poetry which writes itself. It represents a defeat of the will, an emergence of the ungainsayable and symbolically radiant out of the subconscious deeps. Rational structure has been overtaken or gone through like a sound barrier. The poem does not disdain intellect, yet poetry, having to do with feelings and emotions, must not submit to the intellect’s eagerness to foreclose. It must wait for a music to occur, an image to discover itself.

Poetry is thus a bridge between the empirical and numinous, breaking the restrictions of the former and invoking the latter by “overtak(ing)” “rational structure”. It cannot succeed in delineating the latter fully, though, but serves rather as a legend for its map. The poetry lies in the attempt to draw this map, whose completion and accuracy of representation is secondary to the process of its own emergence. Its key is encrypted into metaphor; encryption into poetic form is paradoxically the only way of decoding and drawing Camus’ “great and simple images” out of the numinous.

“Under Sleep”’s whale is, like the “unaccountable animal”, both attractive and ominous. The fact that grooves in the whale’s throat allow it to swell

and consume whole birds and animals without being aware of having swallowed them, the size and power of its slapping flukes at close range, and the krill's powerlessness to escape engulfment by the huge animal that cannot be seen cause the speaker's instant of nightmarish terror before the reminder comes that this is the speaker's greatest desire. The whale will literally carry the speaker from this place, where the social world's anxieties and restrictions filter down into the subconscious, to another world whose sublimity satisfies a very deep need. The speaker longs to be incorporated by this agent of a quiet, clandestine escape, longs to stow away and be exiled from the species.

"Undertow"'s whale researcher imposes a more active and voluntary exile upon himself, spending winter on Argentina's Peninsula Valdez, a breeding site for the subjects of his research. He places himself at the geographical limits of civilisation which, like the shallow waters of "Under Sleep"'s lagoon, is a liminal space, the littoral zone. This zone is the habitat of species in transition, in the process of evolving out of the water onto land. It is both terrestrial and aquatic : "waves run aground" on it but the "smell of rain" that is "rolled in fog" and the "tidal pull" dampen and wash over it. Along with the volcanic vapour, the elements of fire and water characterise the forging of a landmass that is still underway.

As the species here evolve slowly out of the sea, so it is the researcher's impulse to return to it, to be "floated" again and permitted entry into the closed system of the whales and their song. The song is that aspect of the whales that can move across the elements of land and water. Their song for the researcher is an encryption into metaphor, a filtered residue, a distilled essence that contains all the elements in a concretised form of that horizon from which the whales appear one day

and to which they return. He is beached, but from the other side, the shore, trapped by the song's magnetising pull, in "the yellow whaleskin of his kind". The "blunt cliffs" and "stunted rock", and the "crude impressions" left by his boots all emphasise his stasis and stand in contrast to the whales' streamlined ease of movement; in his boots and oilskins he appears as "alien" as he is.

Beached by his awkwardness, he nevertheless knows he will be drawn to this place year after year even if it is in vain. The whales will always leave the bay for the horizon without him and their arrival each year for which he waits alone will always desolate yet tantalise him. The tidal pull will always draw him to where the waves break on the beach but never further, just as the dreamer will never see the ice-pack. Both must realise that, like the carver in "The Other Animal", their totems, and the deep undertone of power latent in such images, will evade them, and that the significance of their encounters with the world of the numinous lies not in its animals themselves but in their desire to search for and follow them. The poems in this collection are an attempt to capture the traces of that significance, which I believe to be present in such encounters.

Appendix II

...the term “modern”, when applied to art, has a more than chronological meaning : it denotes a quality of irresponsibility peculiar to this century...My own theory is that it is related to an imbalance between the two tensions from which art springs : these are the tension between the artist and his material, and between the artist and his audience, and that in the last seventy-five years or so the second of these has slackened or even perished. In consequence the artist has become over-concerned with his material (hence an age of technical experiment), and, in isolation, has busied himself with the two principal themes of modernism, mystification and outrage.

Philip Larkin, Required Writing (1983)

...it seems to me that the characteristic element of modern literature, or at least of the most highly developed modern literature, is the bitter line of hostility to civilisation that runs through it.

Lionel Trilling, Beyond Culture (1969)

“Things Far Stronger” chronicles a night of unease and restlessness whose ostensible cause is a storm’s series of squalls. The poem’s speaker drifts in and out of sleep, constantly aware of the weather’s waves and of the replication of that upheaval in the intimate space between the two lovers. The speaker acknowledges that she should counter this unease by “Mak(ing) [her] length long against [him]/And the cold air”, but is precluded from doing so by the rhythmical breath of her lover which sounds to the speaker almost mechanised, as if controlled by a respirator. In contrast to this is the storm’s manic “breath” and the “gust” which brings closure in the final stanza.

The lover is dead to this world, “unperturbed”. His ease compounds with the violence of the storm to increase the speaker’s discomfort and comes to stand for both the lover’s world and the vast distance between this and the speaker’s. The lover’s world, even in sleep, is a social one. The scope of his dream is “mute” and clear-headed, a blank space onto which the speaker projects her anxieties about the

social world in the form of the fear of her lover's infidelity. This fear is a "vacuum" against which the speaker feels powerless. It is associated with images of persecution by an organised and tyrannical social force ("Raids and executions") which is violating and intrusive. The storm becomes symptomatic of the perceived proximity of the social world's anxieties ("rain plies groundward into mud") as well as that world's tendency towards self-destruction (trees are "snapped by their own crowns").

The speaker's world, though, is one heavily influenced by events in nature to the extent that natural upheavals catalyse certain emotional responses. The final dreamed act of destruction, performed in sleep, is sympathetic to a gust of wind heard, perhaps, subconsciously. It is a gesture which severs the lover's airway, an attempt in sleep to end the tyranny of the social world's reign and its power to disturb and disquiet. The lover's airway becomes the trunk of an inverted tree whose branches constitute his respiratory system. In the speaker's subconscious an order is toppled, felled like a tree by this gesture of resistance, but the residue remains with her on waking. She must pick her way through the effects of her destruction in her waking hours and proceed with a life that represses the night's disquiet. The repression begins to build again soon after it is released in sleep, expressed in the form a rising tide of run-off from the storm.

The lover is encountered again in "Man-eater". Here he embodies again what the speaker perceives to be the mercenary nature of the social world. The shark is used as a vehicle to communicate this cold-blooded predatory nature. The poem descends into a cold and hostile medium which is numbing. The shark is flanked by a phalanx whose functions exceed those of conventional symbiosis. The remoras form a "harem" around the shark, a closed system of self-perpetuating

servitude into which each has been drawn as if into a “vortex”. They service the shark in an unnatural relationship, the result of which is a blurring of the distinctions between the animals involved in the cycle. Both shark and individual remora are “half-hidden” by each other until they fuse into a single indeterminate organism occupied solely by itself, by the gratification-centred complex that it forms. The speaker is excluded from this organism, unwilling to grant the lover’s social prominence any dignity. The new organism’s unity is described as being “clasped/ Inside [a] mermaid’s purse” : in the lover’s behaviour the speaker sees a return to a kind of infantilism, a reversion to the embryonic state of an egg capsule.

In these two pieces particularly, there is evidence of the “bitter line of hostility to civilisation” that Trilling notes as characteristic of modern literature. Each portrays the social sphere as numbing and regimental, composed of encounters with others that are at best awkward and at worst undignified. The pieces suggest further the sterility of this sphere, its tendency towards destruction and its resistance to deeper primal energies. It is governed by explicable cause and effect and its rigours deny access to an essential source of vitality. Its impulse is Apollonian, “repress(ing)”, in Paglia’s words, “the monstrous gigantism of chthonian nature, that murky night-world from which society must be reclaimed day by day”. This line of hostility would seem justified in the light of comments made by those like Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane :

Modernism...is the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos. It is the art consequent on Heisenberg’s “Uncertainty Principle”, of the destruction of civilisation and reason in the First World War, of the world changed and reinterpreted by Marx, Freud and Darwin, of capitalism and constant industrial acceleration, of exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity... It is the art consequent on the dis-establishing of communal reality and conventional notions of causality,...on the linguistic

chaos that ensues when public notions of language
have been discredited and when all realities become
subjective fictions.

“The Name and Nature of Modernism”

These words describe a society worth being hostile towards and justify in part modern art's tendency towards what Larkin describes as “mystification and outrage”, even though the latter regards this modernist reaction as a betrayal of poetry and its social mission.

Where the pieces here hopefully distance themselves from modernity is in their intended destination. Larkin's quote above complements Trilling's by pointing out that practitioners of modern art have lost much of their sense of audience and commitment to pleasing an audience. Having no faith in society's capacity to understand them, many modernists have worked for themselves and each other in competition for the greatest achievable degree of artistic autism. Larkin's “essential criticism of modernism” is that it “helps us neither to enjoy nor endure. It will divert us as long as we are prepared to be mystified or outraged, but maintains its hold only by being more mystifying and more outrageous : it has no lasting power.” In “The Pleasure Principle” he elaborates :

We seem to be producing a new kind of bad poetry,
not the old kind that tries to move the reader and fails,
but one that does not even try. Repeatedly he is confronted
with pieces that cannot be understood without reference
beyond their own limits or whose contented insipidity
argues that their authors are merely reminding them-
selves of what they know already, rather than re-creating
it for a third party. The reader, in fact, seems no longer
present in the poet's mind as he used to be...

The pieces here do not presume success in moving the reader, but they do try. They are not written for their own sakes or out of any belief in the necessity or inevitability of what I have called artistic “autism”. Evidence in them of Trilling's “bitter line of

hostility to civilisation” is not simply evidence of what has become (by now) a modernist “reflex”, but is intended as an implicit social critique that is moral in nature. The “detours” they make towards their first movers, their originating impulses, map out a poetic space. This space serves as a reminder of the existence of the numinous and of why attempts to express encounters with it, however elusive, are essentially humanising.

The pieces here express the belief that to neglect the primal, vital and pre-human is to fail to achieve a deeper self-discovery. To advocate a poetry that is written “in isolation” by a poet who has “become over-concerned with his material” is to relinquish our primary responsibility as writers: to create cultural artifacts that in my view celebrate our nature. To accept such artistic work is perhaps to perpetuate the kind of world that Bradbury and McFarlane sound sometimes overly grateful to find themselves in, a world whose “linguistic chaos” opens the way for an artistic or poetic permissiveness which destroys the essential pact between a writer and society. These poems have been written out of the conviction that a writer has obligations that reach much further than an obsession with the new – obsessions which are, in fact, ancient in their depths. If these pieces go some way towards reminding their readers that their source of vitality is a common well, they have achieved more than was hoped.

Their concern is with mystery, but they do not seek to mystify, rather to translate and decode a world already saturated in mystery. Here, in a world that pre-exists society and language, the notion that all realities are “subjective fictions”, as well as other tendencies of the modern movement, both in its modernist and postmodernist expressions, becomes a sophism. Given my sense of this pre-social world, and of its powers, there is a further conviction that underlies these poems :

that poetry's new charge must be to salvage language from indeterminacy
and to reinvest it with its power to refer to anything, or everything, but itself.