



Stein, Jock (2021) *Temple and tartan - Psalms, poetry and Scotland*.
PhD thesis.

Volume 2: *Word and weave: poetry on the Psalms*.

<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/82294/>

Copyright and moral rights for this work are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study,
without prior permission or charge

This work cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first
obtaining permission in writing from the author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any
format or medium without the formal permission of the author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author,
title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Enlighten: Theses

<https://theses.gla.ac.uk/>
research-enlighten@glasgow.ac.uk

Word and Weave: Poetry on the Psalms

This Presentation offers an experience of the Psalms and how they reach into Scottish history and contemporary life. It accompanies a Thesis called ‘Temple and Tartan: Psalms, Poetry and Scotland’, which sets the poetry in the context of other writing on the Psalms, and shows how it sheds light on Scotland past and present. While the overall structure has been carefully planned, it has not pre-empted a varied response including satire, comedy, whimsy and tragic vision, with a variety of forms (ancient and modern). With objectivity maintained through the scholarship of the thesis, the poems launch a cornucopia of ideas.

1 Carpet. Poems on the Psalms of Book 1 take the readers to different parts of the cosmos of place and history and personal experience, as if on a magic carpet, connected by the theme of enquiry (from Psalm 27:4). Justice is another theme, since Israel (and humankind) are ‘on the carpet’ before God. Like the Psalms themselves, the poems do not follow an obvious sequence, but every poem is connected with the next by (at least) one common significant word: for example, to complete the circle the last poem 41 and the first poem 1 share the word ‘psalms’.

2 Journey. A linked sequence of short ballads, curating stories of early and medieval Scotland (in tercets) alternately with stories from the Old Testament leading up to King David (in quatrains), and showing the similarities between his life and that of Robert the Bruce, citing verses from Book 2 Psalms.

3 Migrants. Individual stories of migrants, in dialogue with the Psalms in this third book, and with reference to the story of Israel which these Psalms rehearse. They include two stories of Scottish migrants, and one migrant missionary to Japan.

4 Pibroch. A long poem which follows the pattern of a pibroch. The tragedy of the troopship *Iolair*, and how we might come to terms with it today, has a parallel in how Israel learned to come to terms with their history of exile and return, which Book 4 Psalms begin to reflect.

5 Tapestry. Individual poems on the Psalms of Book 5, which is itself a tapestry with the long Psalm 119, then the Psalms of Ascent (120-134) as a centrepiece. Book 5 poems continue to reflect the ‘Temple and Tartan’ themes of the Thesis, but with more of an emphasis on praise, since Book 5 is where David ‘lays down his crown’ in favour of God as supreme ruler.

The Old Testament Psalms both reflect Ancient Near Eastern religion, and challenge it. A common theme is temple, and earthly temples were always intended to be a counterpart of the cosmic temple which was the home of God. But whereas the other ancient temples had their images, it is man and woman, humans, who are the image of God in the Israelite cosmic temple – humans who ‘enquire in God’s temple’ as in this poetry.

Tartan is a weave where different threads of culture and history cross, and the metaphor is extended to embrace the synaesthesia of art, music and poetry, and the relation of human and divine. The five headings all hint at some kind of ‘crossing’.

While the poems do make use of specialist knowledge of the different Psalms, they are in no way ‘versions’, and are designed to stand on their own without requiring a reader to open the Old Testament Psalms, desirable as that might be. Taken as a whole, they use seven threads of the work of a biblical makar – enquiry, interpretation, wonder, dressing, curation, prophecy and the final golden thread – to weave a plaid which readers will enjoy wearing.

Book 1 Poems: Carpet

1 Temple Garden

Illuminated manuscript,
unnumbered, naming no and yes,
by some anonymous lyricist
who introduces all the rest
with contrast and with chiasm,
two parallel lines that never kiss
but cross and complicate the rhythm
of a temple garden house.

The righteous prosper, trim and trig,
manicured by God's own hand,
nourished, watered, planted snug
and safe, quite sure they know the plan.
Outside Eden, sour soiled farms
make cultivation toil and pain,
yet still enlightened by the psalms
that penetrate our dusty skin.

How simple seem God's garden themes
for daily work and sabbath rest;
but underground, deep hidden genes,
our subway roots, in battle dress
keep us alive, write up our files,
assess the truth of war and peace,
press our buttons, tell us tales,
feed our choice of ant or louse.

2 Irony Redeemed

You make them look ridiculous,
these tin pot gods, this pompous lot
of presidents. So plant your questions,
smelt, refine your iron work,
but craft it in a human frame,
with hands and feet we recognise,
and Zion somewhere in our hearts.

3 Chin on Chest

'You, O Lord, are . . . the one who lifts up my head.' v. 3

Chin on chest, dream walking,
still I carry disappointment.
Lord, cup my face within your palm
and lift it, so I see another
pair of feet besides my own.
My skin bleeds from the cruelty
of those who fight me or forget me.
Lord, draw a circle close around
my fraying edges, so I find your
cross-shaped failure hides my own.

4 Bedtime Sonnet

‘When you are disturbed . . . ponder it upon your beds.’ v. 4

Bad lands for the sleepless face
fetched flat, mind grounded, stoppered,
shaken with a poisoned word;
jeremiad days, without a trace
of laughter oxy-bubbling fertile chatter
through that shame pool: there it learns
to surf its own dissatisfaction, churns
dark cream which never turns to butter.

Lord, turn my squat into a sanctuary,
show your face, and smile upon my sleep
to make my bedtime better brain time, deep
with surge and flow; a nest up high,
a restful REM sleep, dreams
from one who hears those silent screams.

5 Daily Routine

‘In the morning you hear my voice.’ v. 3

A turtle wakes and waits, a little shy,
a lizard wakes and tongues a passing fly;
a warrior wakes and checks his blade is true,
an infant wakes, and all the world is new.

Lord, I am many things, and many people,
so each morning smiles a welcome
– and then hits me somewhere deep;
wake up is a new-staked claim on life
– and then a count of more than I can do.

But if you listen, while those turtles crawl,
while lizards laze, and warriors take a fall;
then I will talk, and take this infant chance
you like me, and my complicated dance.

6 Honest Tears

'My bones are shaking with terror . . .
I flood my bed with tears.' vv. 2, 6

When he fell into my arms,
I held him tight, remembering
that awful night, the rift
torn through his tender gut,
and somewhere deep, nudged into me,
how God is good with tears.

Unlike the hypocrite crocodile,
third eyelid brimming cheerfully
while jaws are full of meat,
we source our butchered sorrow
soulfully; with aching bones
and breaking hearts we sob our grief.

His pain racked three of us,
if God be counted, counter
to earth's bald arithmetic.
I count on God, with Jesus
putting skin and hair on God
who spots the tiniest teardrop.

7 Shiggaion

'On their own heads their violence descends.' v. 16

We cannot harmonise this song,
this hurt and angry 'shiggaion';
for sure we often get it wrong
when thinking with our gut.

We do not recognise this God
who fires his arrows on the nod
to pierce the tongue of each poor sod
who disagrees with us.

Yet God is not so soft a touch
that evil keeps on winning. Such
an absent God is far too much
a non-theology.

The mills of God grind slow but sure,
fed by our dull revenge. If you're
God's target, let him score
a bull's eye, drill the heart.

8 Old and Young Newscasters

'Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark.' v. 2

They say the Americans never
made that full moon landing,
they call it fake news, filmed
by old and frightened men
to boost a President scowling
up the back of a Russian bear,
down in the polls, prevent
his legacy pop into thin air.

They say that climate change
is just a Leftie game call,
something we can handle.
So the children strike, all
resolute to raise a flag
of inconvenience, rattle
politicians' cages, join
this dark green battle.

May the mouths of infants
build a tower, provide
a slit for awkward arrows
fired to pierce the hide
of backward leaders
mouthing *ichabod*.
Curse those lame excuses,
cast the majesty of God.

the glory has departed

9 Forgetting

‘The very memory of them has perished.’ v. 6

An appointment, a face, a nation, a race;
a garden, a country, a moon or a cosmos;
things blur, they say, get vague as we age
and edge into forgetfulness,
unlike the Lord who’s busy, busy
turning page on complex page
of evolution. Memory loss,
for God, is choice to take our sins
and bin them, off the cosmic stage.

A brother, a mother, a dance with a lover,
a flourish, a foul up, a flower will fade
as neurons falter in our brains
and leave us strangers to ourselves.
Can we believe God will remember
how we lived, if our remains
are burned or buried? When our faith
has vanished off the scene, forgotten,
is there ought a poor saint gains?

A coat, a prayer mat, a favourite cat;
a diary, a smile, a shadow, a sundial;
no stars in the grave, it’s lonely down there.
A prayer: ‘God, while my twitching nose
can smell a clue to human life,
made to be raised from death, somewhere,
somehow, re-membered – help me find
some traveller who has lost the scent
and needs a whiff of praise, and care.’

10 Hard Questions

'Some questions are too good to spoil with answers.'

Nahum in the red corner, walks out tough:

'Belt those Ninevites, knock them dead,

God is a word you'll come to dread.'

Jonah in the blue corner, off to sea:

'They'll get no word of God from me,

God better find someone willing instead.'

Jonah in the belly of a fish came round

to target Nineveh, launch a career,

put citizens down on their knees in fear.

God saw change and switched his view,

Jonah whinged as he fought the clue

that God likes love more than sword or spear.

No easy answers in psalms are found,

if the cry, 'God, why?' just calls God's bluff,

and despairs of justice when times are rough.

Choose bully or wimp and you banish belief,

so stay with the psalmist and feel the grief

till you meet with a God you can trust enough.

11 Exam Time

‘The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked.’ v. 5

Essays, orals, surveys, morals,
pushy tweets ‘we want the best!’
Instant soup in a public cauldron
stirred by winners, losers, sinners
learning lines that fail God’s test.

Academics, civil servants,
priests unfrocked and in disgrace;
‘Wicked’ spins, since relativity
shocked us, rocked amoral waves
through brains as well as time and space.

Those who fear foundations knocked out
lose the plot. Gear up the program
for the gaze of God, rejig the lot
to get some temple target practice,
daily assessment God’s exam.

12 Watch God's Lips

'Yetser hatov, yetser hara' – a Rabbinic antinomy

Binary systems

serve more
than laptops.

Each pair
of lips –
open goal
for love,
open tap
for truth
or flattery,
open space
for things
that matter,
open market
to exchange
who knows
what kind
of words

– each pair
speak of
two hearts,
two rivers
from Eden,
yetser hatov,
yetser hara,
coursing the
human race.

the good inclination
the evil inclination

God's lips
spell 'yes':
promising lips
to watch,
together
making one,
never zero.

13 Beating on the door

‘How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?’ v. 1

I’m beating, God, upon your door.
I screw my eyes to read your lips
but I am shaken to the core

by covid, climate, and what’s more
you’ve morphed into a God who sleeps
when I would worship and adore.

On glib response I set no store
nor on those charismatic cantrips
which have left me raw and sore.

charms

How long before I rant and roar,
or worse, when my whole being slips
to shadow life upon the floor

I will ooze death through every pore
while casually the Devil rips
my fading faith to shreds. Therefore

I’m beating, God, upon your door;
with these mantraps I’ll get to grips;
I’m pounding, Lord, upon your door
and I *will* worship and adore.

14 Tuim-heidit

'Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God"' v. 1

They're a wee thing tuim-heidit, *empty-headed*
 them as beats the drum fir science
 an cannae fin God ony place.

Whit dae they expeck? Angels *bouncing*
 stottin oot o test tubes, cherubs
 ridin quarks, a derk god bleck-holed?

We niver really thocht o angels
 dancin on the heids o peens,
 yon wis jist philosophers flytin. *wrangling*

Heivin is whaur God is, aw aroon;
 wioot, the universe is tuim indeed, *empty*
 sae tuim it faas tae less thin stoor. *dust*

Can ye hae guid wioot a faith? Aye, *good*
 whiles. It taks a wheen o generations *a good few*
 tae pit a ceevilisation back in clogs.

See 'Darkest Hour' – thon Churchill film?
 He gat is ken an wit fae chiels *know-how insight people*
 wha traivelled wi im unnergroon.

An see yon King wha cam tae back im,
 Geordie ca'd a realm tae cruik its hochs; *bend its knees*
 nae wird o thon on the big screen.

Tuim-heidit? Tuim-hairtit? Tuim-saulit?
 Fin yir ain metaphor, but listen up,
 Israel: God will hae the hinnermaist wird. *last*

15 Postmarked

'O Lord, who may abide in your tent?' *v. 1*

Innocently she smiles, placing
two envelopes in my hand.
She will walk down the road,
busy with bills and brochures,
her daily postal business.
I am just opening metaphors
for holy man and hypocrite,
worried that they use one typeface.

Two letters in the same post,
one for me, one for my shadow,
speaking of money, promises,
gossip, neighbours, friends.

Soon I shall walk down the road,
hoping my holy smile reaches
two corners of my mouth,
and holds my face together.

16 Bless my Kidneys

'I bless the Lord who counsels me,
at night my heart [*Heb.: kidneys*] instructs me.' v. 7

Bless my kidneys, one might say,
reading Hebrew body language
with a knowing smile: away
with careful, icy comprehension,
make for the warm choppy wake
of David, his sweet and salty passion
for a God who wants to ravish,
sandblast, sort and wrap the soul
secure within its deepest wish.

When the sea's a trampoline,
bouncing plans, churning guts,
settle your skis, laugh, lean
back into the breeze behind,
hold God's line, let God balance
body fluids, brace your mind.

Whereas in English the heart is the seat of the emotions, in Hebrew that is for the mind and will, with emotions (and conscience) seated in the kidneys or belly.

17 Eye to Eye

'I have avoided the ways of the violent.' v. 4

What a sweet and salty psalm,
titbits, tough bits trauma trawled
from fearful years: blogging bald
as a bullet head, yet strangely calm
as David facing Saul, half certain
of the peaceful power of prayer,
but left with anger in his hair,
close-cropped, a violent disdain.

His hope? God's look. It seeks out fruit,
the apple of a human eye,
God's sweet endgame. A butterfly
flaps wings, slow tempest follows suit
and evolution blossoms, fades out
primal instinct, fades in choice,
the hearing of a crucial voice,
the entry of debate about

genetic fate. Adam unlearns
the violent lust to cut and tear,
stab, butt, rape, swear
at Eve. By grace, Macadam spurns
those vicious habits never formed
in Eden, but maybe concealed
in code upon the playing fields
of Eton. Can he live unarmed?

The battle rages fierce within
the cave, the dark night of the soul.
At dawn, when he awakes, he will
be thrilled to feel God close, begin
to wax his grown pupils, meet
the gaze of God, far-seeing light
which surely must put all things right
and nail the cosmic balance sheet.

18 The Nature of God

'He made darkness his covering.' v. 11

God is not – not this, not that: so say
the sages of the all-negating way.

*You rode the dark
and bent the sky
when I was tumbling
into hopeless night.*

God is not some stuff to be defined.
Faith rests upon the things God does, they're kind.

*You flashed a spark
and lit my lamp
when I was fumbling
with a broken light.*

God is not as dim as humans are;
God is not vague – God is particular.

*You made a mark
upon my map
when I was stumbling
and a sorry sight.*

19 Art and Science

Experimental Inca scientist,
 Pachacutec, emperor, was left
 alone for three days to his curious self
 upon an island in Lake Titicaca,
 studying the sun, its daily progress.
 A god, he thought, would roam the sky,
 unchained in orbit as the sun.
 'There must be Someone other.'

Vincent, artist, troubled saint of sorts,
 gazing at the sunflowers and the sun,
 dreaming on the star rhymes of the sky,
 bears witness in the court of art.
 Though passers by at night might glimpse
 only a little smoke from the chimney,
 that great fire in Van Gogh's soul
 burned light onto a canvas.

C.P. Snow, scientist and writer,
 sketching two divided cultures, bright
 fixers with the future in their bones,
 poets locked in a sunlit past.
 Art and science maybe need each other,
 but in burnt up, bitter years, who comes
 with sunny words and sweeter tweets,
 like hexagons of honeycomb?

20 Royal Rule

'Give victory to the king, O Lord.' v. 9

When Adam delved and Eve span,
who was then the gentleman?

'God save the king – or maybe queen.'
Have we no republican psalms,
no hint that what's aye been
might be a changing scene?

Who is this chosen royal king?
Anointed, haloed – but by whom?
This psalm has lines which fling
a spanner into everything

that might accommodate a fan
of democratic government.
If Eve dug deep, and Adam span
would we have then a gentle man?

With every age, its royal crimes.
Is there another Adam
that might flype the rhymes
and rhythm of the times?

turn inside out

21 That's It, Then

'Blessings forever' v. 6

No least hint of sorrow
no flaw in the gold
no prayer unanswered
not one word of weakness
no sin undiscovered
no chance for the wicked
Not a paradox in sight

22 Worm Weary

'Many bulls encircle me.' v. 12

No cuddly pets in sight: there lurk
just savage beasts – and me, a berk
God-forsaken, hurling out
a prayer, a groan, a rasping shout
from broken lips, from East Damascus,
every hell scene that would ask us
how much bloody longer, why
set monsters on humanity?
A talking, swearing, crying worm
one minute, and the next a sperm
of hope, yearning for a womb
to offer God some living room,
a womb to tend my worst afflictions,
tomb to end my contradictions.

23 Shepherd Sonnet

Contradictions, with a sudden dark
to overtake our cosiness, our rosy
hopes. The unexpected snakes devour
the flimsy ladders that we pick and park
for easy climbs to happiness. Who knows,
we might today be falling, calling out
for God to hear us, hold us, help us, fold us
in those arms that felt the hammer blows
to nails through ankles, wrists – such love to meet
the cost of shepherding the likes of us;
or finding courage in the cold of night,
the daytime heat, the struggles of the street.
You fill my cup with hope again: indeed
I find, with you, I've everything I need.

24 Behind the Door

‘Be lifted up, O ancient doors.’ v. 7

Every thing,
every blessed thing
that God has made
was placed upon the piers
love built out of the years
of evolution’s readiness
to tiptoe at the pace of God.

Every one,
every blessed one
or ninety one
who climbs a temple stair
and leaves behind their share
of human dirt and emptiness
will seek and see the face of God.

Every king,
every blessed queen
who fronts the queue
at mystic doors, and waits
outside the glory gates
– such royal lowliness
will find the living space of God.

For every thing
and every blessed one
who knocks in hope,
with heart and soul sick
of our inauthentic
puff and stuff, in holiness
will revel in the crazy grace of God.

25 A New Lexicon

'Do not remember the sins of my youth.' v. 7

Back in my youth, wrapped up and gone,
I was no angel: but it's age
that opens a new lexicon,
puts loss and pain centre stage.

I was no angel: but it's age
and wrinkles make a tender soul,
put loss and pain centre stage
and start to make the person whole.

Yes, wrinkles make a tender soul,
reflect the crooked paths of life,
start to make the body whole
for break and make are man and wife.

Reflect the crooked paths of life,
reveal success, translate defeat,
for break and make are man and wife,
they share a house in every street.

Reveal success, translate defeat,
play on my heartstrings and my gut
which share a house in every street
I drive through mindfully; so please,

play on my heartstrings and my gut,
sound blues and rhythm in the glen
I drive through mindfully; but please
deal with me kindly, even then.

Sound blues and rhythm in the glen
where trip wires cross, and boulders roll;
deal with me kindly, even then
make music in my empty soul.

Where trip wires cross, and boulders roll,
I'll wear the hurt, I'll bear the wrong.
Make music in my empty soul
and I will answer with a song;

I'll wear the hurt, I'll bear the wrong.
Back in my youth, now it is gone,
I longed to answer with a song
that opens a new lexicon.

26 Aye Right

'I have walked in my integrity.' v. 1

If Davie gat tae screivin wirds like thase
lang wirds lik integritie, an nae jist yince,
he maun hae thocht himsel agen a laddie.

writing

must

Nae a gang leader, wi bluid on is hauns.
Nae a guerilla fechter, teuch an gleg,
playin aff yin agin the ither a the time.

tough and smart

Nae a king wi a gled ee, wha spuliet
anither's wife, and kilt hir guidman
tho he wis his ain aefauld sodger.

*roving eye plundered
husband
loyal*

Nae a stickit faither, yin wha coudna
dale the richt wey wi the bairns e hid.

children

Lad and lassies arenae aa that guid,
ken, sae whit wey did yon son o his,
the yin they cry the Christ, hoo cam
he telt us tae become like smaa bairns?

Aiblins it wis curiositie?
The wey they gie ye aa they hae tae gie?
Wis it they cud tak the hauns o Jesus
wioot bein pit aboot lyk aulder fowk?

perhaps

upset, embarrassed

Davie langit tae be born agen,
A kin jalouse – wioot yon lexicon.

guess, work out

27 From Caskie to Cosmos

'He will hide me in his shelter.' v. 5

What was Donald Caskie's mind on,
when Gestapo failed to climb the stairs
and find them hidden in the gallery?
Inquiring in God's temple, scheming,
dreaming of a life beyond the walls?

Tent or temple, build it radical,
porous, see through, pop-up church,
open sided, roofless. Roller skate
along a corridor, find a door
which opens to a vault of stars.

Abseil to the crypt, dig out
a tunnel under faulty towers
of privilege and vice. Leave limpet
bombs of word and witness, learn
to gaze on God deep underground.

This maze of God is where I lurk,
passionate about a charged cosmos,
its cool mystery. This is the faith
I share with Paul, affirm the universe
is all Messiah's, yet still ours.

Like Solomon I lift my holy hands
to heaven, and proclaim God vaster
than the space God fills. I ask,
what sort of God is this, who wears
our skin, and keeps such human hours?

I seek your face, I search your cosmic fields
to find you stellar occupant
of every kitchen, cellar, gallery:
I search your cosmic files, I seek your folk
to find you present in a feast of smiles.

28 Pinnacle or Pit?

'If you are silent to me, I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.' v. 1

The universe has six dimensions,
seven double letters father Abraham
could see, a cubic universe,
the temple at its heart –
so said Creation Book *Sefer Yesira*,
moving meaning from a public knowledge
base to private words and lego thought.

My hands feel their way to the centre:
sanctuary, the holy hexagon,
the space with six edges, where
the heart beats something
old and fierce. It is my journey
to the sun, my Parker Project
over seventy-seven years, not seven.

Is this your holy place, my God?
Might cabbalism turn the cry of David
into echolalia? From Pinnacle
to Pit, where God is silent?
Will the temple change to clever text,
or could the holy word become again
our flesh, our fate, our faith?

29 Mind Map

'May the Lord bless his people with peace.' v. 11

Five steps to meeting fire with fire
of love, five lasting steps to bury Baal,
that chancy god, for good and all.

First up, reconnaissance, go over
ground, with Caleb's can do attitude;
live in their skin, think as they would

up to a point, step number two,
for human thought is never watertight,
not Israelite, nor Canaanite.

The third is battle for the mind:
because *the pen is mightier than the sword*
they sang the great voice of the Lord

who (fourth) stormed through the Middle East
and mocking, cut foes down to size
with shafts of truth instead of lies

which leaves a fifth much later step –
non-violence – take it, later Joshua's way,
and leave to God the power play.

30 Playing and Praying with David

'You have healed me . . . you brought up my soul from Sheol.' vv. 2-3

Playing away with Bathsheba instead of his mates,
called out, sent off by Prophet Nathan,
David swopped God's face for Sheol's gates.

Yet David never sought to take a tour
with Dante in the nether parts of Hell.
It was enough for God to make him sure

of mercy, smile upon his mourning soul,
control the damage, re-engage the covenant,
returf the pitch, remark the goal

for me and all who want forgiveness fervid,
reeled and jugged right down the field,
yes, everyone who plays and prays with David.

31 Holocaust Denial

'I have passed out of mind.' v. 12

The gas chambers have exited
the screen, so what else brews
behind a face which wants to frame
the Holocaust fake news,
its documents all doctored,
witness just a shred?

*I've passed right out of mind
like someone who is dead.*

The death certificates died,
their owners disappeared,
ghosted into mist and myth,
a sleight of hand that's geared
to turn the not so distant past
a little less blood red.

*I've passed right out of mind
like someone who is dead.*

A custom of nay-saying,
a library of lies,
the truth dropped out of Dropbox,
no store cloud in the skies.
My first prayer was too easy,
my second is unsaid,

*I've passed right out of mind
like someone who is dead.*

32 Silence

'While I kept silence, my body wasted away.' v. 3

My gutted silence
groans to God,
for keeping quiet
is not a mark
of Jewish faith
or modern doubt.

The noise of silence
fills my head,
loud memories
keep battling trolls,
rattling facts
I can't refute.

A wall of silence
breaks my heart;
things unsaid
are dissonant,
a cloud of sound
that shuts me out.

Locked in silence,
fearful, gagged
by those who keep
harsh tabs on you?
Let this psalm be
a parachute.

To break that silence,
choking speech
and life itself,
takes all of God
and all of us:
one saving shout.

33 Judgment

'He spoke and it came to be . . . the Lord brings
the counsel of the nations to nothing.' vv. 9-10

One shout
to cheer the players,
call attention
to the score,
brace the music,
fire the psalm,
a singing arrow
winging skilled
parabolas of praise
across the pitch.

One melody
to seed the storm,
astound the dawn,
feed grass and ground,
reveal a world class
wicket keeper
on a field
where what
we pick or pass
may not be cricket.

One quote unquote
for Holyrood,
for Belfast,
Dublin, Cardiff,
from Westminster:
while fools queue up
to riff that note,
beware! The Umpire
may not play
by English rules.

34 Fears – a List Poem

'I sought the Lord and he answered me, and delivered me
from all my fears.' v. 4

'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.' *Proverbs 9:10*

Ahmed's anger
Bella's blackmail
Colin's court case
Dai's divorce
Erzsébet's ego
Fran's fake film
Gregor's guilt
Helen's hate

Isobel's insomnia
Jean's jealousy
Kati's kidneys
Lisander's leukemia
Mary's madness
Navin's nightmare
Owen's obsession
Peter's poison

Quentin's question
Rachael's rape
Stephen's sexual abuse
Tasmin's terror
Umberto's ugliness
Viktor's violence
Winston's whip
Zach's ugsome zeal

What are you afraid of?
Never mind the unknown X,
there is Yourself and holy fear,
where Wisdom tackles fools,
and God plus U is W.

35 Enemies

‘Fight against those who fight against me!’ *v. 1*

When it is too easy to say

‘Love your enemies’

When it is repugnant to say

‘Love your enemies’

When it is impossible to say

‘Love your enemies’

I shall seize this great aggressive psalm

I shall load it with these righteous bullets

I shall smile and slip the safety catch

and – oh horror –

God has stepped into the line of fire

nodding his head at my complaint

opening his heart to all my anger

holding his hands up in surrender

36 Change of Subject

Enough of enemies
rattling words, dropping turds
to grease your way to the pit.

Change gear,
dress for a place where skies expand,
where goodness has no prey to fight,
no animal goes out of sight,
and stealing land is banned.

Raise barriers,
find space for refugees,
grit some just political teeth,
new brief the army and police,
release the feast, in peace.

All those friends,
sharing passes, raising glasses
to the star of a lit up heaven.

37 Don't Fret

'Do not fret because of the wicked.' v. 1

To the short-term victor the spoil:
Nazi loot or Assad's boot.

How can you say, 'Don't roil
yourself', when they conspire
to make land contraband
for Sunnis fleeing fire

to live as refugees
while lesser folk possess
their homes – no 'if you please'.

Weep *After the Last Sky*:
Said's lament for bent
Jew-Arab history;

Duck as Ngũgĩ's sinews
flex at Kenyan men
who slip into White shoes

and steal land from *The Poor*,
who *Have no Lawyers*. Raw
research, tracking spoor

laid down in memory
for Wightman's legal fight
for land and liberty.

What about Ostriker's quote,
here set: try not to fret
'at the meanness of men' she wrote,

but she knew how to add,
this psalm has bitter balm,
it's counterfactually clad.

A *Volcano Sequence* indeed,
although, for the lava to run
and bite our memory, read

Dead Men's Praise, and thrust
your tender nose in Osherow's
damning take on trust,

as Auschwitz Jews rehash
'don't fret or feel regret'
to 'a shovelful of ash'.

Takes faith to understand,
long-term, and to affirm
the meek shall farm the land.

Books referred to in this poem are listed
in the Notes at the end of this section.

38 Dialogue with Pain

'Your arrows have sunk into me.' v. 2

You squeeze me in your holy grip
I shrivel up – it's all my fault
although you sent me on this trip
you squeeze me in your holy grip
and let your questions run full rip
to bring me to a grinding halt.

You ease me from your holy grip
I answer back – it's your default.

39 Tanka for the Passing Guest

'I am your passing guest.' v. 12

Each day a dice cup
shaking sunshine or shadow;
each prayer a hiccup
bouncing questions off the wall
that hides us from the future.

40 Mine Shaft Music

'I waited patiently for the Lord.' v. 1

A song from the mine shaft, a cry to God's ear
in a psalm Bono felt was more Gospel than Blues:
I'll sing in the darkness, and wait without fear.

Lost deep in a maze without freedom to choose
my way out, reshuffled, discounted, debarred:
I'll praise from the pit, gloom and panic refuse.

Attacked with a blog knife, half pen and half sword,
lambasted by critics who mock a false me,
I'll ignore their fake idols, I'll stick with the Lord.

Walked over by cynics who trash my integrity,
squeezed like a grapefruit, impaled by their taunts,
I'll talk from my heart, and I'll sing my lips free.

To hell with false comforters, agony aunts,
spin doctors, celebrities, all just the same,
I'm here and I'm willing, I'll do what God wants.

Farewell to the pinball and thin wall of fame,
a good reputation, a solid career,
I'm poor and I'm needy, but God knows my name.

41 The Cosmic Synagogue

'They think a deadly thing has fastened on me . . . even my bosom friend,
in whom I trusted, has lifted the heel against me.' vv. 8-9

You would expect to hear the word amen
within the mosque or church or synagogue;
the cosmic record shows, for rich and poor,
throughout our history the road is hard,
the way is narrow, dogged by human snakes
who trip and trap the amens of the blest.

While godly psalms preoccupy the blest
who long to see a cosmic great amen
transforming every sloth and slug and snake
into the dolphins of the synagogue,
the savvy sigh: they know how very hard
it is to change the ways of asset rich, time poor.

Cosmic is as cosmic does; the poor
survive on scattered crumbs among the blest
and wish for more than words; it's hard
for broken refugees to say 'Amen'
and 'Praise the Lord' when synagogues
of any faith play racist cards with snakes.

With just a touch of irony, the snake's
acknowledged as a sign of healing, poor
joke for the sick within the synagogue
who think that healing's in the deal, a blest
inclusive gospel for our glad amen:
a package with no comfort – just too hard.

To hold together different worlds is hard,
to keep believing humming birds and snakes
both share a cosmic plan, to say amen
to theft of time and assets, seems a poor
and dour response, when dozens of the ablest
minds have banned snakes from the synagogue.

So who is welcome in the synagogue
to sing these psalms? Should I include those hard
unholy enemies of mine, say 'Blest
are you' regardless if you're saint or snake,
a sloth or slug, labelled rich or poor?
And while I pray, I hear them hiss, 'Amen'.

This cosmic synagogue has snakes
who make it hard for all, even the poor,
to say 'Blest be the Lord: Amen, Amen!'

Notes on Book 1 Poems

1 Chiasm means ‘crossing’, from the Greek letter X; Psalm 1 is not the best example, but in v. 6 ‘the Lord watches over the way of the righteous’ is followed by ‘the way of the wicked shall perish [when judged by the Lord, v. 5]’, which reverses the sentence order in a chiasm.

3 Using two Finnish sayings cited in *The Icebreaker*, by Horatio Clare, Chatto and Windus, London 2017, 44, 111.

7 The ‘shiggaion’ (Hebrew word) is a lament of some kind.

10 The quotation is from Thomas Halik, *I Want you to Be*, Notre Dame University Press, Illinois 2016, 2.

17 The rhyme pattern A B B A mirrors the chiasmic psalm pattern. I owe the concept of ‘Macadam’ to Andrew Philip.

19 The Van Gogh quote is from his ‘Letter 155’, June 1880, <http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let155/letter.html> accessed 4/3/20. The book referred to is C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1961. Snow was a fan of George Davie’s ‘Democratic Intellect’ (Paul Scott, *Towards Independence*, Polygon, Edinburgh 1991, 97).

27 The story is in Donald Caskie, *The Tartan Pimpernel*, Oldbourne Book Co., London 1957, 148-9, republished Birlinn, Edinburgh 1999.

28 See Peter Hayman, ‘Some Observations on Sefer Yesira (2) “The Temple at the Centre of the Universe”’, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 51 (2) 1986 176-182. The Parker Project is a NASA probe to the sun launched on 12/8/18.

29 The poetic conceit of ‘five steps’ reflects the step parallelism of this psalm, which is found also in Canaanite poetry. The title ‘Mind Map’ is a concept developed by Tony and Barny Buzan.

37 Books referred to in this poem:

Edward Said, *After the Last Sky*, Faber & Faber, London 1986.

Thiong’o, Ngũgĩ wa, *Petals of Blood*, Penguin, London 1977.

Wightman, Andy, *The Poor had no Lawyers*, Birlinn, Edinburgh 2013.

Ostriker, Alicia, *The Volcano Sequence*, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh 2002.

Osherow, Jacqueline, *Dead Men’s Praise*, Grove Press, New York 1999.

40 The italicised line in stanza 1 is cited with permission from a song by Maggi Dawn (Kingsway Thankyou Music/EMI/David Cook). The reference to Bono is based on *Revelations*, Canongate, Edinburgh 2005, 136.

Book 2 Poems: Journey

Psalms 42 - 45

1 Blood Lines

A

Where is your God? A question never marked
on Abraham's mind map, given what we know
of this great ancestor, just told to go
from Haran, up and round that Fertile Crescent

Canaan bound, with basic Bedouin stuff
– a tent, a wife, a nephew, goats and sheep,
maybe a camel, servants, just enough to keep
together soul and body, *build an altar*.

Sheikh and shepherd, wandering warrior,
hearing desert recitative by night
as God kept telling Abraham he might
expect *as many children as the stars*.

One God, one note, such faith and faithless play
with Abraham's women, trial on Mount Moriah
when his trust was taken to the wire
and Isaac brought the song back from the dead.

B

Columba learned that music, flew
(or fled) across the Irish sea
to beach his coracle on I.

Columba, lord of wind and whirlpool,
whales and wells, the cataracts
of Scripture, named prophetic facts
that opened hearts and kingdoms,
thundered godly psalms at Brude,
changed a heathen land for good:

a saint of spiritual songs,
thirled to God by light and truth,
heaven's music, Spirit's breath.

C

Led, or driven, into wilderness,
wildscape where songs and dreams and men expire,
Moses saw the light, the bush on fire,
found the God of all his nomad fathers

calling him to go to Egypt, face his fears
and Pharaoh, free his people from the grind
of slavery, the helpless, hopeless mind
that takes disgrace as heaven's final word.

*Take off your sandals, Moses, keep your distance,
this is holy ground.* So Moses hid his face,
but not his failings, tried to dodge his place
in history, argued long with God, and lost.

Loose ends tied up, great ends ahead, the man
went back to win his people living space
as God fought for them, making them a race
unique, a lighthouse to intrigue the world.

D

For all their common Christian light
those Europeans fought for power,
and this meant refugees like her,

the Saxon Princess Margaret,
disciplined at the court of Stephen,
wrecked on Tyneside coastline, even

then in Scottish hands, and taken
north to wed that nasty Malcolm,
roughest king in Christendom.

Did he poison his Orcadian
queen? And then exchange that potion
for his passion, for his notion

that he wanted, needed Margaret,
some firm and feisty woman who
would take him, change him, make him new?

Forget your kin, your father's house:
tough words for any royal bride
'mid rumours of uxoricide.

Who else would leave her husband's bed
to tryst with God, and let him be
all eaten up with jealousy?

He crept behind her to that cave –
but when he found her true, he knew
he had some making up to do.

He bowed to God as well as wife,
and so Dunfermline Abbey stands,
his penance, built to her own plans.

Her soul kept thirsty for her God,
saw statecraft joined to piety,
new learning, health, sobriety
and pilgrimage an economic
asset for the realm, Queensferry
hers in name for car or wherry.

E

Romance, command, arrangement, hit or miss,
the chemistry of fate has many forms
and ceremonies, taken as the norms
of ancient or today's society.

Let's find them in the text, those hidden
early brides, from Eve to Zipporah,
with thanks to Shiprah and her colleague Puah,
who both saved the race from genocide,
fulfilling words to Abraham, that he
would have descendants, so that those who share
his faith in God might call him father, bear
his name beneath their own religious label.

F

What a roll call from her womb,
no virgin saint Queen Margaret:
Alexander, David set

to follow Duncan, Edgar, all
her sons, and with a lateral twist
we find King Robert on the list –
the Bruce, whose wife Elizabeth
would suffer exile for the cause
of liberty, its fame, its laws.

Salute the women, pull them out
of hiding, name them every one,
and note the mother of the son,
the countess Marjorie of Carrick,
Bruce's mum, and Agatha,
Saint Margaret's devout mama.

Psalms 46 - 48

G

A bit of foreign blood improves the gene pool,
oils the way to make Adullam's cave
a hospitality tent for any brave
enough to join the loyal opposition,

find the God of Jacob is their refuge,
take the risks of changing faith and truth
to copy David's great-grandmother Ruth.
But none of that is in young David's head.

He watches sheep. He skiffs a stone across
a river carrying his childhood dreams,
still unaware of any brook *whose streams*
will bless the future city of his God.

H

We dinna ken fir shair gin Bruce
 wis born in Ayrshire or in Essex,
 wi his pedigree a mix

sure if

o Europe's westies: onyweys,
 cried Robert lyk is Norman faither
 (no that they were aye thegither),

Bruce wis a sturdie bairn, brocht up
 in Annandale, wi fower brithers
 an three sisters, aa wi mither's

child

Scottish bluid as weel's the French
 tae gie the comin King a gene
 for joukin back an forrit, tween

ducking forward

the Scots an Edward, eik name Langshanks,
 wha cud flether and cud flyte
 an if ye thrawed, gang unco gyte.

*nickname
 flatter scold
 opposed mad with rage*

Nae mony gaed aboot the land
 tae coont its tours, conseeder was,
 its fierdie heritage an its laws,

*went
 towers walls
 proud*

fir maist wir feart, wi Balliol jist
 a tuim tabard. Then, Wallace winnin
 Stirling Brig, the English rinnin,

*afraid
 empty*

Edward laired in Flanders – hooch!
 – till Falkirk; efter, a thing ower,
 Wallace lowsed hissel frae pooer.

released himself

Bruce wis Earl o Carrick, yokit
 wi his sleekit unfrien, Comyn,
 an yin Peebles coorse forgetherin

smooth, plausible
rough assembly

fun the Comyn's twa hauns thrapplin
 Bruce afor the ithers mad im
 gie richt ower. The bishop bad im

choking

bide is time, fur aiblins God
 wad *brak the bow, ding doon the axe*,
 an mak the English turn thir backs.

wait perhaps
cast down

Bit nae jist yet. Edward wis back,
the mountains shak, the braid seas raired,
 an Bruce wis forced tae cry im 'laird.'

call

I

Far from Rhine and Danube, Tyne and Forth
another river waters not a garden
but a city; not the river Jordan
but a river from the heart of God;

not even Gihon in Jerusalem,
but God's own blessing for all humankind.
Meanwhile, the prophet Samuel puts his mind
to changing the succession: no more Saul,

but David, chosen for his sparkling eyes,
his shepherd soul. The last shall end up first,
the youngest best; while Saul might do his worst,
the giant-killer David swerved, survived.

One day they'd crown him in Jerusalem,
a city David took by stealth; ascended
by the water tunnel; God defended
him, and let him star in his own film.

*Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion,
city of our God.* A hillock morphs
into a cosmic diamond dwelling, dwarfs
the future monarch's modest place of birth.

J

Who know what stark theology
drives prelate, monk or priest
to put a fast before a feast?

God is the king of all the earth,
the Psalmist says: and therefore, since
an English king is but a prince

a Scottish bishop ponders long,
decides God's temple has no gate
that closes out a Scottish state.

Psalms 49 – 51

2 Border Warfare**K**

David had no qualms that Saul was king;
 he was a commoner; he knew his place,
*for low and high, both rich and poor, all face
 one judgment, leave their wealth behind.*

Saul was the foolish man, the paranoid,
 fearing failure, dreading death; obsessed
 with David's popularity, possessed
 by jealousy, he tried to kill the one

he saw as rival, offered him his daughter
 as a prize, set the bride price high
 enough to guarantee that he would die
 at enemy hands. But faint heart never won

fair lady – David, smitten, never blinked,
 brave enough to outstare dangerous billies
 like King Saul: tossed a hundred willies
 at his feet, and married Princess Michal.

Still, *no price is high enough for life,
 in spite of fame we die like animals.*

No way Saul and David can be equals;
 David seeks the truth, and finds the lie,

as Saul is taken over by his hate,
 sits there, bieling, *speaks against his kin,*
 calls out his son, flings his spear at him
 for loving David more than father's pride.

boiling

Michal is wife – but Jonathan is more,
 a friend that loves more truly than a brother,
 tragic, doomed to perish with his father,
death his shepherd, Philistine his foe.

L

Another Saul perhaps, this Edward,
 making Robert *protégé*,
 not guessing *lésé majesté*

would prove a double-ended spear,
 their friendship just an episode
 as border warfare ebbed and flowed.

These English kings *named lands their own*,
 but rich and poor, *the wise, the fool*,
must enter death's own boarding school.

Robert made three pacts: he pleased
 himself and Edward, as it were,
 and wed Elizabeth de Burgh.

The second pact, with Lamberton,
 he made to *solve his riddle*, keep
 the flame of freedom burning deep
 within himself. The third compact
 was Comyn brain-child. Robert
 trusted him, used all his expert
 skill at politics, until
 called back to Edward's oversight;
 Bruce played for time, fled overnight,
 deduced the depth of treachery
 on Comyn's part; confronted, slew
 him at the holy altar, knew
 the die was cast; the time had come
 for Scots themselves to call the tune
 and crown this Robert king at Scone.

M

Some psalms are written to enthrone the king,
and some are written when the king has fallen
foul of God and humankind, all in,
shit-soiled in sin, and flat upon his face.

King David, older and no more that bright-eyed
boy who charmed all Israel with his art,
his handsome, giant celebrity – his heart
cries out in pain: *‘O God, have mercy on me,*

I am crushed and broken, filthy in your sight.

I stole Bathsheba, made her pregnant, got
her husband killed, then went and tied the knot
with her in haste to hide the awful crime.

*You want the truth bored deep into my soul,
so make me clean, and scrub my dirty heart.*

I’m torn in bits, but every single part
is pleading with you, begging your forgiveness.’

N

Maybe King Robert used this psalm,
acknowledged what he’d done before
the altar of a church, his war

with Comyn bringing him to crisis,
daggers drawn, shedding blood
within the holy house of God.

Barbour glossed it in two lines,
a bishop soon absolved the king,
but still it was a dreadful thing

that seared the conscience of the Bruce,
besmirched the virgin Scottish rose
and gave a weapon to his foes.

Psalms 52 - 59

O

Young David took Goliath's sword, and fled
from Saul, left Doeg clyping to his king: *telling on*
'I saw your son-in-law, worshipping
at Nob, and all the priests supporting him.'

Saul summoned them and had them put to death,
his chief of shepherds, Doeg, *treacherous*
in heart and tongue, his dagger lecherous
with misdirected lust for sacred blood.

All alike perverse, no one does good,
the litany continues through the strife
of Saul and David, running for his life
from town to town, from countryside to cave,
where once he hid, as Saul crept in to crap,
and David's men said, 'Get him, now's your chance!'
But David said, 'No dance of circumstance
will let me murder God's anointed king.

'I cast my burden on the Lord, for he
will save me, and throw down my enemies
into the deepest pit. Vengeance is his,
and I shall live to give him all my praise.'

P

Bruce almost lost his life at Methven.
 With his cause and kingdom doomed,
 he fled far west, while Edward fumed.

Barbour never mentioned spiders,
 but the legend fills a vacuum;
 history needs some wiggle room,
 for truth is strange, and providence
 embraces fiction as it acts
 through circumstance and stubborn facts
 – like those two women caged like doves
 without their wings, four hideous years
 a spectacle, exposed to jeers,

nowhere *to fly and be at rest*;
 while Alexander, brilliant brother
 (Dean of Glasgow), Thomas, other

sibling, lost their lives for Bruce.
 How will he spin the story, win
 the hearts of kith as well as kin?

(And how will other thinkers link
 the simile of *olive tree*
 and killing in the sanctuary?)

Q

No kin were Ziphites: '*Rude and ruthless strangers
seek my life*', said David, as he dodged
King Saul again at Horesh, went and *lodged*
in wilder country, rescued from his troubles.

Would it always be like this? A weary
fugitive? Pretending to be mad
in Gath? Or asking God's advice from Gad
the seer? '*All day I utter my complaint.*'

R

Guerilla warfare's what you see
when Bruce comes back. In Galloway
he worked his faith, day after day
*evaded capture, kept his feet
from slipping, proved that God could shame
those who would trample on him, came*
at last to tipping point, the fight
at Loudoun Hill, and (well rehearsed
off stage), the death of Edward First.

S

This royal lion, *greedy for its prey,*
its teeth an arrow, tongue a sharpened sword,
 had lashed its tail at David and the Lord:
 but when King Saul and Jonathan met their fate

on Mount Gilboa, David would compose
 a song of lamentation, praise the one
 who set the dogs on him, the Saul who'd done
 so much to hunt him down and take his life.

Yet David knew the words to slag a foe:
'Let them be like the snail that turns to slime
under my foot. Let them slip out of time
like an aborted child. Give me revenge!'

David once had carried thoughts like these
 against a man called Nabal, who refused
 a payment for protection, then abused
 his future king, preferring his own feast.

He had a wife who knew which side her bread
 was buttered: waited till her man was sober,
 told him how she'd gone and cleared the larder,
 taken loaves and wine, dressed sheep and grain,

a hundred raisin cakes, two hundred figs
 to save the day, keep David's wrath at bay.
 A stroke ensued, her husband died, a doorway
 to a better life, as David's wife.

Psalms 60 - 65

3 *Broader Places*

T

A better life indeed: *repair*
the breaches, fill the cracks
with smeddum that the country lacks.

courage

A bolder life – although the Bruce
falls sick, his people pray, ‘*Prolong*
the monarch’s life, let him be strong

again, for he belongs to us,
and we to him. Returning health
became a sign of commonwealth,

a king and people working out
how *low and high estate* will both
commit to treaty at Arbroath.

But first to set a nation free,
keep and castle, raid and ransom,
North Sea trade another transom.

Bruce is found beside his soldiers,
wading through Perth Castle moat,
water reaching to his throat,

in such like ways declaring status,
tightening screw and turning spanner,
raising up a godly banner.

Slowly, slowly, wins this race,
 until his brother, who had wedged
 his men round Stirling Castle, pledged
 that Mowbray could remain
 one year without relief. This made
 the English force bound to invade
 before Midsummer, 1314,
 giving Robert just a year
 to mount the fight of his career.

U

David makes the flight of *his* career
 to Achish, King of Gath, a Philistine
 no less, and serves him well, with every sign
 of loyalty, by raiding foreign parts,
 pretending plunder comes from Israel.
 Then a blow: his base at Ziklag falls,
 the women, herds, are stolen. Hear the calls
 his men make hard against him – *then he prays;*
his heart is faint; God leads him to his foes
 through an Egyptian slave he rescues, makes
 the raiders raided – finds the flocks; takes
 his trophies; *fainting turns to feast and praise.*

V

Now Edward marched his men past Falkirk,
 thought he'd quickly sweep the board,
 failed to take St Ninians Ford,

had to take the long way round,
 pitch his camp down on the carse,
 there park his weary royal arse.

Scots creep through Balquiderock Wood
 that second day, before midsummer,
 Edward's army due a bummer

blow, knock out

for their spurning of the peace
 that Bruce has offered. Oozing swank
 but poorly led, they slumber, drunk

until they spot the Scots advancing
 down the carse. King Edward likes
 to think that when they place their pikes

and kneel, they offer to surrender;
 close advisers grimly cackle:
 'Sire, they kneel 'fore God and battle!'

One knight charges at the Scots
 – too late, no room to gather speed,
 he falls; the Earl of Gloucester *deid*.

dead

The English archers have their famous
 arrows ready by the gross,
 but now the Scots are far too close,

they cannot shoot without their targets
 being friend as well as foe;
 they are disqualified. And so,

the Scots are winning; pinned between
 the Pelstream and the Bannock Burn
 the English see the battle turn.

The river of God is full of water,
yes, but now it runs with blood
and buries men in gore and mud.

Two days later, Bruce reflects,
and through the squint at Aberdour
takes bread and wine: "This is my hour,
for you have heard my promise; also
Scotland's hour; our time has come,
we're no more under England's thumb.'

W

King Saul is off the field, now dead, and with him
Jonathan: *have you not left us, God?*
Must we repeat that awful *ichabod*?
The land is torn, and human help is vain.

the glory has departed

David, kept alive by providence
can pray, 'O God you heard my vows, and gave
me heritage with those who fear you. Save
me, let me be enthroned for ever.'

So it was. He took the throne at Hebron,
fought for seven years to bring the nation
into one. 'My rock and my salvation,
God my castle, confidence and King.'

X

*If riches grow, set not your heart
upon them.* Bruce dealt well, and fairly
with the captured English, early

on he ransomed Bishop Wishart,
with his Queen and Marjorie
his daughter, now at last set free.

Needing further fields of glory,
Edward Bruce went into action
overseas, but some distraction

Ireland proved to be; *set no
vain hopes on robbery*, the psalm
makes clear, it only leads to harm.

Ten years after Bannockburn
the Pope acknowledged Bruce as King.
In shadow of your wings, I sing

*for joy, and all who swear by him
shall glory, for the mouth of liars
will be stopped.* Priests, monks and friars

now invoked St Andrew patron
saint, and Edward, always late,
agreed in 1328.

He turned the sea into dry land.

While Pharaoh may have lost his son,
his daughter Scots proved the one

progenitor the Scots might claim
 to link them with the Bible story,
 according to the ancient foray
 into history on which
 the Declaration of Arbroath
 itself depends. For, nothing loath,
 the document rides roughshod through
 the facts, to make the case for Bruce
 before the Pope, plays fast and loose
 with Picts and Scots; but what it says
 on people, kings and common weal,
 for freedom making such appeal,
 is what has stamped its glorious seal
 on minds and hearts for centuries.
 Without it, Bruce would be the less,
 for he has only one more year
 to live. The Douglas takes his heart,
 after his death, and makes a start
 on pilgrimage. Jerusalem
 he fails to reach, is killed in Spain,
 the heart is saved, comes back again
 to find a home in Melrose Abbey.
Blest the man whom God shall choose:
 so rest in peace, Robert the Bruce.

Psalms 66 -71

Y

David gathered thirty mighty warriors,
battle heroes, ambidextrous slingers,
archers, men who understood the King as
well as fought for him; they knew him, loved him,
risked their lives to bring him just a drink
of Bethlehem water when he mentioned thirst.
Such energy and love behind him burst
a leaking dam, installed a new regime.

After all the trials, *a spacious place*
to rest and reign, to build a civil service
(and some houses for his wives). His verve is
there until he comes to middle age,
and teenage sons, each with a different mother.
Once girls thrilled to sing of David's fame,
later *played their tambourines*, and came
to bless God in a massive congregation.

Now these girls have married David's soldiers,
and the King has gleaned a dangerous
hareem, one bound to nurture venomous
ambition, to which David's eyes were blind.

The Bible spills these family secrets, David's
crafty nephew Jonadab abetting
Amnon's incest lust for Tamar, letting
him deceive her, rape her, then reject her.

Absalom, usurping God and father
(*who alone should judge with equity*
the people given him), showed no pity
for his father nor his concubines,

abused them, while his father fled for life
 across the Jordan, *waters to his neck*
and weary with his crying. What a wreck
 he's made of fatherhood, this famous king.

Meantime Absalom took bad advice,
 let David rally, find his friends, fight back,
 see Absalom's rebellion falter, crack.
To God alone belongs escape from death.

*'O Absalom, my son, my son! Would I
 had died instead of you, O Absalom!'*

Thus David threw away, without a qualm,
 the courage of his troops who fought for him.

His flaw? He could not bear to discipline
 his sons, or make the kind of firm decision
 that his kingdom needed. Lack of vision,
 nesting, no more worlds to conquer, lulled him

to a lonely end. We find him senile,
 appetite gone cold, while Adonijah
 makes a sudden grab for power. Bathsheba
 confronts David: why not Solomon?

*Do not cast me off when I am old,
 do not forsake me when my strength is spent.*

Benaiah, Nathan, Zadok, all three went
 to crown King Solomon, at David's word.

King David's voice: still present, whispering
 lament and praise, thanksgiving, song and prayer;
 a commonwealth of psalms, with words to wear
 around the forehead, and within the heart.

Psalm 72

Z

The past seems far away,
the future's now upon us,
knocking, scowling, mocking
our attempts to pray
for rulers, be they kings
or queens, prime ministers
or sheiks, Theresa May
or Sturgeon, Mao or Xi
Jinping, Pol Pot or Trump,
imam or president,
yes, all the powers that be
who hold elected seats
or fill by fouler means
the stage of history.

How does rule play out
in war and peace games? Could
the unseen prayers of common
men and women, doubt
and faith, lament and praise
mixed up in cries to God
be what it's all about?

Grant the king your justice
God, and may he give
the poor a break, the rich
a fright. In fact, is this
the sort of king a God
might be, or is that just
a faint hypothesis?

So, does it really matter
 if the psalm is full
 of jussives, 'may it be',
 or something more than that, a
 'he shall be', so dear
 to Christians seeing prophecy
 in lots of Bible data?

Our stories start with fire,
 then flicker to their close,
 limp off the stage, and cough,
 apologise, retire.
 Without some thread of hope,
 the tales of David, Bruce
 and everyone expire.

Long may he live! He will,
 with *gold and grain and glory*,
 when the common weal
 is all his care, a temple
 built of living stones,
 such potent prophecies
 a leader must fulfil.

Notes on Book 2 Poems

To let the poem grow like two trees with interweaving branches, I wrote shorter poems alternatively dealing with the OT and with Scotland; David has the traditional iambic pentameters, in four line stanzas, to establish the genre, and Bruce has tetrameters, in three line stanzas. The final poem combines the two in seven line stanzas.

D While Margaret was born in Hungary and brought up in the royal court, it is uncertain whether she had Hungarian blood – I follow the story that her mother Agatha was '*filia regis Hunorum*' (though she may have been his niece, or unrelated) – but she certainly was influenced by the Christian royal court.

V It is likely King Edward camped on the knoll at the north end of the Carse of Balquhiderock (below Bannockburn High School today) before the second day of battle – the knoll (not a pit bing!) is shown in Thomas Jeffery's map of 1746, and the Carse is now accepted by historians as the battle site. However, historians do question the story that Bruce went to Aberdour Kirk, though it is claimed on the site of that church.

Y As in other sections, this uses material from other parts of the Old Testament.

Z This frames the whole poem, as Psalm 72 frames Books 1 and 2 of the Psalms.

Book 3 Poems: Migrants

73 Open Questions

‘Show me bodies floating in the water, I don’t care.’ *Katie Hopkins in the Sun*

‘I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

They have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek.

They are not in trouble as others are;

They are not plagued like other people . . .’ vv. 3-5, 13

Alan Kurdi, toddler, drowned en route to Kos,
island of healing and some hope of passage;
a photo speeded evolution, changing migrant
cockroaches to human casualties in hours;
it might have seeded revolution, ranging
righteous sympathy against the gates
of fortress Europe, reeling from the hordes
who push the boundaries of Superpowers.

Can God be good as well as great? Abu
Hamada’s never troubled by these issues,
handling boats and migrants from a distance.
Like every smuggler, business first – and other
jobs are hard to come by; he has family
to put through school; and if he was to stop,
demand would thrust another in his place.
Philosophy is seldom worth the bother.

Yet Israel keeps asking these big questions,
giving us hard words in psalm and silence
fleshing out the tearing of our bodies,
flashing out a challenge to belief.
And if the psalm does bookend fear with faith,
and seem to close enquiry with a visit
to the holy place, consider this: what doors
can open through a body on a reef.

74 Identity Theft

'No one remembers his own history . . .' *Tsegaye Tesfaye*

'They set your sanctuary on fire, they desecrated the dwelling place of your name,
bringing it to the ground . . . We do not see our emblems . . . vv. 7, 9

Pharaoh tried,
Nebuchadnezzar,
great Alexander,
grim Antiochus,
then the Caesars.

*Our flags have gone
from mast and heart,
and no one knows
the past; our art
is crushed, and now
the last dread part
of life has come.*

Russian pogroms,
Nazi policy,
Western eyes shut,
ships turned back,
a holocaust.

*Our flags have gone
from mast and heart,
and no one knows
the past; our art
is crushed, and now
the last dread part
of life has come.*

Refugees
are swimming
into Europe,
pressing on
our politics.

*Our flags have gone
from mast and heart,
we never heed
the past; our art
is weary, and
the last dread part
is still to come:*

when we are all
turned refugee
from history
and who we are,
a hidden steal.

*Our flags have gone
from mast and heart,
we never heed
the past; our art
is weary, and
the last dread part
is still to come:*

that solemn slippage
out of memory
and into something
larger, little known
but held by God.

*Our flags have gone
from mast and heart,
and all we know
is past. The art
of faith in God?
Entrusting every part
of who we were.*

75 *Selah*

‘When the earth totters, with all its inhabitants,
it is I who keep its pillars steady. *Selah*.’ v. 3

Zabiullah sips tea in a tent;
stench of sewage hangs around
him and seven thousand others,
waiting for news of asylum,
watching a rat scuttle past.
Selah.

‘This is worse than the boat,’
he says, caught in an eternity
hung around his neck:
queueing for toilets, ten minutes,
queueing for bread, ten hours,
queueing for asylum, ten months.
Selah.

Lesbos, island of loitering,
loitering in tent and trauma,
loitering in mental breakdown,
loitering under the leaky umbrella
of that deal with Turkey,
put up fast to block
the heavy rain of refugees.
Selah.

‘We are treated worse than animals,’
Somali teen Saida says,
fighting months of boredom,
fighting for a doctor,
fighting for identity
against the lure of suicide.
Selah.

God has set a time, *Selah*,
to judge with equity, *Selah*.
Selah – silent pause
which echoes all our questions,
leaves us none the wiser.
Selah.

76 The Wrath of Teens

‘Human wrath serves only to praise you,
when you bind the last bit of wrath around you.’ *v. 10*

A stone thrown,
a rubber bullet
to a cousin’s head,
the soldiers slapped
and kicked by Ahed,
age sixteen; her parents
Nariman and Bassem
are so proud of her,
a teenage hero
reunited with her village
after the Israeli jail.

Violence, counter-violence,
escalation eddies
round the Middle East,
a vicious storm
that feeds on hate
and catches everyone.
Surely, says the psalm,
this all too human wrath
will praise the God
of Arab and of Jew.
Some hope. Somehow.

Ahed Tamimi spent time in an Israeli jail in 2018 for slapping and kicking Israeli policemen following a clash which involved her cousin.

77 Through Our Eyes

'I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints.

... I am so troubled that I cannot speak.

I consider the days of old, and remember the years of long ago.' vv. 3-5

The razor wire cuts through me,
separating past, serrating
present, future gutted.

I walk beside the endless fence
with a thousand companions,
locked into our bleeding selves.

Assad and his army were the worst,
firing out of nowhere – even
snipers taking out the children.

We served them tea, after
the army had beaten in our door.
What is happening to respect?

My husband works away
from here; if he's late back
I fear the army took him.

My mum is sick, no blanket.
Even close to the border,
the planes come to bomb us.

The children have only the clothes
in which they fled. They remember
paradise, and cry, and cry.

I never imagined it would come
to war; nor that we'd need
a visa just to stay in Lebanon.

We don't want parcels, nothing
from you – just to return,
go back to our own country.

The world sends weapons, bombs,
then settles down to watch us;
they must want the war to stay.

The planes come. They don't
kill Daesh or the Free Syrian
Army. They kill the likes of us.

Children need a home, not camp.
To those with nothing, Daesh
offers money and a future.

Why join Daesh? No one
wants to say 'I am a loser'.
Daesh offers power.

'When the waters saw you, O God,
... the very deep trembled.
Your way was through the sea,
your path through the mighty waters;
yet your footprints were unseen.
You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.' *vv. 16, 19-20*

Migrants struggle overland,
fling themselves across the seas:
salvation wears a European face.

A Bosnian refugee gets an award
for film. At age thirteen, a Syrian
girl wins Betjeman's poetry prize.

God's way is rough, God's steps
unseen, but still the world is big
enough for every one of us.

78 Israel – a Melting Shop

‘I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us.

We will not hide them from our children . . .’ *vv. 2-4a*

‘Then he led out his people like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock.
And he brought them to his holy hill, to the mountain that his right hand had won.
He built his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth which he has founded
forever.’ *vv. 52, 54, 69*

God drew them back to sanctuary,
a place of dark as well as light
to match the mystery of the journey,
echo patchiness of sight.

A place of dark as well as light,
profound enough for everyone
to echo patchiness of sight,
admit the race is hard to run,

profound enough for everyone
to learn from Israel’s special case:
they found the race was hard to run
and made a tent a worship place

to learn that God, in every case
of trouble warned them, and then said
to make the tent a worship place
and trust him for their daily bread.

When trouble came, God warned and said
‘I drop the manna, send the quail,
so trust me for your daily bread,
and don’t keep saying God will fail.

‘I drop the manna, send the quail,
I spread the table, flush the fountain,
don’t keep saying God will fail
to bring you to his holy mountain.’

Spread the table, flush the fountain,
follow God for all you're worth;
keep on travelling to the mountain
temple, sure as heaven and earth.

Follow God! Yes, all you're worth
is what he tells you in that holy
temple, sure as heaven and earth.
You're his image! Chew that slowly

when he tells you in that holy
time of wrestling with the true –
you're God's image. Chew that slowly
but digest it, make it new.

Keep on wrestling with the true,
a sacred fire, a melting shop;
digest it, live it, make it new
in earthly tent and mountain top.

A sacred fire, a melting shop,
God draws us into sanctuary,
an earthly tent, a mountain top
to match the mystery of the journey.

79 Another David

‘Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants
be known among the nations before our eyes.’ *vv. 10-11*

‘Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!’ *Psalm 137:9*

‘May God do his worst to me if Nabal and every cur in his misbegotten
brood isn’t dead meat by morning!’ *David in 1 Samuel 25:22 (The Message)*

Scrunch of a father’s head
crushed with a killing club,
hard as the face above it.
Scream of a sister pierced
with a stabbing spear
sharp as the knife in his mind
that cut his childhood
into slices of lean hate.

Three days lying in the bush,
scared to pee or shit, while
soldiers ravaged, raped,
relaxed. He heard them laughing,
boasting, drinking, snoring,
quarreling till their ethnic
lust agenda moved them on,
left behind that awful silence.

Twenty years to live in trauma,
eat the meat of memory,
drink the heady beer of vengeance,
warm his feet at the raging fire
consuming his humanity,
turning him so slowly, surely
into a soldier brandishing
his stabbing spear and killing club.

The story of this ‘other David,’ caught up in the conflict of South Sudan, changed for the better when he attended a trauma healing workshop.

80 Malala

'Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears . . .

You make us the scorn of our neighbours; our enemies laugh among themselves.

Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.' vv. 3-7

Her mum wailed, 'My Malala, my Malala!'

recited verses from 'The Pilgrimage',

thinking of this daughter *planted*

in her womb, and God who causes

life and death, and then revives:

the hour is coming, have no doubt.

Another father phoned, whose

nine-year old became a programmer

approved by Microsoft – her heart

gave out before she met Bill Gates.

Malala's dad cried too, 'How does

a father live without his daughter?'

He sobbed and told his brother
that the village should prepare
to hold Malala's funeral – this girl
gunned down by Taliban, whose
life was fading into memory, until
the helicopter flight to Rawalpindi.

The British nurse was occupied,
knowing if Malala did not live
it would be said she killed
the teenage saint of Pakistan,
the National Peace Prizewinner,
symbol of a female future.

She lives – in Birmingham, an exile
with her family, not a friend
to tell her jokes to, no flat roof
on which to play, only the weight
of fame to carry, and the silence
from her home in Pakistan.

I was crying as I read. The tears
of broken walls and shot up nations
trickle gently down the conduits
of our holy books, and down
the face of God, beloved parent
whose own face shines behind its tears.

81 Freed from the Basket

In memory of the Chinese cockle pickers
drowned in Morecambe Bay in 2006.

'I hear a voice I had not known:
I relieved your shoulder of the burden;
your hands were freed from the basket.' vv. 5b-6

Who knew that Chinese immigrants
were mired in such a slaver's pickle?
The Government, as blind as Pharaoh,
blamed their lack of holding pens.

Some British cocklers, coming back,
passed them, tapped their watches.
No communication. Too much
racist water had been flowing.

Then the fast Spring tide, returning,
noticed them, and freed them
from their baskets: yes, the sea
saw every one of them, all 23.

How many Israelites fell dead
beneath the Egyptian lash before
that unknown voice called 'Moses, Moses'
from a burning bush, and Moses noticed?

How many migrants die in lorries,
in the desert, on the mountains,
in the dangerous sea? How long
before a cockled world takes notice?

82 Clearance

‘Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked . . . Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you.’ vv. 3-4,8

‘Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God . . . the authorities are God’s servants.’ *Romans 13:1,6*

The heather failed
when factors burned it off before the sheep
were even come. The highland cattle
and the customs perished, while the lowland
Scots Enlightenment
was all the rage.

Justice failed,
it never caught alight, the wick of truth
doused by the dark, the black, black oil
of underground theology, that pumped
predestined poison into
venal veins.

Gaeldom failed,
clan chiefs bewitched by betterment, they hid
behind the law, let houses burn,
the people shift to barren coasts, to live
or die in penury.
No kindness left.

God failed.
His ministers of state were far away
in London, centre of the world;
his ministers of word were far away
in soul, appointed, bought
by greedy landlords.

Change is hard.
To justify the ways of God and men
is not a easy game. But like
the spores exploding from a punctured puffball,
Scots and powerful doctrine
cleared the ocean.

83 Beyond

'O God, do not keep silence . . .

They say, "Come, let us wipe them out as a nation;

let the name of Israel be remembered no more." vv. 1, 4

The crash at the door,
the inner commotion,
the tortured confession,
the cattle trucks,
the camps,
the gas,
a nation driven
to the edge of that last exile
and beyond:

*beyond the reach of reason,
beyond the frontier of pain,
beyond the bounds of human life,
beyond the throat of any word.*

What turns stones thrown out of protest
into missiles primed to kill?
What turns a leather waistband
to a belt of high explosive?
What overturns the Middle Eastern
table of warm hospitality,
pours poison down our gullets
to black our arteries,
build our biceps
in a devilish gymnasium,
ready to blood the Jews
(or bleed their foes)

*beyond the reach of reason,
beyond the frontier of pain,
beyond the bounds of human life,
beyond the throat of any word?*

We have the psalms
to make up hard lines,
work up angry questions,
size up all our enemies,
beat up lust for vengeance,
. . . and give up justifying evil.
God, is there something else,

*beyond the reach of reason,
beyond the frontier of pain,
beyond the bounds of human life,
beyond the throat of any word?*

84 The Highways to Zion

'How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.
Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young . . .
Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.' vv. 1-3, 5

I am a bird, created on day five
to pick the insects off sea-monsters,
fly through space and storylines, steal
into psalms where God delights
to name my kind to keep the tune alive.

I am a migrant, seeking sanctuary,
worn out, longing for a corner
I can call my very own, feel
at home, a wanderer no more, where
I can rest those documents I carry.

I am a bird, so flexible in flight:
I swoop, I coo, I twitter, could be
swallow, pigeon, sparrow, as I wheel
around those temple courts, to see
if I can find a holy nesting site.

I am a pilgrim, struggling on the way
with beasts and burdens, worldly fears;
for just a single day with God I kneel
and pray; that's worth a thousand years,
I know; I want to find this, come what may.

There is a bird of passage, say a dove,
which makes a draught around my soul,
suggests to me life's ordinary deal
is played into a pigeon hole
soft feathered with the plumage of God's love.

85 Birds of Passage

'Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.' v. 11

They flock, they fly,
they float, they die.

Some pass the hunters,
some fall from the air;
some lose their compass,
some succeed and get there.

I read about a migrant
passing through Libya to Paris,
who grew wings for a wild
ascent, four flights of faith
to pluck a child from a balcony,
replace him in his family nest.

I heard about another
passing through Greece and Italy,
grounded at Calais, every flight
to England full, or turned back,
cancelled till he lost the lift,
the spring of hope that drove him
from an Asian to a European hell.

They flock, they fly,
they float, they die,

looking for a righteous wind
somewhere in the atmosphere,
hoping for a faithful current
and a friendly pier.

86 Mungo the Migrant

'O God, the insolent rise up against me;
a band of ruffians seeks my life,
and they do not set you before them . . .
Turn to me and be gracious to me;
give your strength to your servant;
save the child of your servant girl.' vv. 14, 16

He left Traprain in embryo,
the child of violent royal rape,
his mother's womb a cushion
as they bounced down cliffs,
were frogmarched to the coast,
dumped into a coracle,
pushed out onto the River Forth,
to drift unannounced on the tide
into the arms of Culross monks.

Tannoc named her child 'big chief',
but holy Serf said 'my beloved',
'Mungo' in his local tongue.
When ruffian boys threw stones
and hit a robin, Mungo took it,
asked the Son of God to heal it,
and it flew right into Glasgow's
coat of arms – the city named
from Mungo's 'happy family'.

Made a bishop, driven south,
Mungo walked through Cumbria,
a journey in the truth and power
of God, converting fear to faith,
as far as Wales, establishing
that monastery of migrant souls
who one day would go back with him
to Scotland, to Strathclyde again
to plan and build a Christian land.

Those miracles – the fire that stopped
restarted by a hazel branch,
the ring flung in the River Clyde
that popped out from a fish's mouth
– and far less magical, those steaming
baths he found on pilgrimage
to Rome and took each day at home:
we owe our legends to these migrant
saints who lived and prayed the Psalms.

87 Sabras

‘The Lord records, as he registers the peoples,

“This one was born there.”

Singers and dancers alike say,

“All my springs are in you.” vv. 6-7

Moshe Dyan, born on Israel’s first kibbutz,

Yitzak Rabin, born within Jerusalem,

Chaim Topol, born in Tel Aviv, but

playing *Fiddler on the Roof* all over.

Sabras, holding blue Israeli passports

without further reference to God

– yet Tevye always shaved his beard

before his children, when the theatre run

was over, so they recognised their Dad.

88 The Torture of the Pit

'I am counted among those who go down to the Pit,
I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.
You have put me in the depths of the Pit . . .' vv. 4-7

A little slit
above the ear
kept him alive,
hanging upside down
for three days
in the Pit.

He bore it,
blood oozing
from mouth and nose,
his faith strong
for three days
in the Pit.

To knock the shit
right out, they took
him, left him
overnight, hearing
the moans of others
in the Pit.

'Just quit
your faith,' they said,
'You'll save the three
believers hanging
three days
in the Pit.'

The Jesuit
apostasised,
convinced his Lord
would do the same
to save us
hanging in the Pit.

In the early 17th century, Christovao Ferreira migrated to Japan at the behest of the Society of Jesus, and spent over 30 years in Japan, an inspiration to the faithful as he endured years of persecution, until a report reached Rome that, unaccountably, Ferreira had apostasised.

89 In Conclusion

'I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, for ever.
... Lord, where is your steadfast love of old ...?
Blessed be the Lord forever. Amen and Amen.' *vv. 1, 49, 52*

Though dead, I hover: Ethan is my name,
insider commentator, leading advocate
of psalmody, this ancient on-off game
we play for ever, questioning the state
of things, rehearsing how and who to blame
for broken promises. Is it too late
to seek God's help? Can we in exile frame
our mind maps faithfully, turn round, migrate
to some more holy ground, discover where
God is at work to comfort, heal, amend,
construct a meeting place of hope again?
I am the patron of each love affair
between our faith and doubt: I end
with 'Blessed be the Lord. Amen, Amen.'

Notes on Book 3 Poems

73 The words by Katie Hopkins in the Sun (April 2015) are cited in Patrick Kingsley, *The New Odyssey*, Faber & Faber, London 2016, 262.

74 The epigraph by Tsegaye Tesfaye is in a Kenyan refugee camp newsletter (*Stormy Seas We Brave*, World Council of Churches). A conference was held at Évian-les-Bains in July 1938, and with the exception of a few countries like Canada, the Western Powers conspicuously refused to take a significant number of Jews, even though Hitler was offering to let them go. An example of ships turned back was the German liner *St Louis*, carrying about 900 German Jewish refugees, which was denied entrance to the Havana harbour in 1939. The ship was later denied entrance to the United States and returned to Hamburg, Germany. Other ships were denied entrance to Palestine in the 1930s by the British authorities.

75 Based on a story in the Economist, 3Nov18, 'A Small Piece of Hell', 34.

77 A found poem, from a film by Samir Mehanovic.

79 Based on an article published by Wycliffe Bible Translators in May 2018.

80 Based on *I am Malala*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 2013.

85 The reference is to Mamoudou Gassama, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-france-hero/france-offers-citizenship-to-malian-immigrant-who-scaled-building-to-save-child-idUKKCN1IS0UD>, accessed 10/4/20.

88 Based on Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, Peter Owen, London 1969, 19ff.

Book 4 Poems: Pibroch

The Iolaire

Urlar (Ground 1): Our Dust

Psalm 90

You turn us back to dust, dust blown
off course, unable to make landfall,
ravaged by rocks, the desert sea, and worse,
grounded by our past, our wilderness,
our memory of Moses silent,
our memory of David gone so sour.

Our dust *The Iolaire Inquiry* gathered
in official vaults for fifty years,
while we had lost the wounded words,
pulled our fingers from the chanter,
placed our fiddles in the closet
where a silent tide washed over them.

A hundred years have nursed this silence,
grown the roots of trauma underground,
with our fury burned up in the psalms,
our sadness shivering on the sands
of Stornoway and every sermon
hinting at some sin still stowed away.

Siubhal* (Variation) 1, singling: Easy Thinking*Psalm 91**

It was the drink. Always
 a reason for the wreck,
 the death, divorce, the day's
 disaster, not a mystery to check
 our dotted i's and j's
 that neatly stack the deck
 in favour of God's ways.

Siubhal* (Variation) 1, doubling: Easy Praise*Psalm 92**

The righteous grow like palms,
 secure within the church
 and flourish without qualms
 or queries: 'God won't leave us in the lurch
 or fail to do his sums;
 let every pagan search
 and scowl; we'll sing our psalms.'

We'll sing them to the lute
 and call it a guitar;
 the praise band has a flute,
 a fiddle, mikes, a drum kit, things that are
 these days beyond dispute;
 we'll build a repertoire
 of unforbidden fruit.

***Siubhal* (Variation) 2: Sovereign God**

Psalm 93

The Lord is high above all contradiction,
 roaring floods majestic in his ears,
 which hear all dischords sweet polyphony,
 the transposition secret in his will
 which rolls a carpet all around the cosmos,
 brushes *stretti*, minor keys, *fermatas*
 into some black hole of providence.

***Siubhal* (Variation) 3: Rage**

Psalm 94

Cum oan, ma Goad ableeze wi wrath,
 wha kens the hairt's ill-cleckit airts,
 jist gie the prood yins thair awmous,
 ding thaim doon tae chow the stour.

misbegotten
come-uppance
throw chew the dust

They scance yir fowk, they kink thir gams,
 they thraw, jalousin God is blin;
 thiv goat it cumin tae thaim, an,
 A'll souch them oan thir wey tae hell.

look critically laugh cynically
oppose, distort reckoning

sing, pant

O Lord, A'm gratefu fir this saum
 at gies me wurds tae lowse ma birse,
 ma grue at aa thit pizzens yirth,
 an bung it ower tae Goad in heiven.

anger
horror poisons earth
hurl

Taorluath Singling: Over the Hump

Psalms 95 – 97

The century has climbed her mountain,
taken off her jacket, wiped her brow;
upon her face a smile is breaking open
years of stale skin, thirsty for the pinks
and wrinkles of some deep clean freedom.

She makes a curtsey, steps aside
to watch a shadow stay upon the hags
of wet fuel never dry enough to burn
the dark clothes, or the darker habits.
'We do not need these now,' she thinks.

'We can no longer sing a warrior king,
we cannot even serve a shepherd king;
our David died; I will not resurrect him.
Seek a different voice, a new belief
for softened hearts and softer skin.'

But sing we will, somehow befriending
these strange temples, this new world,
riding pillion with a God far bigger
than the one we used to know, and
glimpsing snatches of God's beauty.

***Taorluath* Doubling: Downhill**

Psalms 98 – 100

The century has spoken, pointed out
the coils of wave power waiting, poised
to drive the turbines of a new theology,
or maybe very old belief transformed,
a dynamo to power new-born religion.

Give us kingship energy renewed,
a monarch running rife within our veins,
who blooded, wears our joys and tragedies,
a lord who sings our songs, and woos us
into writing verses lighting up our nation.

She does a chassis, moves into a quickstep,
catches snatches of the heather song
awakening to summer and its colours.
'Take it away, Satchmo,' she cries, gung-ho,
a raid on memory, to comb the silt

for bits and bobs of melody, deciding
that the soil and seas, the air and trees
are sanctified and safe, their whisper
telling us the peat can stay and hold
its share of carbon without guilt.

‘If I were on skis,’ she said, astride
of Suilven, ‘I’d be away, downhill,
skimming scree and stretching time
for you to see things differently. I would
awaken Moses, shake him, get right through

to God: howl, groan, gasp, spit
your prayers, real and raw as juniper.
I’d breathe on Samuel, make him once again
a child, living in the Scottish temple
garden for you, hearing something new.’

We won’t see the likes of her again;
she leaves us no repeats, no playback mode,
only the fragment of a tune we heard before
and lost in jags that pricked us into tears.
We’ll take each note and nurse it into song;

we’ll take the jigsaw of her faith, and let
the Spirit add a third and fourth dimension
so our praise turns gold instead of grey,
and every day we finger all the grace notes,
playing world things right instead of wrong.

Taorluath Breabach: Free Kick**Psalm 101**

Play the ball and not the man,
 no first team pride of face or foot,
 kick out sin and not the sinner,
 take care which is which:
 but if and when you can't detach them
 keep the weak on side, and boot
 the worthless out of leadership
 and into God's firm touch.

Urlar (Ground 2): Back in the Dust**Psalm 102**

Aye, stour yet clags ma thochts, ma doots,
 A cannae lilt, ma thrapple's smooored
 wi aa the aise o mony years,
 a lang, lang shedda maks ma days
 an nichts sae dowf an tuim an wae.
 The Lord is sett me oot o sicht.

A mane an grane, a fin ma banes
 ir steikit wi a stoun, ma hairt
 is gowpin, a kin hear the soun
 o fients. 'Dear Goad, be mercifu
 tae me, preen back yir lugs an tent
 yir stickit, seik, disjaskit frien.'

dust
sing throat's choked
remnants, refuse
sad empty wretched

pierced ache, blow
palpitating
fiends
start listening to take notice of
shut out sick downcast

***Crunluath* Singling: Zip up your Jacket**

Psalm 103

Cool down the cauldron of sin-stewed indictment,
 throw in some ice from the poles of God's patience;
 pull down the shutters on drunken paralysis,
 habits and havers of all such abusiveness;
 fall down and worship the Lord who is summoning
 islanders, mainlanders, all.

Zip up your jacket that flaps in the slipstream
 of blame from the engines of fateful theology;
 rip up the packet of sugary half truths that
 foul up the bloodstream of Proddy and Pape;
 wrap up your ticket for high celebration,
 and lodge it in God's banquet hall.

***Crunluath* Doubling: Stir up the Breeze**

Psalm 104

Fly down the alleys of blazars, go deep into
space, with its galaxies, days when the quasars will
lay down a challenge to poets and physicists,
hinting, cajoling our science and art for a
hoedown, a ceilidh, a throwdown, a showdown
to highlight the tartan of God, warp and weft.

Range over centuries, study the plant patterns,
think culture harvest, pick every ripe fruit, don't
whinge over credits to Druid or Christian; there's
room in God's temple, there's heart-food and brain-food, so
change over templates to weaving and wondering,
gather and grow with the Spirit's windfall.

Stir up the breeze in the branches of birches which
dance to the music of warbler and chaffinch, and
cheer up the glens, shelter cowberry, blaeberry,
perch by the burns as they sing liquid notes, run to
tear up the script that rolls solemn from sceptics
who notice life's magic – yet no one to thank.

Tip inhibitions that limit your grasp
of life's options, its chances, its challenges overboard.
Stop overworking your left brain, and roll
to the rock of your right, its superior clock; don't let
sleep overtake your desire to sing praise, to bring
psalms to the Lord, all the days that you live.

Crunluath a Mach: Exegete your Story

Psalm 105

Dig up all your history with stainless steel and expertise:
 Rope it onto patriarchs, get a feel for exodus,
 know your plagues are not the first ones, nor the last to set you back;
 you may have Pharaoh's DNA, but Amram's children count for more
 than meets the closing Western eye, so tired of bad religion.
 Exegete the memories concealed in those laments.

Deconstruct your doublings, let the hope out of your throat;
 like bodies on that awful shore, dress them with respect,
 and kneel before your Maker as you bury in the ground
 all the pain that stung your parents, all the hurt they left to you.
 Think of Jacob, think of Joseph, think of Judah and his tribe,
 and claim your resurrection from the endless spinning wheel.

Trust that things in hiding will reveal themselves, so build on
 all your past with quiet confidence, like Moses in the wilderness
 experience the cloud by day, the fire by night; the spark-filled
 darker mystery tugs at our hearts and feet, a guardian angel
 opens temple doors in earthy places, conjures up new threads
 for the sett of holy tartan God still reels off secret looms.

***Urlar* (Ground 3): A Dusty Hallelujah**

Psalm 106

Our kilts are musty now, we live
somewhere between lament and praise;
we read the riots that our fathers made
like Moses' gang en route to Canaan,
nodding God-squad for a languid minute,
hell-bent on themselves the next.

We have one sovereign now. No longer
Moses, David, or Saint Augustine;
not Fingal, Colum or the Bruce,
not Luther, Calvin and his crowd,
though all had leadership to give.
The Lord, the holy one, is king.

It's all transition now. The road
is different from a hundred years ago,
but pipers, poets, preachers even
share their stories, make their music,
learn to play their human nature,
sing a dusty hallelujah.

Notes on Book 4 Poems

Pibroch is the English spelling of the Gaelic *piobaireachd*. Whereas *urlar* and *siubhal* are translated as 'ground' and 'variation', *breabach* is associated with 'kicking', the derivation of *taorluath* is less clear, and of *crunluath* disputed, though often linked with 'crown'.

This long poem has no connection with the 'Lament for the *Iolair*', a modern pibroch written by Donald MacLeod.

Book 5 Poems: Tapestry

107 Homecoming

'East, West: Hame's Best.'

I remember words
stained on the glass
front door panel,
jiggled into memory
as adventurous
feet jumped step,
paused, passed
the opened door,
thumped the hall
as owner occupiers.
*For health and home
give thanks to God.*

He had a name –
I don't recall it now.
Came from Poland,
not job hunting
but last century,
stranded by war,
lodging in our house,
reminding us
the world is full
of accidents.
*For health and home
give thanks to God.*

Ron lived with us
a month or two,
his ways a puzzle
to our children,
but explained to

doctors, therapists
and any friend
prepared to hear out
acid nightmares,
tacit dreams.
*For health and home
give thanks to God.*

She stayed near us
for many years,
on off, off on,
her brilliant brain
still clawing rubbish,
pawing past life,
filing for recovery
from awful things
no pastor spells
out in a poem.
*For health and home
give thanks to God.*

I remember the God
stained by journeys
of a searching kind,
more or less
unrecognized,
peering through faces
of pained and queer,
all the unlikely
exiles like us
God wants at home.

108 Larks and Crows

'I will awake the dawn.' *v. 2b*

That lark ascending
Classic FM, twittering to fame,
but softer, almost out of sight
and into spending
time with God, a climb within
some rainbow arc of steadfast love.

That psalm full-throated
throws its praise up high for God to catch
from all the longitudes of earth,
wakes a band
to play God's anthems, fire
a rocket through faith's enemies.

That crow complains,
the rasping back row literalist: 'No sign
of God in army uniform,
the game's a bogey.'
Save us Lord, from all our foes
– save us from impatient friends.

109 A Fork in the Mouth

‘When who we think we are is suddenly
flying apart, splintered into
acts we hardly recognize . . .’ *W.S. Graham*

‘No one can tame the tongue . . . with it we bless
the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those
who are made in the likeness of God.’ *James 3:8-9*

Mouths were made for other things
like kissing, pouting, whistling, laughing
playing oboes, moothies, bagpipes,
drinking *uisge beatha*.

But we remember with such pain
the ding-dong words we had with those
who threw their acid speech at us,
and burned our self-esteem.

The words we rolled around our tongues
for those who spoke behind our backs,
the way we justified ourselves
when under their attack.

And worst of all, we thought that God
would take our side in court
and run the wicked out of town
and out of our fair hair.

Well, *let them curse, but you will bless*,
and quieten every angry voice,
the outside hexes, hate and hiss,
the inside shame as well.

110 Priest and King

God's temple feet are on the march.
Essenes are withdrawn, conflicted,
struggle with doctrinal scandals.
Zealots take the simple sense,
read 'shatter kings' as holy writ
to trample on some Roman sandals.

Even kings need sustenance
while on the road: a little sign
that God might find some human way
to live this messianic psalm,
to work from altar and from throne,
explain them both in harmony.

111 Lord of All Being

‘Great are the works of the Lord,
studied by all who delight in them.’ Psalm 111:2

‘The sum of your word is truth.’ Psalm 119:160

‘A towering figure ranked with Newton and
Einstein.’ *John Gunn F.R.S.E.*

Unsuspecting that he might become
the greatest scientist since Isaac Newton,
James Clerk Maxwell studied optics,
oval curves, electro-magnetism,
opened doors for quantum theory,
Albert Einstein’s relativity.

Maxwell took a strip of tartan ribbon,
crossed three different lines of research,
made the world’s first colour photograph.

Ahead of the game, he feared the Lord,
filled his mind with wisdom, knowledge,
knew his destiny, his definitions,

took such pleasure in the works of God,
carved that verse outside the Cavendish,
but kept his heart and home in Corsock.

Just one Hebrew word for start and finish,
summit, apex, height, the first, the last,
the best, the chief, the front, the sum:

no wonder Maxwell gave God head room
in his study, sang of heavenly glory
flaming out of every sun and star.

112 Wealth and Poverty

'Furnace no. 8 produced a record output, Mr Carnegie!'

'Whit's wrang wi' the ither seven?'

'They have distributed freely; they have given to the poor.' v. 8

We know so much about the wealth
and poverty of states, rich men
who pull a country to the right,
leave the green world black and barren,
fighting for its global health.

We analyse resources, climate,
study culture, works of art;
we scrutinise the role of women,
think religion plays a part,
prosperity is not just fate.

So when we read of dynasties,
great families who rule the land,
we grow suspicious, ask our questions,
deconstruct psalms out of hand
that give the wealthy open praise;

we march for change, for revolution,
hijack the *Magnificat*,
until it all goes wrong; meanwhile
some incorrect aristocrat
has made this psalm his very own.

113 Height and Depth

The temple pinnacle had its ironies
for him who fell from heaven's high artistry,
but Jesus stuck to script: 'Don't test the Lord
your God' – who takes the side of those now floored
and lifts them up, without a miracle
except that loving hand which wraps goodwill
around the needy, lets them sit at tables
with the royals, rewrites morbid labels,
raises wretched, dings to earth high heid yins,
pulls the poor from middens, covers sins,
requests a child to hunt the house for yeast,
and passes over fame to grace the least.
From dawn to dusk, from east to west
the name of God is to be blessed.

114 Exodus

‘Dante’s angel is at the helm of a boat in which more than a hundred spirits are singing Psalm 114.’ Edward Clarke

Dante came to meet me, walking on his hands
– and knees – hound hermeneut with four tails,
nose to a trail he feels and understands.

Each tail wagged the dog to the altar rails:
Judah became temple, Israel God’s dwelling
place, layers of meaning driven nails

into the story board of earth, spelling
out God’s saving purpose, sowing seeds
of greater morning glory, show-and-telling

Bible meanings in these crazy deeds.
Mountains go mad with magma melt,
cliffs are cleft with cataracts, God reads

his play on the stage of Sinai, his belt
tight round his tribe, only let out a notch
when Moses intercedes with heart-felt

cries for those who cannot stay on watch
while God gives Moses temple time.

Dante finds his feet, plays hopscotch

with his Classic friend, stirring the lime
between the polysemous squares
of old interpretation, adding rhyme

to link the Exodus to all of us. He bares
his chest: it’s gospel truth, he swears.

115 The Sky's the Limit

'We will now aim to upgrade humans into gods,
turn *Homo sapiens* into *Homo deus*.' *Yuval Noah Harari*

We have ideals, not vain idols,
thoughts of sisterhood, of brotherhood,
of green at the equator, ice restored to poles,
a space farm, energy turned ethical,
industrial barons under lock and key
but getting five (or six) a day
like those we duly recognise
as *homo sapiens*, one of worldwide us,
the wise who once made sacrifice to God
but lately have outgrown such baby teeth.

We have ideas, not false idols,
thoughts of manhood, womanhood
outgrowing death by gene control.
Will scientists write poetry,
or bankers play sudoku games?
If we have all the rights to life,
then death has lost its human rights.
Why should the heart stop pumping blood,
why should we lack spare body parts?
Death, thou shalt really die!

We have such idiots, such idols,
clever fools who live inside
their great ideals, their big ideas;
a cast of hermeneutic dentists,
sparky savants, shrewd interpreters
of human possibilities
who never bump their brilliant heads
on any ceiling, never feel the limits
which might let us have some hope
of praising God eternally.

116 Common Cup

At the September 2018 Communion in St Mary's, Haddington, duty elders included Ian Gray MSP and Councillor John McMillan.

Ian finds us bread, the kind of thing
an MSP is voted in to do,
while John behind gives out the wine, he too
enriching public service, entering
our temple courts as one of us, like when
the link of church and state was sacrosanct,
and here the Provost of a Council ranked
no higher than the least of other men
and women. Clasp hands around the cup,
we drink a portion rooted in a psalm
which pulls us back to Passover, then rolls
us on through three millennia, wraps us up
within the love of God, whose pouring arm
can ground and heal and feed all souls.

117 Nae Hairm

Wee psalm, nae hairm intendit.
Jist the scandal o particularitie.

118 Space Temple

‘The Lord set me in a broad place.’ v. 5

I’ll bring
my kilt and Alfred Edersheim;
courtesy of Doctor Who
I’ll take this psalm and travel time.

I’ll walk
through holy, heather-tasselled gates,
see Blake, inspired, at work creating
annotations on his plates.

I’ll look
in every cranny of this psalm,
find Luther lost in admiration,
touched by God’s heart-cradling arm.

I’ll talk
with Gaudi and with Samuelsson
in Barcelona, Reykjavik,
feel the clunk of cornerstone.

I’ll join
a liturgy with *cohēn*, *goi*,
and all who fear this tartan Lord,
sing praise with multi-coloured joy.

119 Fair and Square

No tapestry complete without a square
jaw somewhere, to remind tame images
that words do more than chatter,
show how *torah* draws a frame for life
to challenge slipshod needlework,
set out certain things that matter.

No book complete without some ordering
of chapters, sequences of numbers, letters
sailing A to Z, the blacks, the whites,
all shades of tighter *petit point* let loose
upon a canvas sea, like decorated buoys
which mark each passage with eight riding lights.

No symphony complete without a switch
from law to liberty, a swatch of tones,
an itch unwrapped so strings rehearse
its secret. Bless you, ancient makar, shrewd
composer, artist, stitcher: you have left
your needle prints so clear in every verse.

No life complete without God's art and music
hidden in our sober prose, artless, silent,
waiting for the word to waken, say hello,
and introduce a new dimension, dancing
intimacy to the edge of long horizons,
splashing colour on a great allegro.

120 – 134 Song of the Fifteen Steps

Introduction

Fifteen steps, said the Jewish sage,
on the stairs to reach the Women's Court
all the way from the Court of Israel.

Did he plan to reach the eternal feminine,
anticipate the next millennium,
open the gates to women's rights?

Dream on – he grabbed at a handy memo.
Fifteen men on the dead man's chest
offers a gendered Scots reply.

Fifteen cans in triangular pile,
waiting to topple, then get rolling
as soon as the missive hits the stack.

That's the scene for a pilgrim journey,
with fifteen psalms to line the route,
buffeting politics, toughening faith.

Psalm 120

Jews in exile stepping the world,
Rashi in France, the Rambam in Spain
wrenched out of sync by persecution,
wrestled to ground with a holy text,
writing a *Guide for People Perplexed*.

Were you there with Jamie in 1715,
out with Charlie in the '45?
Gutted in Gallipolli in 1915,
desperate for closure in '45,
not quite sure if you're dead or alive?

Scots do grievance all too well,
but so does everyone who feels
a misfit in an alien world
of fear and war, and longs to escape
from the lies, the cuts, the raw-edged rape.

Psalm 121

Pilgrimage, an upland route
footsteps on the Cairngorms,
guided deeper by Nan Shepherd,
rapt, seeing the world in her body,
feeling the coil of an eagle's rise.
Ascent indeed, but someone higher
gives us all our pilot's wings,
guards our going and our coming.

Pilgrimage, not mountaineering,
love the mountain, not the tops.
Hold the vision, ride the thermal
current, gaze on Angel Peak;
salute the exploits, but remember
hills and valleys frame the journey,
while the end is out of sight.

Psalm 122

A 'terraced' psalm (tribes, thrones, *shalom*),
three levels in Jerusalem.

Three monotheist modern tribes,
with rather different pilgrim vibes,
are eyeing judgement on their thrones
that now lie buried with the bones
of ancient history. Complex
may be the politics, effects
of war, attempts at peace. The hope
is balanced on a rocky trope
that Teddy Kollek, Arab Mayor,
chiselled into public prayer:
'Pray for the peace of Jerusalem'
(and every step to build *shalom*
that lives the meaning of this psalm).

Psalm 123

I have seen that look
in the eyes of a collie
aquiver with hope of a walk,
acquainted with body signals,
knowing the master's habits,
happy with a moment hanging
in the mind of the enthroned one.

Crowns so often shield the eyes,
speed up growth of cataract,
curl the lips of a ruler
centralised in Holyrood,
or lodged down in Westminster.

I must try to meet the gaze
of God, who sees through me
and every would-be king or queen.

Psalm 124

Such public psalms do frighten the atheist horses,
ridden rough through films and wikipedia,
strictly barred from *casa et cathedra*
where a nation prayed the British forces
safely out of France, to fight again.

A Red Sea crossing, wrote the Gaelic poet
of Dunkirk, quite unashamed to show it
in such holy context, all those men
delivered from the raging waters; calm
behind the storm which grounded enemy planes,
cloud which gave divine protection. *Chains*
fell off, their hearts were free to shout this psalm.

Better dismount, see 'Warhorse' and 'Equus';
no wonder atheist horsemen have no use
for faith; they'd unseat Churchill – and the Bruce.

Psalm 125

On skis, I toured the hills around Glenshee
and hit a whiteout – rather, it hit me
like a dose of labyrinthitis, spun
my senses widdershins, the home run
halted, and my body falling upright,
biped spider on a bath of white,
stranded on a flatbed like a ghost
while the universe went left off piste.

Two legs frozen, six dissolved in fear
I waited for the world to reappear
and give a mountain top the sign, all clear.
I guess Mount Zion comes and goes
like that, somewhere above our woes:
it leaves us hoping that the Lord our God
might ski or leg it down, meet us roughshod.

Psalm 126

That game we drew
 at Twickenham,
 all fifteen players
 heroes, legends;
 divine catchup,
 return from exile.

You did it once,
 now do it again,
 God of surprises.

Do it for Scotland,
 do it for England,
 do it for the world,
 every person
 setting out
 on pilgrimage.

Psalm 127

Zsuzsa worked for us at Carberry,
 brought a sense of family with her,
 fifteen siblings, self and parents
 making quite a quiverful:
 Hungarian exiles, holding hard
 to Calvin, church and culture
 deep in Transylvania,
 knowing only God the Lord
 can build the house of hope,
 guard the city from calamity.

Early to bed, early to rise,
 she modelled pilgrimage
 for ageing worry warriors
 who suffer deficits of faith
 and family life, wisdom and sleep.

Psalm 128

'A symphony must embrace the world.' *Gustav Mahler*

Work and family life and Israel,
that hidden light for every nation,
gladness gift wrapped in a psalm
with liminal fear, immanent love.

One table set for more than one
(*it is not good for man to be alone,*
nor prayer and praise to be confined
within a lonely solo instrument
that plays, and sobs, in wilderness).

One octave for the children,
another for the grand-children,
those fifteen different notes
that make a symphony for Israel,
an orchestra of horticulture,
seeded in a thousand lands.

Psalm 129

Just when the going was downhill,
my progress programmed, fifteen easy steps,
I felt the lash, and shuddered to a stop.

I had the wrong map, dragons painted out,
the giants missing. We had all forgotten
history, the thongs and thorns and daggers
hidden by the cloak of Christendom
now whipped off zipped up torsos.

Temple walls and roof collapsed, its rubble
wrecked my all too easy pilgrimage.
No longer shielded from my enemies,
I yelled at them, a withering curse
that curled my lip, padlocked my heart,
and blocked the blessing that alone
might burst the bubble of my hell.

Psalm 130

We know that psychopaths are born, not made,
 autism more than adverse child experience,
 and the human genome is the modern key
 to unlock mysteries of illness and behaviour.

Read this psalm on a wall in Dachau prison.
 We indignantly reject the roots of Hitler's blame,
 his paranoid conviction, dictat that the Jews
 corrupted Aryan purity, must disappear.

Diagnose our pain from human sin?
 How out of fashion – yet, we hear a text
 that dives beneath our dismal lives
 into the depths, to source a pearl
 that Jung and others raked the fire for:
 Israel as suffering servant, scapegoat,
 kept awake, aching for the morning.

Psalm 131

How odd our culture,
 out of step with history,
 passing laws of progress
 in a freedom sweated
 out of the hard hands
 of barons who submitted
 to that double whammy,
 Bible and democracy.
 What passing privilege
 to choose our pilgrimage,
 eye the very heights.

When the crash comes
 we will be children
 holding on to mother,
 hoping in the Lord.

Psalm 132

‘Obedience has a history.’ Eugene Peterson

A bit of history always helps
that half time pep talk, when you’ve missed
a chance, a goal, and now the wind
is in your face, the going hard.

Obedience has a long track record
in the storied lives of women,
men like David who knew hardship,
failed, yet found God’s faithfulness.

Fifteen dark blue threads remember
those who died inside the mountain,
tartan marks those tunnel tigers
resting till the whistle blows

and Zion’s lamp lights David’s son,
when every life is joined in one
more powerful than Ben Cruachan.

Psalm 133

How blest is one small step together,
fifteen must be heaven. In
between, we make such heavy weather
of our common life, we sin
against each other, Jacob, Esau,
Isaac, Ishmael, Abel, Cain.

We tear our hair, we clutch at straw
to find our way in, out of Europe,
with no proper sense of awe
at Aaron's beard, and every drop
of oil that consecrated him
a priest, a listener, chosen backstop
for our fall, a pseudonym
for you, for me; the question's whether
we can priest our sister, brother.

Psalm 134

When we get there, questions dry
up, silenced by the sounds of heaven;
no more need to puzzle why
the journey felt like being driven
off road, off stage, just off key.

When we find that wider space
than we allowed in our religions,
heaven may seem a stranger place,
a glorious sequence of black swans
on message, and in harmony.

When we meet to praise the Lord,
our fifteen steps of pilgrimage
will thread their way into a cord
that decorates the title page
of holy books of tapestry.

135 Mosaic

Sandwich psalm,
mosaic of texts
for chosen lifters,
the Lord's name
layered, like lasagne
which ripples from
that holy standing start.

Ten strikes, Pharaoh,
and you're out
– with your calves
and your quarters
pierced by the dark angel
you called up
from a hardened heart.

Struck by a lightning God,
unlike us, who
stroke the internet
for friendly idols,
click on 'next'
to fill our tidy
ideological cart.

136 End Game

They caught that massive hole of blackness,
called it by the name Powehi,
darkest source of evolution,
lit up its event horizon,
put it on a world parade.

Could we wrap up all mystery,
the words of God, the human hope
by probing radio telescopes,
this psalm would bite the cosmic dust
that litters outer, inner space.

It brings to heel the dogging voice
which robs religion of its track
in time, and makes the spiritual
nice and vague, not blood and battles,
earthbound tyrants seeing stars.

This *Great Hallel*, this making song
has God committed, and for ever,
in a universal frame
of right and wrong, taking aim
at rulers, saving refugees.

We hole up in the psalmist's end game,
lowly, hanging on the praise chain,
late arrivals in creation,
dwarfed by skies of light and darkness,
yet a twinkle in God's eye.

137 Finding Your Voice

In memory of Astor Piazzolla, composer, 1921-1992

She senses something missing,
a soul space sectioned,
left in Argentina.

This Nadia Boulanger,
teacher playing therapist
to Astor Piazzolla,
gives him tangoed freedom
to deep root his love of Bach
in Argentinian soil.

Crossover takes time,
voices back from exile,
hearts all clear of hate.

138 Hair

‘Samson . . . bowed himself with all his might’
Judges 16:30 KJV

Cross stitch creeps into a corner
p.c. stitchers do not visit:
threads twisted in hermeneutic
horror, recognises Samson,

hears him orchestrate the clatter
of a foreign temple as he bows,
strains, claws two alien pillars
as his final act of worship.

At a safe distance,
she wonders who else
lets their hair grow
under the tapestry.

139 Convenient Fiction?

Starting somewhere in my psyche, temple
textures touch my mind. No need to book
a room, no call to speak to any stranger;
free to open suitcase, strut one's stuff,
repack with jewels from the night, some truth
about the soul, some insight, art or science.

So far so good. I call upon Sir Science
for some knowledge of myself. The temple
library is open, and the truth
about my brain is there in many books
on cortex, lobes and neurons, complex stuff
that keeps on getting brainier – and stranger.

Like how we understand our stranger
selves, the fabled bits that neuroscience
only labels, while Dame Art has stuff
galore from centuries before the temple
closed its canon, not to speak of books
and blogs since then that deep mine truth.

All this is introduction. For some truth
that blows the mind, a story even stranger,
meet a searching God, here in the book
of Psalms: a God who flies ahead of science
fiction, fuels quasars, forms a temple
out of space and time, inspires the stuff
of dreams, knows off by heart each book that stuffs
the shelves of planet earth. To tell the truth,
God reads the dark, the darkness found in temples
or in us, when we become a stranger
to ourselves, and flee from art and science
and from human company, to book
ourselves a place apart, no God, no book,
no sense, no you or me. This nightmare stuff
God also knows, through wind and womb, by science,
art and therapy, in nudging truth
to birth, in changing entropy, these stranger
miracles that mark a cosmic temple.

Is it science, art, to class God's book
convenient fiction, tepid temple stuff?
God thinks truth stronger, definitely stranger.

140 Af Bees n Bleizin

They byket about me, like bees; they gaed down
like a bleeze o' thorns . . .

'Wha fank me roun' –
atowre their crown,
may the ill o' their lips be theekit!
Bleezan blauds come abune them . . .'

*Saums 118:12 and 140:9-10, owerset frae Hebrew
intil Scottis bi P. Hately Waddell*

'A see ye keep ae bee,'
quo Jimmie Shand,
whan gien a measly
thrummle-fu o hinnie
i yon scrimpit B n B.

Aiblins snell-gabbit,
bit no sae nippie
as e speeder venim,
ir the sairpent souch
o a slidderie tung.

They fun the bees
o Notre Dame tae the fore,
bit soon as peeries,
in a ruiptap skep
abune the tempil bleize.

Thae birsled bougars
sen a reiky waff
tae kittlie stangers:
'Dover aroun yir quen
or daunger wins awa.'

Lat them as be shairp
stang bi sic fell pizzen
cuil thir birse,
lae flytin tae
thon sangschaw keeng.

formed a nest

*surround me
all over their heads
thatched
blazing blows*

one bee

*thimble-full honey
tight-fisted*

*perhaps sarcastic
sharp
spider poison
venomous timbre
deceitful*

*up on top
fast asleep
hive
above*

*scorched rafters
smoky smell
sensitive stingers
snooze
till danger passes*

*poison
rage
wrangling
music competition*

141 Prayer

‘To my God a heart of flame, to my fellows a heart of love,
to myself a heart of steel.’ *St Augustine*

Every day I pray this trail of tapestry a little further on.
Flame stitches zigzag morning and at evening,
an irregular bargello, yellowed with such fitful craft,
but still alight with all the incense of each night.

Every day cross stitches lose their place and purpose,
need unwinding in a faithful strike of love,
for modern tapestry’s a multi-coloured fellow
learning how to pray good in, and evil out.

Every day I stretch my stitch to continental,
with a steely grasp of our own gaucheness,
make a tent with room for more than one,
and find some warp threads simulating God.

142 In the Cave

Who is in the cave with David
and his band of desperadoes?
Plato working on his mind
to sort out false from real foes?
Edgar Poe, his pendulum
of fate aswing to frighten those
with brutal claustrophobia?
Or Bruce, a spider at his nose
to model hope and stamina?

Who is in the cave with me,
when life becomes a prison hut,
and prayer goes round and round my head
and wears a clogging, toxic rut?
My enemies within, without
are wily, smooth and strong, they shut
me into dark despair; there's no one left
to help. Oh save me, Lord, just cut
a path into my soul, and rescue me.

Who is in the Scottish cave,
our catacomb of buried past,
clogged up with credit and complaint,
with argument and counterblast?
Those real and phantom figures huddle
with us, watch and pray and fast
till *faith and fortune, time and tide*
may bring us out, to praise at last
a God who wipes the floor inside.

143 In a Corner

'So Absalom stole the hearts of the people of Israel.'
2 Samuel 15:6

If not Absalom, another rival
crushes me, dissects my character
and pins it to a dirty washing line.

I remember golden days, when I
was young, my team around me, brilliant
and untagged by blood and lust and power.

In this muddy corner, choked by dust,
I cower, throat-sore, thirsty for you,
knowing I have dragged my country here.

For me read every human being, Scot
or not, each called to be a servant prince
and ruler of the road before our feet.

144 Stuff

Mind-bending stuff:
shape-shifting God
flows happily
without a blink
from lightning flash
to people power,
and personalist
trainer, life coach,
gym and spirit
all in one.

Heart-rending stuff:
crook-fingered aliens
shake hands
and never think
of faithfulness.

Deliver us
from ricin, anthrax,
cyber warfare,
family feuds,
from knife and gun.

Soul-mending stuff:

I will pick up
my multi-stringed
guitar, and link
my voice to angels
in the temple
taking shape
around the praise
of song and psalm
in every tongue.

Impending stuff:

this God is waiting
for a weighted prayer,
pitched – kerplink –
into a loch,
when ripples rich
with consequence
bless barn and beast,
upend the wicked,
keep a kingdom young.

145 A to Z

acrostic seems a little lower case for God,
 belittles one whose letters only spell a word,
 cannot bow before the majesty,
 describe the beauty or the glory,
 evoke those intimate connections
 firing all things seen and unseen,
 gilding star and season,
 hearth and holy heritage.

I will bless you every day, my God and King,
 just as on weekday afternoons, the synagogue
 kept psalms like this in service,
 line by crisp and careful line,
 marrying grace and greatness,
 never close to running out
 of verbs and other
 parts of stunning speech,
 questions left behind this craft of wonder
 reaching for the sky, complaints left wailing
 somewhere in the wake of praise. A
 tapestry of miracle is rolling, scrolling
 underneath earth's tragedies, adding
 value unsuspected without faith. If
 Wallace Stevens could invent so many
 extra things about a blackbird, how will
 you, my God, approach the
 zenith of *your* poetry?

146 Boundaries

Let everyone be clear about their mission,
though the bounds be wide as heaven and earth;
let not the prince become a politician.

How blest the man or woman who long since
picked up a call to servant leadership;
let not the priest or prophet be a prince.

Let God be swift to help, in God's own fashion,
free our speech, hold back the evil thought;
let not the prince become a cool assassin.

My soul is shocked, my fragile being winces
at the sight of blood, the sound of lies;
let not the people put their trust in princes.

147 Jerusalem

City of conflict and combustion,
city of international contention;
city of stones and ancient bones;
city of wonder, though the thunder
of its past rolls past the present,
makes the future nervous.

City of fears and separate parts,
city of tears and broken hearts,
city of God, below, above;
city of metaphor and meaning,
city to explore with mind
and map you make your own.

City of song and ancient praise,
city the Lord alone can raise
above the wrangles and the rasp
of rivalry between the faiths
that claim it – reinvent *shalom*,
so wounded outcasts name it home.

148 People of the Light

Let every biochemist praise the Lord,
and every astrophysicist:
you charm afresh these earthly, heavenly bodies,
make John Keats clear Isaac Newton
of his crimes against the light.

The photons from the sun began their journey
deep in fusion at its core,
set out before the birth of *homo sapiens*,
only now are hitting on
the retina behind my eye.

Let every biochemist praise the Lord,
and every astrophysicist:
you open eyes and ears again to wonder
at God's puns, those particles
which also take the form of waves.

Humans voice the praise of all creation,
God within us praising God beyond,
but God as usual goes ahead of us,
his beam soft booming of a boson,
modern music of the spheres.

Let every biochemist praise the Lord,
and every astrophysicist:
like Israel, you're called to be a light
to Gentile ignoramuses –
go re-enchant the universe.

149 Maturity

She walked half round the church, before
the paper plate fell off her head;
the girl relaxed, such halo practice
proving taxing fun; instead,
she settled for a biscuit with her maw.

mum

Her brother flashed the plastic sword
his paw had bought at Stirling, tiny
two-edged tribute to the Wallace
and the Bruce, a simple sign he
understood and took on board.

dad

So now may Zion's children grow
to sainthood, wisely exegete
their past, to fight for freedom
knowing also how to beat
the sword to hoe, violence veto.

150 Breathing or Breathless

slow breath and quick breath
the long and the short of it

shallow breath, deep breath,
the ins and the outs of it

noisy breath, quiet breath
whisper and shout of it

bag breath and pipe breath
the puff and the teeth of it

buzzard breath, budgie breath
twitter and cry of it

snout breath and muzzle breath
snuffle and growl of it

baby breath, dying breath
first and the last of it

breathing or breathless
a cosmos of praise to it

Notes on Book 5 Poems

109 Epigraph from W.S. Graham, 'The Fifteen Devices', *New Collected Poems*, Faber, London 2004.

111 The final line is a reference to Maxwell's favourite hymn, 'Lord of all being, throned afar'

114 Epigraph from a conversation on *The Divine Comedy* with Edward Clarke, who has himself published poems on all the Psalms (*A Book of Psalms*, Paraclete Press, Brewster MA, 2020).

115 Epigraph from *Homo Deus: a Brief History of Tomorrow*, Penguin, London 2015, 24.

118 Alfred Edersheim was a Jewish Christian who wrote about the Temple and wanted to take his readers back through time.

126 On 16/3/19 Scotland and England drew 38-38 at Twickenham.

132 The poem refers to the fifteen men who died inside Ben Cruachan during the construction of an underground power station.

136 Powehi is in Hawaian culture a name meaning 'the adorned fathomless dark creation' and given to a black hole photographed for the first time in 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2019/apr/12/powehi-black-hole-gets-a-name-meaning-the-adorned-fathomless-dark-creation>, accessed 11/4/20.

143 The Septuagint adds, 'When his son is pursuing him' to the heading 'A Psalm of David', hence the reference to Absalom.

146 The reference is to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi on 2/10/18.