

***OPEN SILENCE: AN APPLICATION
OF THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY
TO LITERARY CREATION***

by

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Above the senses are the objects of desire, above the objects of desire mind, above the mind intellect, above the intellect manifest nature.

Above manifest nature the unmanifest seed, above the unmanifest seed, God. God is the goal; beyond Him nothing.

From the Kāthak Branch of the Wedas (Katha-Upanishad)¹

¹ Shree Purohit Swāmi and W B Yeats, trans., *The Ten Principal Upanishads* (1937; London: Faber and Faber, 1985) 32.

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ABSTRACT

Open Silence: An Application of the Perennial Philosophy to Literary Creation is a dissertation that combines a creative component, which is a long, narrative poem, with a framing essay that is an exegesis on the creative component. The poem, entitled *The Silence Inside the World*, tells the story of four characters, an albino woman in a coma, an immortal wizard, a dead painter, and an unborn soul, as they strive to comprehend the bizarre, dream-like realm in which they find themselves. The narrative utilizes various metaphysical elements of the Perennial Philosophy for the creation of character, event and setting, and also uses the concept of Imagination as the power and place of creative endeavour. The poem comprises 8,170 lines of blank verse arranged in three-line stanzas, for a total of 62,816 words.²

The exegesis accompanying *The Silence Inside the World* explains the creative value to the writer of the philosophy underlying the work. It does this by examining the artistic and critical experiences arising out of the writing of the poem. The first half of the exegesis, entitled ‘Intentions: *Tzimtzum*’, explores the biographical background of the author, those influences not only on the motivation to write such a creative text, but also on the original desire to investigate such creativity and spirituality in the first place. It also examines those elements of the Perennial Philosophy felt necessary for incorporation into the creative component. The section then delineates the factors Harold Bloom considers necessary for the creation of strong work and considers how the intended creative project may fulfil these requirements. Finally, ‘Intentions’ presents those creative, mythic and symbolic

² Word count includes title page and chapter titles.

materials gleaned from the critical process that are likely to be prove useful for the creative component.

The shorter, second half of the essay, entitled ‘Reflections: *Tikkun*’, examines the intricacies of the drafting process for the poem and for the thesis as a whole, as well as the lessons gathered from the project and its overall success. The section ends with suggestions for further work not only for the present author, but also for others, writers and critics alike. The full exegesis, which comprises the segments ‘Introduction’, ‘Intentions: *Tzimtzum*’, ‘Reflections: *Tikkun*’, and ‘Conclusion’, totals 37,077 words.

STUDENT DECLARATION

I, Edward Arthur Ronald Livings, declare that the PhD thesis entitled *Open Silence: An Application of the Perennial Philosophy to Literary Creation* is no more than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signed: Date:

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INTRODUCTION

I have made thy word to be true before Nut,
and thou art mighty before the gods.
‘Speech of Isis’³

The inspiration and context for a text can be assumed to come from a number of sources depending on one’s philosophical inclination. For those of materialist bent, a text is generally deemed the result of conscious and unconscious thought processes, with possibly a nod to the collective conscious and unconscious of the race. For such people language is often considered the sum, sign and inspirer of all human endeavours, and itself may be a construct of the social environment of the human. However, for those who believe that the spiritual, not the material, is the foundation of the universe and who believe also that the spiritual is the goal of the human being, inspiration for texts is considered likely (and for strong texts, essentially) to come from much deeper (or much higher) sources, from the soul itself, from the spirit that informs the soul, and maybe from the unknowable Mystery underlying all manifestation. One expression of this Mystery is what has come to be called the Perennial Philosophy, and it is the intention of this project to explore how this philosophy can be used in the creation of a text whose aim is to bring a reader closer to these deeper/higher sources.

This thesis has two components, one creative and one critical. The latter is split into two parts that frame the creative component, which itself is a long, narrative poem entitled *The Silence Inside the World*. In his seminal book *The Perennial Philosophy* Aldous Huxley mentions the two classes of scripture in India, ‘the Shruti,

³ E A Wallis Budge, intro. and comm., *The Book of the Dead: The Hieroglyphic Transcript and Translation into English of the Ancient Egyptian Papyrus of Ani* (1895; New York: Gramercy, 1999) 624.

or inspired writings which are their own authority, since they are the product of immediate insight into ultimate Reality',⁴ and 'the Smriti, which are based upon the Shruti and from them derive such authority as they have'.⁵ This division can be applied to the thesis. There is the poem itself, which, as the exegesis will make clear, is an engagement with Imagination, with the power and place of ultimate Reality, and thus a type of Shruti. However, the exegesis is not a typical Smriti. What is not evident in Huxley's noting of the two classes of scripture is that any 'insight into ultimate Reality' of necessity requires preparation, if not for the experience itself, then at least for the transcription of that experience so that others can engage with it. Thus, the exegesis is a type of extended Smriti, for not only does it analyse and comment on the poem (the Shruti), but it also explores the artistic and critical preparations for, and experiences of, the poem's creation. The exegesis also can be seen as an example of what the American transpersonal philosopher Ken Wilber calls 'mandalic or paradoxical thinking',⁶ the mind attempting to reason about what is beyond itself: the transrational/transpersonal realms, those higher reaches of soul and spirit that can only be directly experienced through intuition. Based on this concept, then, the creative component of the project, because it is intended to be an art piece designed to give a reader an experience of those higher reaches, can be seen as an example of 'mandalic art'.

The two parts of the exegesis reflect the two aspects of Smriti suggested above: the preparation and the analysis. The first part, which is titled 'Intentions: *Tzimtzum*', will explore the biographical background of the author—not only those influences on the motivation to write the project's creative text, but also those

⁴ Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954) 4.

⁵ Huxley 4.

influences that prompted the original desire to investigate such creativity and spirituality in the first place. It will also examine those elements of the Perennial Philosophy that could prove useful for the creative component either as form and content or as possible methodologies for the actual writing process, its ongoing transcription of inspiration. Furthermore, it will delineate those factors Harold Bloom regards as necessary for the creation of strong work and consider how the intended creative component may fulfil these requirements. Finally, 'Intentions' will compile the approaches and mythic and symbolic materials gleaned during the critical process that are likely to be used in the creative component.

The sub-title for this first part is *Tzimtzum*, a term taken from Lurianic Kabbalah. *Tzimtzum* refers to the divine concealment (or contraction or withdrawal) that the Infinite Godhead performs in order to create the conditions for the eventual emergence of the manifest world.⁷ The 'emergence' of a creative text requires similar preparatory work, a 'clearing of space' into which the Godhead (ultimate Reality, Imagination) emanates a thin line of divine light (inspiration) and encourages those creative and critical processes required to turn the inspiration into a manifest text.

The second half of the essay, entitled 'Reflections: *Tikkun*', will examine the intricacies of the drafting process for the poem and for the thesis as a whole. It will also present those lessons learnt dealing with the difficulties of the creative process and examine the success of the project as a whole. In addition, it will offer

⁶ Ken Wilber, *Eye to Eye: The Quest for the New Paradigm* (1983; Boston: Shambhala, 1990) 67.

⁷ Sanford L Drob, *Symbols of the Kabbalah: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 2000) 18.

suggestions for further work not only for the author of the project but also for others, writers and critics alike.

The Lurianic sub-title for this part is *Tikkun*, which is taken from *Tikkun ha-Olam*, the Restoration of the World,⁸ the process by which man, through the ‘raising of the sparks’—those elements of divinity caught in darkness—reunifies the masculine and feminine principles of God that were separated during creation in the event known as ‘The Breaking of the Vessels’ (which could be seen as the inadequacies of early drafts). This usage for ‘Reflections’ is a recognition that the project itself is one attempt at ‘raising sparks’ through an iterative process involving inspiration and rational endeavour, and that the divine enterprise itself, if you like, will continue long after the completion of the poem and its accompanying exegesis, with further projects based on outcomes of the creative and critical components.

The major element of the thesis is the long, narrative poem created using the insights gained during the project. *The Silence Inside the World* is a metaphysical epic that features a group of characters who meet in a bizarre, dream-like realm and try to comprehend their appearance there: Jessie, an albino woman in a coma; Zane, an immortal wizard from an apparent fantasy realm; Remesh, a dead painter from the near-future of the woman; and Rynobar, a star-demon from Zane’s world who discovers she is an unborn soul. These characters face each other and their own deepest secrets as they struggle to evade Abzzu, a strange creature of smoke and lightning, and travel towards Mt Alkerii, the dream mountain in the middle of Thexlan, the land that is all lands. The narrative utilizes, for the creation of character, event and setting, various metaphysical elements of the Perennial Philosophy,

⁸ Drob 19.

including the hierarchy of worlds, the superimposition of these worlds, and the soul's progress along the Great Chain of Being (which necessarily involves reincarnation), as well as the concept of Imagination as the power and place of creative endeavour. The narrative's poetics constitutes blank verse put into three-line stanzas reminiscent of the *terza rima* in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*.

The thesis then is an examination of how the Perennial Philosophy in its depiction of the divine in action can aid the creation of a strong, imaginative text, which itself examines the divine in its aspect of Imagination and story and traces how the soul may evolve towards the divine. As Kandinsky says in his important work *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*:

The spiritual life, to which art belongs and of which she is one of the mightiest elements, is a complicated but definite and easily definable movement forwards and upwards.⁹

This thesis can be seen as an effort to understand and possibly reduce that complexity for those interested in exploring the spiritual, both through and with art.

⁹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. and intro. M T H Sadler (1914; New York: Dover, 1977) 4.

INTENTIONS: *TZIMTZUM*

But by virtue of the Imagination, the universal cosmic knowledge is available to whoever, poet or prophet, raises his mind into those regions: ‘One thing alone makes a poet’, Blake affirmed, ‘Imagination, the Divine Vision’.

Kathleen Raine¹⁰

¹⁰ Kathleen Raine, *W B Yeats and the Learning of the Imagination* (Ipswich: Golgonooza, 1999) 94.

1.1 On the Crooked Path

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.
Alfred Tennyson, ‘Ulysses’¹¹

Over twenty years ago I wrote my first novel, a fantasy entitled *The Rainbow God*. After re-writing it several times I submitted it to publishers and began work on a trilogy¹² that was to comprise a prequel to this book.¹³ I never finished that trilogy, the complexities I’d introduced into the plot being beyond my capacity at the time to unravel. As for *The Rainbow God*, it was rejected a number of times and was eventually relegated to my filing cabinet, along with the ‘trilogy’ drafts.

During the later stages of this period I discovered a love of poetry, and this probably contributed to my diminishing interest in speculative fiction; other reasons were the preponderance of what I saw as formula books, ‘fat fantasies’ and the like, and the dominance of overblown theme series.¹⁴ For almost ten years I devoted myself to writing poems, with occasional forays into short fiction. However, one character from my ‘trilogy’ kept nagging me. His name was Zane, a young idealistic magician and seeker of wisdom.

When I first wrote about Zane he was a minor character in the first novel of the prequel trilogy. In this novel, tentatively entitled *Choices*,¹⁵ Zane was part of an order of magicians called the N’Dami. These were not black or white magicians, but

¹¹ Alfred Tennyson, *Alfred Tennyson: Selected Poetry*, ed. and intro. Douglas Bush (New York: The Modern Library, 1951) 90.

¹² Inspired by the success of J R R Tolkien’s three-volume novel *The Lord of The Rings* (which was actually a tale comprising six ‘books’) trilogies were then, and still are, *de rigueur* in the fantasy genre. Indeed, it is not unheard of to have multiple trilogies or more involving the same characters and/or worlds. Robert Jordan’s *The Wheel of Time* currently stands at 12 volumes, a prequel and 11 books in the series.

¹³ Though a prequel is nominally one book, in the speculative fiction genre the prequel can comprise any number of books whose events occur before those of the original book and are related to its story in some way.

¹⁴ For example, while I enjoyed the first three *Dune* books, the quality of writing and idea decreased rapidly as the series continued, so that the series became to my mind purely a money-spinner.

colour magicians,¹⁶ an idea I had found in a book by Philip Bonewits, who in 1970 received the world's first Bachelor of Arts degree in Magic and Thaumaturgy. His system, based on 'pagan, nonliterate, and associational classifications of colors',¹⁷ and related in some degree to the chakra system, divided magic into domains that suit a magician's skills and interests and are not judgements of a practitioner's moral standing. Red Magic deals with the body and so involves killing and healing. Orange Magic deals with ego-strength and materialism, as well as the physical and economic sciences. Brown Magic deals with hunting, the wilderness and the ecological sciences. Yellow Magic involves the mental sciences, such as mathematics, logic and philosophy, as well as learning (hence the sub-title of his book), and is the colour of Thaumaturgy, 'the art and science of wonderworking'.¹⁸ Green Magic includes 'the botanical sciences, fertility and creativity, beauty and art'.¹⁹ Blue Magic deals with emotions, the social sciences, religions, theology, and is the colour of Theurgy, the use of 'magic for religious purposes, for "attaining salvation"'.²⁰ Indigo Magic is the colour of weather control and other sciences of the sky. Purple Magic refers to violent and physical passions, and the political sciences. Ultraviolet Magic deals with pure power in the psychic realms.²¹

¹⁵ The first and second novels of the prequel trilogy were only written to first draft stage.

¹⁶ Philip Emmons Isaac Bonewits, *Real Magic: An Introductory Treatise on the Basic Principles of Yellow Magic* (1971; London: Open Gate, 1972) 122-124.

¹⁷ Bonewits 119.

¹⁸ Bonewits xiii.

¹⁹ Bonewits 122.

²⁰ Bonewits 224.

²¹ It might then be said that this dissertation is a mixture of Yellow Magic (the exegesis being an examination of the art of literary 'wonderworking'), Green Magic (*The Silence Inside the World* being an art piece), and Blue Magic (because the poem attends to metaphysical matters).

In *Choices* Zane was an apprentice Yellow Magician, one of those who studied magic but was not usually a practitioner. After a crisis of faith about the laws of the universe, during which he tried to kill himself, Zane left the story to pursue his quest for wisdom. I was so taken by his character and his quest—Where and how does one find absolute wisdom? (my own interest then and now)—that I made him the main character of the second trilogy novel, *The Cobwebs Clear*.²² This may have been the reason for my not being able to complete the trilogy; I was writing two stories, the one started in the first book, a formulaic good magicians versus evil magicians tale, with a bit of modern technology thrown in (the setting was in the near future of Earth, after a world war that somehow had opened up the powers of magic), and the one involving Zane’s quest, which was more along the lines, I realized some years later, of Hermann Hesse’s eponymous protagonist in *Siddhartha*.

Even as I wrote poetry and tried my hand at literary fiction, Zane still plagued my imagination. Over the years I delved into his character and his world, both in my journal and in occasional short story drafts. Yet this delving seemed incomplete, unsatisfactory, as evident in the many false starts to, and alternative skeleton versions of, his story. This work was compounded by the arrival of another character that also nagged at my imagination. Her name was Jessie Willis,²³ a young albino woman who was a student of ancient literature and who somehow had an intuitive connection with Zane, though they were of different universes. They wanted their story told, but I wasn’t sure what their story truly was. It was as if I were lacking in some specific combination of craft and, more importantly, philosophical and spiritual knowledge—

²² The titles of the prequel book were obviously working ones only, though they did seem appropriate at the time, the naivety of the beginner writer.

how could I write about a successful quest for wisdom when I hadn't discovered such wisdom during my own years of reading, writing, meditating, and the studying of higher order mathematics, music, and martial arts (more of this later). I had become stuck, and I wasn't sure where to look.

I began to acquire the requisite craft during my further explorations into poetry and fiction and from my literary studies. The spiritual and philosophical knowledge didn't come quite so easily, as I wasn't sure what was needed for the story. Then I encountered the Perennial Philosophy as detailed in the critical works of the English visionary poet Kathleen Raine.

For a writer interested in works of the imagination, of which, in poetry, the Romantic poets are exemplars and, in fiction, tales of the weird and fantastic are a type, the Perennial Philosophy was a liberating discovery. As Raine puts it, the 'Perennial Philosophy in all its branches holds that not matter but mind—consciousness—is the ground of reality as we experience it'.²⁴ This basic tenet not only appealed to my own intuitive experience, but also to my lyric and dramatic instincts. My interest in the philosophy increased when I discovered the concept of the Great Chain of Being, as here described by Ken Wilber, who has been investigating structures of consciousness, especially as delineated in various Eastern and Western mental therapeutic systems, for many years:

According to the perennial philosophy, reality consists of several different levels or dimensions, from the least real to the most real. This is the Great Chain of Being,

²³ The character's name when she first appeared in my imagination was Keea Willex, but to avoid confusion I will use the name she is known by in the completed narrative, as I will do for any other characters that appear in the exegesis.

²⁴ Kathleen Raine, *From Blake to A Vision* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1979) 5.

reaching from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit. Matter, body, mind, soul, spirit—those are five levels or dimensions. Some traditions have seven levels—the seven chakras, for example. Some traditions just have three levels—body, mind, and spirit. Some traditions have literally dozens of levels... The point is that in human growth and development, the Witness, or real Self capital S, starts out identified with the material self, then the bodily self, then the mental self, then the soul self, and finally reverts to, or awakens to, its own true nature as spirit. Each stage includes the previous stage, and then adds its own unique aspects in order to form a larger union, until there is ultimately a union with the All.²⁵

It began to dawn on me that Zane's story was connected with the search for the All, for ultimate knowledge, and that the dramatic tension in his story, both internally and externally, might arise from his misconceptions of this knowledge and the application he makes of these misconceptions. Thus, it became obvious that appropriate study of the Perennial Philosophy and its elucidations might not only reveal methodologies for a structuring of Zane's quest, but also provide details for setting and character.

The goal then is for *The Silence Inside the World* to be a strong, imaginative record of one man's search for ultimate knowledge and of his application of that knowledge. The use of the word 'strong' recalls the way Harold Bloom talks of those poets who can misread their precursors and create worthwhile works:

Poetic history, in this book's argument, is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves... My concern is only with strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death.²⁶

²⁵ Ken Wilber, *Grace and Grit: Spirituality and Healing in the Life and Death of Treya Killam Wilber* (1991; North Blackburn: Collins Dove, 1994) 100.

²⁶ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973; New York: Oxford UP, 1975) 5.

Though Bloom seems here to be referring to poets only, his thesis can be applied to any sort of writer, as he himself implies in his comments about Norman Mailer, whom he sees as trying to evade the influence of Hemingway.²⁷ My precursor in the field of fantasy, as he seems to be for most mythopoeic writers, may well be J R R Tolkien. Other precursors, given that I originally planned for *The Silence Inside the World* to feature poetry as well as prose, would certainly be the Romantic poets, who foregrounded the importance of the Imagination and attempted to reveal the reality that lies behind the ordinary. This reality is a central concern of the Perennial Philosophy and, as Kathleen Raine has discussed in her writings, the Romantic poets were fully aware of this and were part of a tradition stretching back to at least Ovid and forward to Yeats:

Indeed, the entire European tradition of imaginative poetry, with all the rich variety of image in which ancient and enduring themes have been dressed, in various places and at different times, proves to be strung upon a single thread. To find this thread in one poet is to hold a clue to all; Yeats and Shelley, Blake and Milton, Dante, Virgil, Ovid, Spenser, and Coleridge all speak with the same symbolic language and discourse of the immemorial world of the imagination.²⁸

As this exegesis will soon make evident, to know of such tools is one thing, to be able to utilize them appropriately and significantly is another. And there is always in any endeavour that mixes philosophy and story the challenge of preventing that philosophy from dictating rather than aiding the creation of the text:

True imaginative learning is a search for truth and reality, not for information as such or in the service of some theory or ideology.²⁹

²⁷ Bloom 28.

²⁸ Kathleen Raine, *Defending Ancient Springs* (1967; West Stockbridge: Lindisfarne, 1985) 94.

²⁹ Raine *Learning*, 83.

1.2 First Tricks

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
 What if my leaves are falling like its own!
 Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Ode to the West Wind'³⁰

Threshold

It is Friday night and you have come to pick up the singer/bass player of your group for your weekly garage practice session. On his bed is a thick paperback with a yellow cover and the picture of a mythical landscape seen through a frame of dark trees. As you pick it up, your friend says, 'I couldn't get into it. Nothing happens in it for ages. Anyway, you're more into science fiction, aren't you?' You open the book and read the first few words, 'This book is largely concerned with Hobbits', and keep reading it even when your friend is ready to go. He says you can borrow it. You finish the book before the weekend is out, and have read your own copy, the three volume edition, more than half a dozen times since. When the group needed a name you suggested Strider, the name of one of the central characters, and it was accepted.

Before expanding in this section and the next on the discoveries and intentions mentioned in 'On the Crooked Path', I will provide more details about my creative interests and activities, to set the ground, so to speak, of and for the unfolding of the project itself.

³⁰ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald H Reiman and Sharon B Powers, (New York: Norton, 1977) 223.

Some of my earliest reading, possibly because my father was in the Air Force during World War II, was war literature, both fiction (especially the Biggles books) and non-fiction: *Dardanelles Patrol*, *The Frogmen*, *The Colditz Story*, *The Dam Busters*. For many years I wanted to join the Air Force and become a fighter pilot. However, when I eventually applied and went in for the battery of tests, the recruiting officer took one look at my spectacled face, showed me directly to the eyesight testing room, and pronounced that my eyes were so bad I wouldn't be able to enlist as a cook's assistant. Naturally I was disappointed, but this was more because of the detail of the rejection than the rejection itself—I was already at an age when I was questioning my direction and was becoming more attracted to the freedom of university and my imagination than to the regimentation of military life.

The first 'real' book I ever read, long before the military took hold, was a 300-page version of the life of Robin Hood, and this inspired my interest in classic Boys' Adventure stories. These included books such as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Treasure Island*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Kidnapped*, *The Three Musketeers*, and *Around the World in Eighty Days*, as well as Enid Blyton's Famous Five and Secret Seven stories. I also collected Phantom, Green Lantern and Spider-Man comics for many years, though was constantly reminded by my parents that such reading fare was childish. Eventually I progressed from these texts of hero-adventure and wish-fulfilment to forbidden ones like Ian Fleming's James Bond books, read using torchlight under the bedclothes.

Around this time I developed a fascination for science fiction, partly because of TV shows such as *Outer Limits*, Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone*, and *Star Trek*, partly because of the general interest at the time in space travel, and partly, I think now, as a form of escapism from a difficult childhood. I read all the books written by the big three of science fiction, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C Clark and Robert Heinlein (and

particularly loved the idea of Future Histories), plus other SF masterpieces, such as the hard technology book *Mission of Gravity* (my father's favourite). I moved from these to the works of A E van Vogt, especially *The Voyage of the Space Beagle*, an obvious influence on the Star Trek scenario (with its first part, originally published as the short story 'Black Destroyer', also cited as a source for the film *Alien*), and the Null-A novels. Then came books exploring 'softer', more social issues, as in those written by Ursula Le Guin: *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Dispossessed*, *The Lathe of Heaven*. As the sixties progressed my appreciation of speculative fiction in the media moved from the original Star Trek to *2001: A Space Odyssey* (my all-time favourite film for many years) and the TV show *The Prisoner*. The latter starred Patrick McGoohan as a former secret agent who is taken to The Village, a surreal retirement home/prison camp for spies in which everyone is addressed by a number (he is Number Six) and from which he tries to escape time and again, only to be caught by weird balloon-like entities. Eventually he becomes Number One.

Early in this period I tried to combine my interest in spy heroes and science fiction by writing a story of an Australian secret agent (inspired by the Australian TV spy drama *Hunter*) who lived on a small yacht (my aunt and uncle owned one) and who rode a black Triumph motorbike he called Bess (my father raced motorcycles at Victoria Park before he was married). The character's name was to be Dick Turpin, or some variation of this (I had just seen a mini-series on that famous highwayman, whose horse was Black Bess). The story would involve Dick investigating the existence of an UFO (another of my interests at that time) under Ayres Rock (which I had visited during a Scouting holiday). The first scene featured Dick's yacht being blown up and Dick escaping the blast and the oil-flames on the surface because he has good lungs from snorkelling and scuba-diving activities (I had been a keen skin-diver

for a while). I wrote four hand-written pages, then stopped, mainly because I had no idea how to plot out such a story, or how to match my words to my ideas. I never showed the pages to anyone, or said anything about being interested in writing. I don't think I even considered being a writer at that stage. I was inspired by a concatenation of separate passions and then the inspiration passed, or was pushed aside because it was too hard to handle, too hard to reveal, too hard to accept. I kept the pages for many years but eventually misplaced them.

Such reading and such creative hints obviously exemplified and influenced many typical male childhood fantasy career wishes—fighter pilot, submarine commander, astronaut, racing car driver, secret agent, super hero. Yet, they also introduced themes and exemplars, conscious and unconscious, that might shape a creative personality's efforts to find an appropriate mode of expression in which to explore not only these conscious and unconscious elements, but also those pressures that drew out the creative trajectory in the first place, the quest for authenticity.

During my Catholic secondary school education I moved from Form 1B to Form 2A and was thrilled with the transition. I had made it to the A stream, the stream that studied languages instead of technical drawing, the stream comprising the more intelligent of the students, though both streams (unlike the other 'lower' ones) also studied mathematics and science, the epitome of fifties' and sixties' education value. It didn't matter that I went from being at the top of the grade to being in the middle. It didn't matter that my English and language scores were always the same level as my maths and sciences. It didn't matter that I wore glasses. All I was interested in for a long time was gaining knowledge in those subjects that would help me join the Air Force. I was travelling the path I thought I wanted, and wasn't able to acknowledge any intuition that there were other paths more appropriate. However,

this intuition was strong enough to find a way of breaking through. In my final year I, along with many others inspired by the burgeoning popular music industry, took up guitar.

When I went to university to study the sciences I joined a garage band and practised every chance I could. There was an excitement in four people producing a song that soared with, and into, its own energies. There was a freedom, when playing lead, in allowing the fingers to find a true and beautiful melodic dialogue with the song, the music coming ‘from memory, from synthesis of memory, and from nowhere’.³¹ There was an impetus even to build on these excitements and freedoms, to embrace a career in rock music, where ‘we can do what we love’ all the time. However, other band members wanted to finish uni first or consolidate their jobs, and I had to admit I too should probably finish my course, ‘as a back-up’. This may have been a failure of nerve on all our parts, or quite a sensible decision considering the career choices we all eventually did make. Still, we kept at our practice sessions, built up a solid repertoire of creative covers, and started playing gigs. We even began to talk about writing original material, and I was designated the lyricist. Yet my early song lyrics (which I had started to write even before joining the group, on brown bottle bags from the pub at which I worked) were awkward and unsuitable for exposure, and the band situation changed before I could build on these efforts.

During this time I was studying Applied Mathematics and, by my third year of university, was excited by Special Relativity and Quantum Mechanics. I was so taken

³¹ Mark Domoney, well-known Australian session guitarist who has performed on countless TV and variety shows and played with almost everybody in the industry, including John Farnham, Olivia Newton John, Broderick Smith, Kate Ceberano, in a recent (2005) private conversation about inspiration in music and literature.

with the idea of this quest for the fundamental laws of the universe that, instead of taking up a job offer in the computer industry at the end of the year, I stayed to complete my Honours, my thesis being on Black Holes. I fully intended to pursue an academic career in cosmology, but was unhappy with the penury of a student and so applied for the Public Service. I also enrolled in an MSc, but the topic offered by my supervisor was an investigation of the intricacies of an equation in tensor mathematics, a project too divorced from the deep questions in which I was interested, and I soon let my enrolment lapse.

There were other changes. For some time I had been uncomfortable with the inequality in the ‘roadie’ workload of the various members in *Strider*. This, along with the dawning of another creative interest, made it easy for me to leave the group, which I did a short while after I started working for the PMG.³² The new interest was kung fu (I had joined a club during the summer holidays after finishing fourth year), and I trained heavily for several years, eventually gaining a ‘black sash’, the equivalent of a black belt. Here was an endeavour that didn’t rely on other people (other than instructors, if they didn’t turn out to be charlatans). I enjoyed the gaining of physical skills, the freedom in letting the body move in defence or attack of its own accord, and the developing of my philosophical interests, which had been a major factor in my originally contemplating the martial arts as a possible domain of mastery.

I had been raised a Catholic by a mother who attended church rarely and a father who was christened Church of England yet was fundamentally an atheist.

³² Post Master General’s Department, which was split up into Australia Post and Telecom Australia (now Telstra) about six months after I joined.

However, in my teenage years I discarded the teachings of Catholicism as too dogmatic and restrictive in its views on sexuality, and too dismissive of other modes of contacting the divine. I became interested in alternative fields of knowledge: ESP and parapsychology, UFOs and ancient astronauts, Eastern philosophies and the esoteric. Kung fu thus gave me an active forum for exploring the connections between the world of man and the world of the Spirit (or whatever name one gave it: Buddha, the Tao, the One, Consciousness, Jesus the Imagination, Kether), though eventually I grew dissatisfied with the art form, seeing much greediness and guru-mentality. I continued my training irregularly for many years, but did not stay with any school or system for too long. I was searching, but still had no idea for what. And this search was being waylaid by the exigencies of 'normal' life: job, courtship, marriage, the approach of children. Such social commitments were important and joyful contributions to life, so maybe, as some loved ones did think, my old intuitions of creative meaning were merely fads in the way of valid life purpose. Or maybe not.

1.3 Dare Seize

Anyone who has ever been visited by the Muse is thenceforth haunted.³³
T S Eliot

Threshold

You have spent months on a research project of your own design. The results are in and you must write your report. You had learnt about such writing at university when recording chemistry and physics experiments, but this is your first professional report. You scribble notes on small cards, throw them on the floor, arrange them into an appropriate structure, handwrite a draft. Now it is time to type up your draft for submission to the typing pool, for you know no one there would be able to read your scrawl. You enter the computer room, the soft whirr of magnetic tapes in their housings, the chrome sparkle of sentinel consoles, your footsteps too loud on the cork floor with its straightened bundles of cables stretched across. You approach the teleprinter, which a colleague told you could be used as a typewriter when disconnected from the CPU. You sit down, test the pressure of keys, start. As the minutes disappear into word absorption, and the continuous-roll paper output mountains behind the machine, you feel excitement crackling through you. The ideas are yours, the words are yours, the effort is yours. Someone else will read this and comprehend the parameters and success of the project, will understand. Your fingers cramp and their tips tingle as you re-read the completed draft.

While I was working at Telecom I met a fellow SF reader. We spent every lunchtime playing chess and discussing the conceptual and philosophical questions that the

³³ Quoted by Walter Allen, ed., *Writers on Writing* (London: Phoenix House, 1948) 46.

better books raised. Eventually we decided that, as there were too many ‘crap’ books,³⁴ books that weren’t stimulating our ‘sense of wonder’,³⁵ we would write our own. We spent months plotting out the story of Arve and Arken, who belong to a pre-industrial world that they discover is part of an experiment by interstellar travellers. I was to write the first chapter, he was to write the second, and so forth. I wrote my chapter, but he didn’t.³⁶ Although the novel was to remain unwritten, I was thoroughly caught by the exhilaration of creating a story for others to read, of creating a living world of character and action and exotic setting, something that would be notches above my earlier experience of translating research into text.

I enrolled in a correspondence course, attended classes at the Council of Adult Education (CAE), and started writing science fiction short stories. One featured a Sherlock Holmes character (I had read Conan Doyle when younger) solving the death of a scientist in a closed room that contained a super-computer, while another explored the situation of a brain removed from its dying body. Although I read scientific journals in the research laboratory in which I worked as a mathematician, I soon found I was not interested in the research needed to write such hard technology stories, and I moved on to fantasy. Under the influence of Robert Howard I wrote sword and sorcery stories, and under the influence of H P Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith I produced ‘weird tales’.

³⁴ I had not at this time discovered Sturgeon’s Law (originally referred to as Sturgeon’s Revelation), which was apparently first mentioned by Theodore Sturgeon, author of such SF classics as *More than Human* and ‘Slow Sculpture’, at the World Science Fiction Convention of 1953: ‘Ninety percent of science fiction is crud [crap]. But then ninety percent of everything is crud, and it’s the ten percent that isn’t crud that is important.’ Source: <http://www.physics.emory.edu/~weeks/misc/slaw.html>, 23/11/05.

³⁵ As defined by Sam Moskowitz (ed.) in the introduction to *A Sense of Wonder*, an anthology of science fiction short novels, ‘a sense of wonder’ is that quality that imparts ‘an emotional breathlessness as well as intellectual stimulation’ (London: New English Library, 1967) 7.

³⁶ He has since gone on to head up his own telecommunication company, and has admitted that his ‘bliss’ (see footnote 96) comes during boardroom negotiations.

I managed to publish some pieces in a local university SF magazine,³⁷ but had no luck with the professional publications. As I read more in the field and learnt more craft, I decided to try my hand at the novel form, for I perceived that genre as more likely to lead to critical and financial success. I wrote the novel drafts mentioned earlier, but was once again unable to obtain publication. Undeterred, and because I had found a character that fascinated me, I returned to the short story and novella forms. I also had started writing poetry.

When I left *Strider* I did not abandon my lyrical interests. Having always been a book-nerd at my single sex school and a stunned rabbit at dances and parties, I had great difficulty in relating to the opposite sex, or even being able to express my feelings. I found the writing of poems to girlfriends a valuable communication tool (though I was eventually to discover that no matter how well such things are written, good verbal and touch communication is mandatory for navigating troubled relationships). Although sincere, the pieces I wrote were amateurish, being full of platitudes, clichés and flowery language put into verse forms half-remembered from English classes at school, with clunking rhythms and rudimentary rhymes. I didn't think to read poems for knowledge of craft or content; all I was intent on doing was putting my feelings down for those who usually liked what I wrote about them and us. I wasn't trying to be a poet. I didn't really know they existed. And then I met one; several in fact, but one in particular.

One of the workshops I attended at the CAE was entitled Fantasy Writing. This was exactly what I was looking for, until I sat down in the front row and discovered that the tutor was a well-known Australian poet and, although the session

³⁷ *Yggdrasil*, published by the Melbourne University Science Fiction Association.

was primarily looking at how to use fantasy in one's writing, most of the writers present were poets and the general thrust of the exercises were towards poetic expression. I found myself striving to construct the fantastic in verse, for I had not written anything 'confessional' as yet and my only verse models were the songs Tolkien put into his stories, the Shakespeare, Lawson and Paterson I had been exposed to at school, and the magical chants garnered from fantasy and horror stories. I struggled through the day-long workshop, yet was inspired enough to think about poetry as an art form and not just as an outpouring of emotion. I was becoming acquainted with Wordsworth's recollection in tranquillity.

Some months later, as a result of my attendance at that session, I received an invitation to help form a monthly science fiction and fantasy workshop group. One of the other people to turn up at the first meeting was a woman I had met at the Fantasy workshop. Although a poet, she quickly adapted to the genres explored in the group. Through her influence I started to read and write poetry that was first inspired by the fantastic, but soon turned into the confessional, into investigating my emotions instead of blithely transcribing them. A year or so earlier I had picked up in a second-hand bookstore a copy of Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*. I had thought at the time that the book would help me with instant goddess figures and symbols for my fantasy writing (I obviously hadn't read the blurb closely enough), and so was disappointed when confronted by its dense and meandering concentration on the tracing of muse language and narrative. However, when I experienced the fact that poets actually existed in, and wrote about, the contemporary world—its events, its people and their interactions—and had fallen under the influence of one, the book took on a new meaning, and I devoured it much like I had done with Tolkien: intense

attention, though at a slower pace, but with far less comprehension (which has improved upon subsequent readings).

Several years later, after a period of emotional upheaval and more concentration on poetry as a craft, I wrote what I felt was my first real poem, which was about the experience of watching an ultrasound being performed for my new unborn child. With this piece I knew I was a poet, knew I had finally found the artistic medium I had been seeking for many years. I could now look back at my writing history and note a progression from hard technology SF—the logical extension of existing scientific and technological ideas and the use of intellect to solve physical challenges in the generated environments—to a greater engagement with the emotions and their attendant environments, fantasy to horror to poetry. This could be seen as a movement from left brain to right brain, or even a correction of the tendency to over-value Thought and a realignment within me of Jung's other functional types: Intuition, Feeling, Sensation.³⁸ I even realized how my previous activities could be fitted into a poetry rubric: mathematics as both an exposure to universal forms and patterns, and a synthesis exercise in logical and creative thinking; rock music as a foundation for what Pound calls the *melopoeia*³⁹ element in the craft of poetry; martial arts as a kinetic and kinaesthetic foundation for the felt-body experience in poetry; and these last two endeavours, with their emphasis on extemporising (going with the flow of music in lead playing or the flow of strike, block and counter-strike in combat

³⁸ Carl G Jung, 'Approaching the unconscious', *Man and his Symbols*, ed. Carl G Jung (1964; New York: Anchor, 1988) 60-61.

³⁹ The phrase refers to words being charged by sound. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (1951; London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 37.

sparring), as evidence of how to open oneself to inspiration, to what is beyond one in poetry, what a rock guitarist would call ‘from nowhere’ and a Taoist would call *wu-wei* (not forcing)⁴⁰ or a Zen martial artist would call *mushin* (empty mind or no mind):⁴¹

In mushin, one unself-consciously acts in accord with the underlying principles of the Universe.⁴²

After such realizations I knew my intimations of creative destiny were not a fad. I was ready to plunge into poetry, its ‘craft or sullen art’,⁴³ as my true calling.

⁴⁰ Alan Watts (in collaboration with Al Chung-Liang Huang), *Tao: The Watercourse Way* (1975; Middlesex: Penguin, 1981), 76.

⁴¹ Kenneth Kushner, *One Arrow, One Life: Zen, Archery, and Daily Life* (New York: Arkana, 1988) 42.

⁴² Kushner 48.

⁴³ Dylan Thomas, ‘In My Craft or Sullen Art’, *Collected Poems: 1934-1952* (1952; London: Everyman’s Library, 1984) 120.

1.4 Leap of Tradition

Nor is there singing school but studying
 Monuments of its own magnificence . . .
 W B Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium'⁴⁴

Threshold

Each week you take a seat in the university library near the English Literature poetry aisle and re-read the assigned texts for that night's lecture and tutorial. Sometimes you wander up and down the aisle looking for texts required for essays. One night you are idly running your fingers along the spines of books, and the gold lettering on burgundy background of one stops you and triggers the image of an armoured poet before the springs on Mount Helicon—Defending Ancient Springs. The book contains essays on Coleridge, Shelley, and Blake and Yeats, poets you are studying in your yearlong subject Blake to Eliot, and others whose names are unfamiliar to you. You take it home and quickly realize you have found one end of Blake's golden thread.

For a writer interested in philosophy and works of the imagination, Kathleen Raine's book was a revelation. Here is Raine talking about Edwin Muir, that great Scottish poet and first translator (with his wife, Willa) of Kafka:

He discovered late what was known early to Dante and Milton, and discovered in the course of their poetic thought by Coleridge, Shelley, Blake, and Yeats, the great symbolic language of tradition. The world-tree and its fruits, the birds of the soul, sun, moon, river, loom, dragon, gate, and dark tower, may be likened to words of that language, whose meanings, though not otherwise definable, are exact. Knowledge of

⁴⁴ W B Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W B Yeats* (1933; London: Macmillan, 1961) 217.

these symbols is essentially a kind of learning, but it is the learning of the imagination, not of the merely conceptual mind. It is the learning of the poets.⁴⁵

And here, in her essay on Yeats's debt to Blake, she identifies this tradition to which all such imaginative poets belong and draw upon:

There is a learning unknown to textual scholars and literary historians no less exact than theirs; and this learning of the imagination (from his studies of theosophy, the Cabala, and Swedenborg he already possessed the key) Yeats instantly recognized in Blake...In Europe spiritual knowledge is embodied and transmitted principally within that tradition which descended through Orphism to Plato, to the neo-Platonists and the Gnostic sects, and to their successors both within Christendom (Dionysius the Areopagite and Dante were of them) and outside it. It is the language of Alchemy and of the Cabala...It is the language also of all symbolic art; or one might say that symbolic art is the natural language of such thought. The measure of its exactness is its conformity to the spiritual knowledge of the Perennial Philosophy.⁴⁶

When Raine mentions in her essay 'On the Symbol' that 'poetry in the full sense is symbolic discourse, discourse by analogy'⁴⁷ and that the symbol has 'as its primary purpose the evocation of one plane in terms of another',⁴⁸ that one plane being of a reality and consciousness 'other than that of the sensible world',⁴⁹ then, even though I had once been a scientist of sorts, with interests in the laws of the physical universe and in the power of reason, I took notice. I did so for I too felt that poetry was more than the 'description of sense impressions or personal emotions, or the evocation of group emotions',⁵⁰ even though my own writing of poetry was still in

⁴⁵ Raine *Defending*, 13.

⁴⁶ Raine *Defending*, 69-70.

⁴⁷ Raine *Defending*, 108.

⁴⁸ Raine *Defending*, 108.

⁴⁹ Raine *Defending*, 107.

⁵⁰ Raine *Defending*, 108.

its infancy. Because of my experience in the sciences and my interests in fantasy, in literature that was not realist, I could understand her assessment in ‘The Use of the Beautiful’:

Imaginative poetry alone has a real function to perform; for the pseudo-arts of realism perform no function beyond that of endlessly reporting on the physical world; which quantitative science (whose proper function it is) can do very much better. But true poetry has the power of transforming consciousness itself by holding before us icons, images of forms only partially and superficially realized in ‘ordinary life’.⁵¹

Though it might be argued there is a difference between the abstractions used and generated in quantitative science and the more concrete particulars of life that realistic literature expresses, the sense of Raine’s argument that realism is inadequate because it more often than not deals only with the physical world rather than its connections with higher worlds appealed to me. It was as if I had suddenly found the overlapping terrain of all my experiences in music and martial arts, my reading of Eastern philosophies and practice of meditation, my shift in interests from the rational to the emotional, from technology to fantasy. I had found a tradition in which I could feel comfortable, enthused and inspired, that of the Perennial Philosophy. Here was a tradition that had an enabling power, not just for my poetry writing, but also for the narrative project that had been plaguing me for a number of years, Zane’s quest for absolute wisdom.

As noted by Aldous Huxley in his book of the same name, the Perennial Philosophy (the translation of the phrase coined by Leibniz, *Philosophia Perennis*) is:
 the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even

⁵¹ Raine *Defending*, 160.

identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being...⁵²

The reason it is called 'perennial' or 'universal' is that 'it shows up in virtually all cultures across the globe and across the ages'.⁵³ The tradition teaches that:

it is desirable and indeed necessary to know the spiritual Ground of things, not only within the soul, but also outside in the world and, beyond world and soul, in its transcendent otherness—'in heaven.'⁵⁴

Thus, Spirit is both the ground and goal of existence, and the major points of the philosophy are essentially those Ken Wilber has listed:

One, Spirit exists, and Two, Spirit is found within. Three, most of us don't realize this Spirit within, however, because we are living in a world of sin, separation, and duality—that is, we are living in a fallen or illusory state. Four, there is a way out of this fallen state of sin and illusion, there is a Path to our liberation. Five, if we follow this Path to its conclusion, the result is a Rebirth or Enlightenment, a *direct experience* of Spirit within, a Supreme Liberation, which—Six—marks the end of sin and suffering, and which—Seven—issues in social action of mercy and compassion on behalf of all sentient beings.⁵⁵

Before examining this path, I need to point out that since 1983 Ken Wilber has no longer considered himself part of the Perennial Philosophy tradition. While acknowledging the Perennial Philosophy is 'especially in its most sophisticated forms...a fountain of unsurpassed wisdom',⁵⁶ he no longer admits such doctrines as 'unchanging archetypes, involution and evolution as fixed and predetermined, [and]

⁵² Huxley 1.

⁵³ Wilber *Grace*, 77.

⁵⁴ Huxley 8.

⁵⁵ Wilber *Grace*, 79.

⁵⁶ Ken Wilber, *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science, and Spirituality* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001) 158.

the strictly hierarchical (as opposed to holonic/quadratic⁵⁷) nature of reality'.⁵⁸ The one item of the Perennial Philosophy with which he still concurs is:

the notion of realms of being and knowing, and then I only staunchly defend three of them: matter, mind, and spirit (or gross, subtle, and causal). I sometimes expand those realms to five (matter, body, mind, soul, and spirit), but I am willing to strongly defend only the former.⁵⁹

The fact that Wilber still countenances the one doctrine of the Perennial Philosophy that is central to this project may give my work credibility, but his authority is not essential. The main concern in my exploration of the Perennial Philosophy and related traditions, including the full gamut of Wilber's psychological and philosophical work, is to discover those concepts and devices that will enable me to complete Zane's narrative. The true authority will be the resultant work, not whether the various theorists consulted are in agreement.

The path that Wilber talks about has many variants, but what is common to them all is the necessity to climb what has been termed the Great Chain of Being, being and consciousness as 'a hierarchy of dimensional levels, moving from the lowest, densest, and most fragmentary realms to the highest, subtlest, and most unitary ones'.⁶⁰ In books such as *The Spectrum of Consciousness* (written when he was 23) and *Eye to Eye: The Quest for the New Paradigm*, Wilber points out that while the West has been adept at handling the lower stages of cognitive development, through the theories of such people as Piaget and Loevinger and the therapeutic advances of Freud and company, the East has been researching for millennia the

⁵⁷ Explanations of holons and quadrants occur further on.

⁵⁸ Wilber, *Theory* 158.

⁵⁹ Wilber, *Theory* 158. I will present definitions of gross, subtle and causal shortly.

⁶⁰ Wilber, *Eye* 126-127.

higher levels of development, which in the West have only been the province of mystics of all persuasions (for example, Rumi, Eckhart). Putting both sets of developments together, Wilber formulated what he has termed ‘the Spectrum of Consciousness’:

The lower and intermediate portions of this model are based on the works of Piaget, Werner, Arieti, Kohlberg, Loewinger, Erikson, Freud, and so on; the higher portions are based on the *philosophia perennis*.⁶¹

And this refinement of the Great Chain of Being comprises such groupings as ‘the prerational (subconscious), the rational (self-conscious), and the transrational (superconscious)’.⁶²

In subsequent books, Wilber has developed, refined, and expanded his model, sometimes in response to criticisms of his work, more often, naturally enough, to accommodate the results of his own research:

I sought an *integral* philosophy, one that would believably weave together the many pluralistic contexts of science, morals, aesthetics, Eastern as well as Western philosophy, and the world’s great wisdom traditions.⁶³

His search led him to consider the variety of historical, scientific, philosophical and psychological models mankind has been building over the centuries:

At one point, I had over two hundred hierarchies written out on legal pads lying all over the floor...“natural science” hierarchies...those discovered by the developmental psychologists...linguistic hierarchies, contextual hierarchies, spiritual hierarchies. There were stages of development in phonetics, stellar systems, cultural

⁶¹ Wilber *Eye*, 262.

⁶² Wilber *Eye*, 264.

⁶³ Ken Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution* (1995; Boston: Shambhala, 2000) xii.

worldviews, autopoietic systems, technological modes, economic structures, phylogenetic unfoldings, superconscious realizations...⁶⁴

And this research led him to a four quadrant model, each quadrant typifying certain domains of investigation into the Kosmos, which ‘contains the cosmos (or the physiosphere), the bios (or biosphere), nous (the noosphere), and theos (the theosphere or divine domain)—none of them being foundational (even spirit shades into Emptiness)’.⁶⁵ The quadrants were formulated by realizing that some of the hierarchies refer to individuals, some to collectives, some to internal events, some to external ones, and that each of the elements of an hierarchy is essentially a holon (the term is Koestler’s), ‘wholes that are parts of other wholes’,⁶⁶ as an atom is part of a molecule which is part of a cell which is part of an organism, and so on. Wilber discovered that there is in fact a Great Nest (a Great Holarchy) of Being,⁶⁷ with developmental lines in each quadrant meshing with lines in other quadrants:

The Kosmos is a series of nests within nests within nests indefinitely, expressing greater and greater holistic embrace—holarchies of holons everywhere!⁶⁸

Wilber’s overall schema has the acronym AQAL, which refers to ‘All Quadrants, All Levels’, but the essential elements of the model, along with the quadrants explained above, are Waves (Levels), Streams (Lines), States and Self.

Thus, there are:

the various levels or waves of consciousness (stretching from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit), through which pass various developmental lines or streams

⁶⁴ Wilber *Sex*, xiii.

⁶⁵ Wilber *Sex*, 45.

⁶⁶ Wilber *Sex*, xiv.

⁶⁷ See Appendix Three for diagrams of the Great Nest and the four quadrants.

⁶⁸ Wilber *Sex*, xiv.

(including cognitive, affective, moral, interpersonal, spiritual, self-identity, needs, motivation, and so on).⁶⁹

A person could be at a high cognitive level, a medium moral level, and a low needs level, so that development does not proceed in a step-wise fashion (one criticism of his early models), but in a ‘fluid flowing of many waves and streams in the great River of Life’.⁷⁰ Furthermore, at any time a person can have an altered state of consciousness, a peak experience of one of the transpersonal realms of consciousness (psychic, subtle, causal, nondual). These states are apparently ‘variations on the natural states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep—which seems to be why a person at virtually any stage of development can experience any of these nonordinary states’.⁷¹ However, for a person to turn such a temporary experience into a permanent trait, the self of that person must integrate the experience by beginning (or continuing) development along an appropriate stream/line towards the wave/level represented by the state of consciousness experienced. In other words, the self, which can be thought of as ‘the *center of gravity* of the various levels, lines, and states, all orbiting around the integrating tendency of the self-system’,⁷² must continue traversing its fulcrum of self-development:

A fulcrum occurs each time the self encounters a new level of consciousness. The self must first *identify* with that new level (embed at that level, be in fusion with that level); it eventually *disidentifies* with (or transcends) that level so as to move to a yet higher wave; then it ideally *integrates* the previous wave with the higher wave.⁷³

⁶⁹ Wilber *Sex*, xviii.

⁷⁰ Wilber *Sex*, xviii.

⁷¹ Ken Wilber, ‘Waves, Streams, States, and Self—A Summary of My Psychological Model (Or, Outline of An Integral Psychology)’, http://wilber.shambhala.com/html/books/psych_model/psych_model1.cfm, 23/11/05) 2.

⁷² Wilber ‘Summary’, 4.

⁷³ Wilber ‘Summary’, 4.

If there is a failure in the operation of any of the elements of this three-fold process (fusion, transcendence, integration), then a pathology of some sort will appear. Thus, overall or *integral development* is:

a continuous process of converting temporary states into permanent traits or structures, and in that integral development, no structures or levels can be bypassed, or the development is not, by definition, integral.⁷⁴

There is no need to go into further details of Wilber's current model, including investigations of waves/lines in all his quadrants, or to provide details of various criticisms of his work,⁷⁵ as my interest is specifically in the first quadrant, the 'I' quadrant, the domain of interior experiences (cognitive, emotional and spiritual)—Zane's domain of exploration—and the criticisms are generally of a type that deal with inter-quadrant situations or with concerns about his overall approach. What Wilber has provided for my own work, and for an overall appreciation of the thrust of the Perennial Philosophy, is an adequate explanation of the dynamic between states of consciousness and levels of development. He also provides me with what, as he says in his introduction, his book *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* is built upon—*orientating generalizations*⁷⁶—even if they are quite complex ones. In fact, the realizations that a) peak experiences are available to anyone at any stage of development, but need consolidation, and that b) a person can be accomplished in, say, the causal level of experience through meditation but be pathologically developed in morals or psychosexual matters, are, with other insights, of strong benefit to my decoding the intuitions regarding Zane's story and the techniques and concepts required to fully transcribe it. It is as if my initial inspiration were a 'peak experience' of the Zane

⁷⁴ Wilber 'Summary', 3.

⁷⁵ See Collins, de Quincey, Harvat, and Heron.

level of consciousness, and my subsequent work at that ‘fulcrum’ a process of consolidating my writing self-structure to that Zane level. There is identification with the story, then transcendence of it (as a Witness), and finally an integration of it by the Witness (the writer), the latter two elements being necessary for the actual transcription of the story and for the analysis of its creation that the second part of this exegesis will explore.

Now for some details of the cognitive line of development, which is an important one for growth in the first quadrant, my area of interest, especially its upper realms (through which my characters are travelling). Wilber’s schema, which I intend as an illustration of a structure model of consciousness development from body to mind to soul to spirit, includes 1) Piaget’s cognitive line of development (sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, formal operational), 2) the recognition of an advanced rational form of cognition known as vision-logic, and 3) the four generally accepted stages of transpersonal development (psychic, subtle, causal, nondual). The terminology Wilber uses combines, for the lower levels or stages, Piaget’s with Gebser’s cultural worldview terms. Each worldview term refers to the type of ‘cognitive map of the world created at each basic level or wave (both individually and collectively)’:⁷⁷ archaic to magic to mythic to rational to existential (or aperspectival). Wilber then attaches these lower level descriptors to the list of descriptors for those transcendental realms Western and Eastern mystics have explored for centuries. This gives the developmental line as nine levels or waves,

⁷⁶ Wilber *Sex*, 5.

⁷⁷ Wilber *Sex*, 612.

though Piaget did divide each of his four major cognitive stages into at least two substages (early and late):⁷⁸

1. Sensorimotor (Archaic and Archaic-Magic)
2. Preoperational (Magic and Magic-Mythic)
3. Concrete Operational (Mythic and Mythic-Rational)
4. Formal Operational (Rational and Rational-existential)
5. Vision-Logic (Existential)
6. Psychic
7. Subtle
8. Causal
9. Nondual

As indicated earlier, another way of looking at all these stages is as ‘fulcrums of development’. Taking into account research into the intrauterine state and the birth process, which indicates evidence for a fulcrum at that level, Wilber defines the full complement of fulcrums as follows:⁷⁹

- F-0: Conception and birth
- F-1: *Sensoriphsical* (the establishment of physical boundaries; the Sensorimotor stage of development)
- F-2: *Phantasmic-Emotional* (the establishment of emotional boundaries; Preoperational)
- F-3: *Rep-mind* (the establishment of conceptual-self boundaries; also Preoperational)

⁷⁸ Details of these stages appear in Appendix Three.

⁷⁹ Wilber *Sex*, 612-613. See Appendix Four for a more detailed description of each of the fulcrums and their associated general therapies.

- F-4: *Role/Rule* (the emergence of role boundaries and rule operations;
Concrete Operational)
- F-5: *Formal-Reflexive* (the emergence of formal operations; Formal
Operational)
- F-6: *Existential* (the emergence of a pure observing Self; Vision-Logic)
- F-7: *Psychic* (The Path of Yogis)
- F-8: *Subtle* (The Path of Saints)
- F-9: *Causal* (The Path of Sages)
- F-10: *Nondual* (Ultimate, The Path of Siddhas)

(This last fulcrum, which involves the ‘complete integration and identity of manifest Form with the unmanifest Formless’, is not ‘one level among others, but the reality, condition, or suchness of all levels’.⁸⁰ Thus it can not be categorized a fulcrum as such, but is technically the final integration stage of the previous fulcrum.)

At each of these fulcrums (except F-10) there occurs a differentiation from an environment (material, emotional, mental, societal, and so on), an initial state of undifferentiation or indissociation, and then an integration of that environment to an appropriate functional degree in preparation for the next fulcrum. That is, the self-system transcends one level and includes it by moving to a higher level, with which it first identifies so that it can function at that level. At each fulcrum there is a creation (or an uncovering), of consciousness, of mind, of ego, of soul, of spirit, of Witness, and with each basic level there is an associated worldview that predisposes the self-system to certain moral and ‘power’ relationships with those entities in its immediate material, emotional, mental, societal, and higher environments.

What is interesting about fulcrum transitions is that each generally involves the attainment of both ‘a freedom from the previous, lesser domain, and a freedom in the new and “roomier” domain’.⁸¹ Wilber tends to use this concept only for the higher levels (*spiritual freedoms*) and only talks, following Habermas, of the legal, moral, and political freedoms available to all members of a world society as a consequence of ‘the global, centauric vision-logic and its moral stance’.⁸² However, the principle seems applicable to all levels, so that the self-system gains *freedom from* the demands and limitations of the lower level and has *freedom in* the new level to function within its wider worldspace. For example, at the formal operational level, a self has a freedom from the tyranny of roles/rules and its associated membership/belonginess forces and has the freedom in the formop worldspace to be reflexive, to pursue self-esteem matters, and to engage in worldcentric activities. However, what is of interest to this project is the existence of (and possible preference for) the higher-level freedoms, which are listed below:

Psychic/subtle—freedom from ‘the ordinary gross-level fluctuations of pleasure/pain and sensual-mental desire and frustration’, and freedom in the ‘deeper space of psychic and subtle awareness’ that moves prior to these fluctuations.⁸³

Causal—freedom from the subtle domain and from all manifestation, from *samsara*, from an awareness that identifies with ‘the mechanism of suffering and

⁸⁰ Ken Wilber, ‘The Spectrum of Development,’ Ken Wilber, Jack Engler & Daniel P. Brown, eds., *Transformations of Consciousness: Conventional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development*, (Boston: New Science Library, 1986), 74.

⁸¹ Wilber *Sex*, 652.

⁸² Wilber *Sex*, 651.

⁸³ Wilber *Sex*, 652.

separation’, and freedom in ‘the vast expanse of boundless, unmanifest, formless Emptiness that is consciousness as such’.⁸⁴

Nondual—freedom from the ‘causal tension or rarefied fear of manifestation’, and a freedom in ‘(and as) the entire Kosmos of Emptiness and Form, spontaneously so’.⁸⁵

As may be obvious by now, all the stages described by Wilber can be said to reside in one or more of the various domains of existence in the slightly expanded Great Chain of Being (matter, body, mind, soul, spirit), with the domain of Matter being the physiosphere and biosphere prior to hominid/human emergence (when considering the stages as being applicable to a society) or the birth of the person:

Body—Sensorimotor and Preop

Mind—Preop, Conop, Formop, Vision-Logic

Soul—Vision-Logic, Psychic, Subtle

Spirit—Causal, Nondual

Whatever the terminology used for the structures of consciousness and their associated worldviews/worldspaces, whether for individuals or collectives, interior or exterior, my concern is with individual growth towards the divine, and the mechanisms of such growth, or its opposite, regression. That is, my concern is with what the Irish poet, painter and mystic A E (George Russell) calls the ‘politics of eternity’⁸⁶ as opposed to the ‘politics of time’.

Thus, my own interests are in the last two domains above, soul and spirit, and in how an artwork such as *The Silence Inside the World* can depict movement to,

⁸⁴ Wilber *Sex*, 652.

⁸⁵ Wilber *Sex*, 652.

⁸⁶ A E (George Russell), *The Candle of Vision: Inner Worlds of the Imagination* (1918; Dorset: Prism, 1990) 58.

through, and beyond these domains. Before looking at this proposition, however, I feel it might be worthwhile to introduce a number of other concepts and processes that I have gleaned from Wilber's various writings and which I have found extremely useful for my appreciation of psychological, spiritual and literary processes, especially in relation to transcribing the growth or otherwise of my characters. As I have indicated previously, my intent in this project is not to parrot a system of thought but to borrow from any system those concepts, process, motifs, and so on that will enable me to understand the themes and particulars of Zane's story and trigger my imagination and intuition in order to create (or 'manifest') that story in a strong, imaginative form.⁸⁷

When we accept the idea of levels within a stream or line of development, we can imagine them as storeys in a building.⁸⁸ (This seems an adaptation of Jung's dream of the multi-storied house and its relationship to the personal and collective conscious and unconscious.)⁸⁹ To walk from one room to another on the same floor, or to move the furniture around, which is a change in the surface structure of a level,

⁸⁷ In other words, such activities are aiding me in what Kathleen Raine calls 'the learning of the Imagination'.

⁸⁸ Wilber *Eye*, 103.

⁸⁹ 'My dream thus constituted a kind of structural diagram of the human psyche; it postulated something of an altogether *impersonal* nature underlying that psyche.' C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, rec. and ed. Aniela Jaffé, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (1963; New York: Vintage, 1989) 158-162.

Wilber calls *translation*. To go from one floor to another, which is a change in deep structure, he calls *transformation*. Thus, on any level one can choose to preserve one's place in it, remain in identification with it (dissociation), or one can choose to release one's identification (differentiation) and move up or down. These various movements thus depict four forces operating on a self. The release is a type of 'death', because one is leaving a level. To ascend is a choice for 'Life' (engagement with a greater/wider universe of experience), to descend, a choice for 'Death'—for, once at a developmental level, to return to a lower one is to regress. To move across a level so as to complete one's development at that level is a choice for 'life' (engagement with the different forms of the same universe of experience). It is these types of movements that *The Silence Inside the World* intends to explore: the translations and transformations (and resulting freedoms) of the main characters as they negotiate fulcrums of development along the Great Chain of Being, generally in an upward direction, with an occasional regression and its consequent repercussions.

In addition to the idea of horizontal and vertical movements, Wilber has developed the notion that any 'psychosocial institution that validates or facilitates translation we call *legitimate*; any that validates or facilitates transformation we call *authentic*'.⁹⁰ *Legitimacy* is a horizontal scale, and is a measure of the power of any psychosocial institution to provide integration for the self-system within its current level of development. In Wilber's opinion, one quite important function of any society is:

⁹⁰ Wilber *Eye*, 266.

to provide its members with a legitimate and legitimizing world view, one that is capable of validating existence on the average expectable level of structural development reached by its members.⁹¹

Authenticity is a vertical scale, and is a measure of the power of any such institution to provide the means for transformation, not only for the self-system to reach the average level of the society surrounding it, but also for the self-system to seek transformation to even higher levels.

Wilber also goes on to define the two likely major characteristics of those institutions that are capable of acting with good *authority*. The first of these is that it is *functional*, as in someone who is ‘authorized to perform certain tasks and functions, for example, plumbers, doctors, lawyers’.⁹² Teachers are a further example, and have the added situation in that, although they tend to operate in a compulsory environment, their task can be said to be *phase-temporary* or *phase-specific*, and a student leaves their authority when they graduate. Though not all functional and phase-specific authorities are benign and nonproblematic, if a psychosocial institution does not have either of these factors, it is likely to be problematic.

While Zane’s story deals with transcendental transitions and does hint at problems with authority in a number of situations (as defined above and in the more traditional sense), the above set of Wilber concepts (from the Great Nest of being to authority) may be even more relevant to discussion of the function and authority of art generally, and poetry in particular, in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

⁹¹ Wilber *Eye*, 266.

⁹² Wilber *Eye*, 269.

1.5 Pens at Ten Paces

The poet's only hope is to be infinitely sensitive to what his gift is...
Ted Hughes⁹³

Threshold

You are attending a semester-length seminar on American poetry: Dickinson, Bishop, Ashbery, Simic, Strand. Some poems are intriguing in their beauty—How does that one evoke the movement of sunrise on the balcony scene without mentioning that the sun is rising? Other poems are baffling in their deliberate obtuseness, for no apparent reason than 'this is how the mind works'. You encounter critical concepts you think untenable for a reader, let alone a poet. The fact that in one tribal culture the 'alpha male' is the one who can destroy more of his belongings than anyone else during a selection ritual doesn't seem to explain by analogy why anyone would invest so much time in reading a labyrinthine text for no expectation of reward, as if in unwrapping a gift and finding nothing inside, the gift is in the act of unwrapping. Then there's the theory that a poet reacts to other poets and not to the real world, a subtle reductionism of the primary creator to the secondary: all texts are reactions to other texts, so none can ever be privileged. You write your semester paper on that one, a dialogue between poet and critic, with aphoristic commentary in the margins. The challenge gnaws at you.

Harold Bloom claims in his important book *The Anxiety of Influence* that all writers are responding to other writers, that a poem exists in relation to a precursor poem, and that a poet when 'confronting his Great Original must find fault that is not there, and

⁹³ Ted Hughes, 'Context', *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell, (1994; New York: Picador, 1995) 1.

at the heart of all but the highest imaginative virtue'.⁹⁴ Assuming Bloom is correct in his analysis, and leaving aside the possibility of unknown influences (through the language itself, for example), who and what are my influences, my precursors, and what effect have they had on my work, especially the writing of *The Silence Inside the World*?

To backtrack a moment. Once I began to write the story of Arve and Arken,⁹⁵ I immediately felt that I had found my 'bliss', as Joseph Campbell puts it.⁹⁶ The discovery, in hindsight, was an obvious one: I had read intensely since I was quite young; I had dabbled in song lyrics before and while playing in *Strider*; I had started to write poems to girlfriends and lovers; I was more comfortable with the written word than with speech sometimes, especially in emotional matters. This new interest was not a fad, as it might have been judged when seen as the latest in a long line of discarded interests—mathematics, music, martial arts—yet it would still take me many more years before I found the genre and the themes that would enable me to express fully my creativity.

As outlined in 'Dare Seize', I wrote science fiction and fantasy short stories, some of which were published in a local SF magazine. I then wrote the fantasy novel I called *The Rainbow God* and two prequel books, though none were published. Perusing them recently I discovered how derivative of my reading parts of them were, though, with the emergence of the Zane character, there was a hint that my laboured apprenticeship in writing might eventually lead to something worthwhile.

⁹⁴ Bloom 31.

⁹⁵ Discussed in 1.3 'Dare Seize'.

⁹⁶ See Campbell's discussion of the need to 'follow your bliss' in Joseph Campbell (with Bill Moyers), *The Power of Myth*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Doubleday, 1988) 117-121.

As seems to be the case throughout my life, I was then sidetracked from pursuit of artistic creation by life itself: job, marriage, family, divorce. During this period of emotional upheaval and intense retrospection I discovered the joys of poetry and the realization that poetry itself was something one could approach professionally, so to speak, and not just read for pleasure or write occasionally when in the common throes of love or despair (and badly, too, though the dabbler rarely grasps this). I then spent the next ten years or so reading, studying and writing poetry in my spare time.

Who were my influences in poetry during this period? Because of my interest in martial arts and Eastern philosophy, especially Zen Buddhism, I read Basho, Li Po and Tu Fu. Because of my speculative fiction background, I read the poetry of some of the weird tales writers I had loved and their antecedents and descendants: Edgar Allan Poe, H P Lovecraft, Robert Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, and Richard L Tierney. These, especially Smith, who was once hailed by San Francisco newspapers in 1912 as ‘the compeer of Byron, Shelley, and Keats’,⁹⁷ led me back to Baudelaire and the Romantics, and university study exposed me to more of their work and to the major modernists, Eliot, Pound, and Yeats. Then there was the discovery of Kathleen Raine’s work and through her the Perennial Philosophy and a close re-acquaintance with William Blake, whose poem ‘The Tyger’ I had once memorised as a young schoolchild for a solo recitation class exercise.

⁹⁷ L Sprague de Camp, ‘Sierran Shaman: Clark Ashton Smith’, *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy* (Sauk City: Arkham, 1976) 200.

As can be gathered from above and from previous sections, my formative literary influences were wide and varied, both in speculative fiction and in poetry, and these have since found form in many of the characters, motifs, events and concepts later embodied in *The Silence Inside the World*. But who are the most important influences? More to the point, are they Bloomian precursors whom I am meant to battle for space in the creative universe crowded by all past literary works? And what are the books that *The Silence Inside the World* has to compete against in the sense of exploring the same subject matter, and how does it differ from them?

In order to identify those texts that will contribute to answers to these questions, I think it best to divide my history of reading into the categories arranged below. Naturally enough, the numbers in each will reduce with each successive one, and any overlaps between the categories will aid the analysis.

1. Reading Exciters
2. Writing Exciters
3. Writing Influences
4. Project Influences
5. Project Precursors

Reading Exciters

These are the books and authors that excited my early passion for reading, especially of speculative fiction, and fulfilled it for a number of years. The following list is more extensive than previously discussed and includes texts already mentioned.

Before there was even a genre called science fiction there were the scientific romances of Jules Verne and H G Wells, which I loved. From them I moved onto such Golden Age writers as Isaac Asimov, Arthur C Clark, Robert Heinlein, A E van

Vogt, and E E 'Doc' Smith. The next generation of SF writers I read included Poul Anderson, James Blish, Ray Bradbury, Gordon R Dickson, Frank Herbert, and Ursula Le Guin. And there were those writers of dystopia, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, and others such as Fred Hoyle and John Wyndham.

The obvious writer in the fantasy genre that I read and re-read was J R R Tolkien, but there were many others, including Stephen Donaldson, Michael Moorcock, and Roger Zelazny. Weird tales is a sub-genre of fantasy and I read many of the major contributors to that field. In the heroic fantasy (or sword and sorcery) field there was Robert Howard (the creator of Conan), Fritz Leiber, E C Tubb, and Karl Edward Wagner (creator of Kane the immortal swordsman). In the horror genre I moved from Edgar Allan Poe to H P Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith, the cosmic and mystical environment of their stories more interesting to me than the later more realistic fare of Stephen King and his many imitators.

From literary fiction and other genres there were the Sherlock Holmes stories, John Fowles's *The Magus*, the work of Hermann Hesse (especially *Siddhartha* and *Magister Ludi*), James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which was a senior text set in my Catholic secondary college, and W Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*.

Obviously, much of my reading for many years was of the fantastic in its various guises, and this reading matter was chosen for a number of reasons. Generally I was looking for that sense of wonder for which science fiction especially is well suited, that emotional breathlessness and intellectual stimulation this literature of ideas excites through its exploration of the ramifications of technology (hard and soft) on the human. In my fantasy reading there was also a desire for hidden realms, for hidden knowledge, and generally such reading was of 'high fantasy':

An interesting distinction...is between high fantasy, set in a fully realized secondary world, and low fantasy, which features supernatural intrusions into our own world.^{98 99}

Yet, the proliferation of ‘heroic’ adventure series such as Howard’s Conan stories and E C Tubb’s Dumarest saga also indicates a contrary desire, not a drive for cognitive stimulation, a going within of the mind or the emotions, but a going outside, escapism through mediated action, through immersion in wish-fulfilment, the only redeeming feature possibly being a misplaced searching for concepts of heroism.

However, I now think there was much more than the search for stimulation or escapism in my choice of the fantastic in my reading. What speculative fiction, especially fantasy, gave me, though I wasn’t conscious of this until recently, was a sense of the reality of other worlds and an opening to the hierarchy, the holarchy, of all worlds. In its pursuit of rationality the materialist and positivist philosophies had discouraged imagination and virtually denied Imagination altogether—virtually denied the idea of separate realms, of higher realms that influence and in turn are influenced by this world—and the fiction of these philosophies exemplified this approach. What I was looking for, but didn’t know it, was a literature that had a more comprehensive view of spiritual worlds and their inter-relationships.

⁹⁸ The entry for FANTASY, John Clute and Peter Nicholls, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993; London: Orbit, 1999) 409.

⁹⁹ As Tolkien writes in his essay ‘Tree and Leaf’, the story-maker ‘makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is “true”: it accords with the laws of that world.’ J R R Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf, Smith of Wootton Major, The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* (1964, 1967, 1975; London: Unwin, 1979) 40-41.

Writing Excitors

These would be the authors and books that directly or indirectly inspired me to start writing. However, as discussed in ‘Dare Seize’, the impulse to write seemed to come more from an experience of seeing my words before me and from dissatisfaction with SF books at the time than from the stimulation of any one text or author. More than likely my reading in speculative fiction focussed my urge to creativity into ‘a critical mass’ of desire, the resulting explosion providing me with direction. Although this urge to creativity was obviously with me long before I read Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, if I had to name an important text, that would be it, for it was a major opening into wonder, thus a trigger for more wonder, even if I had to start generating it myself.

Writing Influences

Here I would include those authors and texts whose ideas (both in art and craft) and themes have stayed with me. From science fiction I would say that the concept of Future Histories (Asimov, Blish, Heinlein, Dickson, and so on) has intrigued me to the point of my planning a whole series of stories of which *The Silence Inside the World* forms a subtle, though major, part. Closely allied with the exploration of humankind’s future is the depiction of an individual’s growth in power (usually psi) and intelligence, for example, Frank Herbert’s work in *Dune* and *The God Makers* and the various ‘superman’ explorations, from the Null-A works of van Vogt to Roger Zelazny’s mythologically-based stories. The secondary world aspect of high fantasy and the metaphysical investigations (however basic) of writers such as Moorcock and Zelazny have also informed my own literary speculations. And from both fields, as well as from Gothic literature, there’s the motif of the immortal hero

(closely linked to the ‘superman’): The Wandering Jew, Melmoth the Wanderer, van Vogt’s Robert Hedrock (*The Weapon Shops of Isher* and *The Weapon Makers*), Heinlein’s Lazarus Long, and Karl Edward Wagner’s Kane.

Then there are those poets whose work inspired and influenced my early poetry writing: Robert Browning (‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came’), T S Eliot, Robert Graves, Edgar Allan Poe, Ezra Pound, Percy Bysshe Shelley (‘Ozymandias’), Dylan Thomas, and Walt Whitman. Once I realized my love for poetry and began reading more of it, a whole new group began to exert influence: Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Yeats, Kathleen Raine, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Edwin Muir, and Peter Redgrove. As for craft issues, first there were Eliot and Pound with their emphasis on the historical tradition, especially the latter’s *ABC of Reading*. Then there were those poets who emphasised inspiration and the Imaginative Tradition: Robert Graves with his *White and Black Goddesses*; Yeats with his *A Vision*; Raine with her ‘learning of the Imagination’ (with its emphasis on the Perennial Philosophy: Platonism, Neoplatonism, Kabbalah, Alchemy, Sufism in the West, Hinduism and Buddhism in the East); and Hughes with his shamanistic approaches and his analysis of Shakespeare’s Tragic Equation in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*.

Project Influences

In this section I would like to examine some of the authors or works mentioned above to discover specific influences on this project. From speculative fiction I would have to nominate Tolkien, Moorcock and Zelazny, from literary fiction, Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, and from poetry, Dante, Blake and Milton. These writers essentially form two groups: those who were influences at the time of the story’s original inspiration,

and those who were influences during the intervening years and during the actual implementation of this project (the poets, mainly). Other writers from both camps may also have influenced me, or some of the many writers mentioned earlier may have influenced literary decisions I am not aware of; if so, these are unconscious, and by definition, outside the purview of this examination. For the purpose of identifying possible precursors in Bloom's sense of the word and analysing their effect on my work, these names will do.

On my first reading, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* stunned me with its depiction of a Secondary World and its mythic resonances. Unlike its many imitators, this book not only had a rich implied history that had connections to the mythologies in our own world, and had detailed, self-consistent landscapes and languages, but it also featured a hero who was reluctant, was ordinary (in his own world),¹⁰⁰ and was not endowed with powers other than perseverance and love. One of my protagonists, Jessie Willis, may be an ordinary person in her own world¹⁰¹ and does effect changes in the story through love, but this trope is present in so many narratives, realistic and fantastic, that to proclaim Tolkien as an outright influence, and thus a precursor to be evaded, is unwarranted. The book's strongest influence was that it showed me the possibilities in fantasy writing and mythopoeia:

mythopoeia (Gr 'myth-making') The conscious creation of a myth...In literature, the appropriation and reworking of mythical material, or the creation of a kind of 'private' mythology.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Although a hobbit, with a liking for the home and hearth, those simple pleasures of normal hobbit life, Frodo was different from his fellows in having a curiosity for the 'outside world', as his uncle, Bilbo, had before him.

¹⁰¹ Relatively so, though her albinism did mark her out as different from others.

¹⁰² J A Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1977; London: Penguin, 1992) 563.

However, apart from its example of the creative labour required for an engaging Secondary World, and the effect of such an approach, I don't see any real connection to my project.

The works of Moorcock and Zelazny are another matter. Moorcock's albino sword and sorcery hero Elric of Melniboné is an obvious influence on the creation of my albino character Jessie, though she is not a magician nor a warrior, only a reader of ancient literatures and a fighter when required. There is also a hint of influence from Melville's *Moby Dick*, which I read at university and loved. What I see as common in both these instances is the sense of whiteness as both weakness and strength: weakness because albinism is a defect in the body, and strength because the characters involved are able to use (consciously or unconsciously) their unnaturalness as a weapon for survival.

The melancholic Elric is one of Moorcock's Eternal Champions, those denizens of his Multiverse¹⁰³ who serve heroic ideals by battling Chaos, even if these champions seem to act from self-interest in some cases. The Multiverse idea—'a Universe in which multiple PARALLEL WORLDS co-exist, constantly (but never permanently) intersecting with one another'¹⁰⁴—might be seen as an influence on my creation of the eternal and all-inclusive realm of Thexlan. However, it is more likely there was a common influence on both creations through current scientific ideas of parallel universes and the mythological and esoteric traditions of multiple worlds, though these traditions tend to emphasise a hierarchy of worlds rather than a flat network of parallel worlds.

¹⁰³ As stated in the MOORCOCK entry of Clute and Nicholls (822), the term was 'probably derived from the works of John Cowper POWYS'.

¹⁰⁴ Clute and Nicholls, 822.

When I first created Zane, who at the time was likely an alter ego, I envisaged him as a hero in adventure tales similar to Elric's. I'd always been drawn to the idea of such series characters: there was my reading of Spider-Man and Sherlock Holmes, then that of sword and sorcery heroes such as Elric, Conan the Barbarian, and Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, and finally that of the more sophisticated speculative fiction explorations of Gordon Dickson and Roger Zelazny. Maybe this interest was because of the wish-fulfilment aspect of episodic heroism: the repetition of success in the face of danger; the safety of the unchanging personality who succeeds because he/she is already an exemplar; and possibly the evasion of those sorts of changes, those 'deaths', brought about by encounters with reality or through deep introspection. However, while I admired such literature, I found myself unable to write it. Though I wanted to put my hero into combative or mysterious situations and watch him find his way out, with 'the treasure and the girl', I was more interested in the character of my hero. I was also interested in the reason I created Zane as a seeker after wisdom in the first place. I wanted him to succeed in this quest, a quest I myself had been interested in for as long as I could remember.¹⁰⁵

Along with my speculative reading as a teenager I had also read deeply in the paranormal, magic, and Eastern philosophies. I wanted to discover the secrets of the universe, the answers to the big questions, hence my interest in cosmology, philosophy, the unknown, the irrational, the anomalies in science and history. For years I struggled with these questions while I embodied society's concerns with job, mortgage and family. I did not travel far in my quest, and neither did Zane, until, as

¹⁰⁵ Recently I asked a favourite aunt, who has held a long interest in esoteric matters, at what age I showed a similar interest. She answered that I started asking her about ghosts, magic and the like when I was 10 or 11.

stated earlier, I discovered the Perennial Philosophy and other characters and motifs found me.

Roger Zelazny was another favourite speculative fiction writer, especially because he worked in both science fiction and fantasy:

For me, science fiction has always represented the rational—the extension into a future or alien environment of that which is known now—whereas fantasy represented the metaphysical—the introduction of the unknown, usually into an alien environment.¹⁰⁶

Zelazny produced a number of imaginative and intriguing short stories, novelettes and novellas,¹⁰⁷ many of them clearly influenced by capital ‘L’ Literature, as is the case with many of the other writers associated with the movement known as SF New Wave. I could see *Moby Dick* in his classic story ‘The Doors of his Face, the Lamps of his Mouth’,¹⁰⁸ while ‘The Force that Through the Circuit Drives the Current’¹⁰⁹ is clearly a nod to Dylan Thomas’s ‘The Force that Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower’, and ‘Exeunt Omnes’¹¹⁰ owes much to *The Tempest*. But it was his novels, predominately *Lord of Light* and those of the Amber series, that influenced some of the concepts in *The Silence Inside the World*.

The hero of *Lord of Light* is Sam:

¹⁰⁶ Roger Zelazny, ‘Constructing a Science Fiction Novel’, *Frost & Fire* (New York: Avon, 1990) 117.

¹⁰⁷ The general guidelines for SF fiction categories are short story (0-7,499 words), novelette (7,500-17,499), novella, (17,500-40,000), and novel (over 40,000).

¹⁰⁸ Roger Zelazny, *The Doors of his Face, The Lamps of his Mouth and other Stories* (1973; London: Corgi, 1975) 9-46.

¹⁰⁹ Roger Zelazny, *Unicorn Variations* (London: Sphere, 1985) 101-106.

¹¹⁰ Zelazny *Unicorn* 172-175.

HIS FOLLOWERS called him Mahasamatman and said he was a god. He preferred to drop the Maha— and the —atman, however, and called himself Sam. He never claimed to be a god. But then, he never claimed not to be a god.¹¹¹

The setting is a future world colonized by survivors of Earth's destruction. The original colonizers, The First, have set up a society based on the Hindu pantheon, with the deicrats (Zelazny's term) using advanced technology to acquire godlike powers, which they use to keep the population at a lower level of development. The story centres on Sam's political and power struggle to liberate the humans of the planet, his principle subversive weapon being the use of Buddhist philosophy.

Though the novel wasn't a direct examination of the concerns involved in my quest, it did demonstrate to me the possibilities of literature utilizing and/or examining religious philosophies, just as Tolkien had demonstrated the use of mythology.

The other work of Zelazny that was a major influence on my thinking was his Amber series. In ten novels Zelazny depicts the struggle for power in the one true world, that of Amber and the Courts of Chaos, other worlds (that multiverse motif again) being shadow worlds, reflections of the one true world with its blood-line hierarchy of kings and princes, all those who can walk the Logrus and/or the Pattern—power mazes in the shapes of fundamental patterns of the universe—and so gain magical command over the shadows. Again the influence here was in concepts, mainly the idea of multiple worlds (a hierarchy as opposed to Moorcock's flat Multiverse network) and their creation through the interplay of basic patterns.

When we move onto literary fiction, a text that is obviously close to my concerns is Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, whose eponymous hero is engaged in the spiritual quest during the time of the Buddha. After ascetic, sexual and commercial

¹¹¹ Roger Zelazny, *Lord of Light* (1967; London: Millennium, 1999) 9.

adventures, Siddhartha finds his own answers as a ferryman on the shores of ‘the long river in the wood’.¹¹² When his old friend Govinda asks him if he has ‘not discovered a certain knowledge’¹¹³ that has helped him to live, Siddhartha answers: ‘Wisdom is not communicable. The wisdom which a wise man tries to communicate always sounds foolish...in every truth the opposite is equally true...’¹¹⁴

Here was a book that gave me a hint of that knowledge Zane was seeking, though in the end, the wisdom that Siddhartha gave his friend was communicated to him through image and direct apprehension, not through words, the irony being that this truth is communicated to the reader through words, through the imagery and the rhythms of the river, the poetry of the faces Govinda sees when he kisses Siddhartha’s forehead (the seat of the Third Eye, the sixth chakra):

He no longer saw the face of his friend Siddhartha. Instead he saw other faces, many faces, a long series, a continuous stream of faces—hundreds, thousands, which all came and disappeared and yet all seemed to be there at the same time, which all continually changed and renewed themselves and which were yet all Siddhartha.¹¹⁵

Although the wisdom communicated had impact, for I re-read the book a number of times, it seemed incomplete, as if it needed a context that was more universal, a context that didn’t come to me until I encountered the Perennial Philosophy and could place the wisdom in an overall experiential structure of timeless knowledge. And

¹¹² Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, trans. Hilda Rosner, intro. Donald McCrory (1922; London: Picador, 1998) 153.

¹¹³ Hesse 204.

¹¹⁴ Hesse 204.

¹¹⁵ Hesse 211.

maybe I was still caught in issues of personal power, at a fulcrum at which the ‘peak experience’ lessons of Siddhartha were not enough to turn a state into a trait.

Then there are the poets. Certainly the works of many of the aforementioned poets have influenced my lyric writing, for better or for worse. However, in the narrative mode that informs *The Silence Inside the World* I can only think of such major poets as Dante, Blake and Milton. Whatever Bloom may think of the problem of belatedness for those writing lyric poetry after Wordsworth, that poet, it seems to me, has no influence on my project. His great long poem *The Prelude* is a first person exploration, set firmly in the ‘real world’, of the discovery of the poet’s creative self (fulcrums F-6 and F-7, perhaps), while *The Silence Inside the World* is a long, narrative poem set in a fantasy/metaphysical land of sorts, with multiple characters, and told in the third person, except when characters engage in story-telling. A stronger candidate for a precursor poem might be Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* (which again is a first person narrative, though this time set in the realms of the Christian after-life), for both poems are engaged with theological and philosophical issues, are, in the words of Joseph Milne, ‘attending to the divine’.¹¹⁶ Apart from this commonality of theme and the fact that *The Silence Inside the World* is also written in three-line stanzas (blank verse as opposed to *terza rima*), there are more differences than similarities, some of these being the same elements as noted above: multiple third and first person characters and viewpoints, the use of fantasy motifs. One major similarity, naturally enough, is the concept of hierarchical spiritual worlds, a concept lost in the ‘three provincial centuries’ (Yeats’s phrase)¹¹⁷ of materialist philosophy,

¹¹⁶ Joseph Milne, ‘The Philosophical Spirit in the Renaissance’, *Temenos Academy Review* 4, (London: The Temenos Academy, Spring 2001) 20.

¹¹⁷ Quoted by Kathleen Raine in Gary Lachman, ‘Poetry & Platonism: a conversation with Kathleen Raine’ (www.lapismagazine.org/archives/L04/raine-lachman-int.html, 27/11/2005).

René Guénon's 'reign of quantity'.¹¹⁸ One major difference, for this poem as well as for Milton's, is the reliance on Christian metaphysics as compared to the attempt to blend several 'surface structure' traditions, including Western Esoteric and Tibetan Buddhism, in *The Silence Inside the World*.

When we look at Blake, his ideas of Eternity and Time and his portrayal of the archetypes of Eternity as they function in that realm and in Time are certainly elements that influence my poem, though only as a peripheral shadow. Blake generally insists on a division between both realms, while I am using the idea of their commingling as part of what I have called the Threshold Equation (see next chapter). That is, both realms are the one realm, that of Imagination, and the differences between the two states are caused by the state of the viewer, the participator in the world, which we all are.

Finally, there's Milton. I remember being stunned when I first read *Paradise Lost*, especially the descriptions of the war in heaven and Satan's flight through the void. However, along with Dante and Blake, Milton did not influence the original inspiration of Zane, but certainly he and the other two are a presence during the writing of *The Silence Inside the World*, as their themes are close to mine: inspiration and the divine.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in 'Premises and Poetry', Kathleen Raine, *The Inner Journey of the Poet and other papers*, ed. Brian Keeble (New York: George Braziller, 1982) 18.

Though the above writers are influences, are they precursors as Bloom uses the concept? Am I battling them in some way so as to find a place in literature? If I am battling them, in what ways am I ‘misreading’ them so I can clear an imaginative space for myself?

Project Precursors

As is apparent from the previous five sections, six likely candidates for precursors would be Tolkien, Moorcock, Zelazny, Dante, Blake, and Milton. These are major writers in the fields in which I am faring: mythopoeic literature and imaginative poetry. In some respects the three poets are more important than the three prose writers, because the form of *The Silence Inside the World* has evolved into narrative poetry (as explained in ‘Reflections: *Tikkun*’). However, Tolkien, Moorcock and Zelazny are influences and precursors in the field in which my poem may be received in this contemporary marketing world and so still require consideration.

Other possible poet precursors might be Shelley and Keats and maybe Browning, for such ‘quest’ poems as ‘The Witch of Atlas’, ‘Endymion’, and ‘Childe Roland’. However, considering their influence on my thought and writing has not been as great as the three major poets mentioned above, I would not consider them strong candidates.

Then there are those I would term ‘market competitors’, writers who may have influenced me on minor motif or theme, or who are mining similar veins, those who may precede me in writing history by a generation, or half of one, or are my contemporaries. Though I need to take such competitors into account when staking out my claim, they would not be precursors, those who trigger the urge to creativity in the first place and whose debt one battles to evade so as to not seem a sad imitation.

I suppose it could be said I evaded Tolkien, Moorcock and Zelazny (and all my speculative fiction influences, Asimov, Clark, Heinlein, Le Guin and so on) by originally abandoning such fiction, though this would actually be a defeat by a precursor or precursors, not an evasion of influence. However, the evasion was temporary. Although I wrote mainstream ‘confessional’ poetry for a number of years, I soon found historical, scientific and speculative subjects and themes gradually surfacing. The imaginative returned, as if Tolkien and company were waiting for my poetic craft to increase to the point where I could handle the speculative possibilities that attracted me to science fiction and fantasy in the first place. Of course, that meant I now had a double load of precursors, those from speculative fiction and those from poetry, though it could be argued that any SF writing about theological and philosophical themes is also struggling with the shadows of such as Dante, Milton, Blake, Shelley and Keats.

So, how do I evade these precursors, be they six or legion? Harold Bloom talks of six ways a strong poet evades the influence of his precursor(s). I will examine these ways in relation to my candidates and to any other texts or writers (such as Hesse) that are strongly connected to the project.

Clinamen

The first evasion Bloom calls *clinamen*, the ‘swerve’ a poet takes from his precursor, the sense of saying that the precursor ‘got it wrong’ and the new poet is finishing the job:

The *clinamen* or swerve, which is the Urizenic equivalent of the hapless errors of re-creation made by the Platonic demiurge, is necessarily the central working concept of the theory of Poetic Influence, for what divides each poet from his Poetic Father (and

so saves, by division) is an instance of creative revisionism...The poet so stations his precursor, so swerves his context, that the visionary objects, with their higher intensity, fade into the continuum.¹¹⁹

How have I swerved from my precursors so that I could write my poem? In contrast to Tolkien and his large field of imitators, *The Silence Inside the World*, while exhibiting some motifs of heroic fantasy, is primarily a contemplative approach to the heroic quest, is more like an example of a metaphysical “hero’s journey”, the elixir brought back being of wisdom rather than a mythology for England, as was Tolkien’s stated aim. *The Silence Inside the World* does not involve a Dark Lord who seeks to control the world (unless Zane is seen as one; though it is not a usual genre motif to have the hero also the villain, the protagonist as antagonist). It does not involve a quest for power weapons to be used to destroy the Dark Lord or any other clearly defined antagonist. In fact, the quest involved is for understanding, not for an object of power, or a group of objects, to be gained (as in most formula ‘fat fantasies’) or to be returned/destroyed (as in *The Lord of the Rings*). It does not involve a protagonist of humble beginnings who discovers he or she is in reality a lost heir to the kingdom and an incredibly gifted magician and leader destined to defeat the villain and save the kingdom or world or universe. It does not have a slew of other races such as elves and dwarfs, nor dragons or other now-hackneyed fantasy creatures. While there is a party of companions, they have not been assembled for their separate skills as in an SAS combat team. And finally, *The Silence Inside the World* is written in verse, not prose, a decision (details given later) that may also serve as a clinamen from all my other speculative fiction influences, precursors, and ‘market competitors’.

¹¹⁹ Bloom 42.

One further difference (clinamen correction) from my three speculative fiction precursors is the treatment of female characters. Tolkien is notorious for his neglect of female characterization, and Moorcock and Zelazny have not in general developed strong female characters, especially in those texts previously cited. *The Silence Inside the World*, however, features Jessie Willis, who is fundamental to the development of plot and story. Of course, only a reader can say whether my treatment is better than those of my precursors, but at least I am aware of the need to include the female perspective, especially as I want my poem to touch on the gamut of human endeavours along the Great Chain of Being.

Tessera

The second revisionary ratio is *tessera*, in which:

the later poet provides what his imagination tells him would complete the otherwise “truncated” precursor poem and poet, a “completion” that is as much misprision as a revisionary swerve is.¹²⁰

Who am I completing? First of all there’s Blake with his insistence on the distinction between Eternity and Time and his depiction of the forces within the human spirit as archetypes. My musing on the Perennial Literary Tradition says that this idea seems deficient, for it does not follow the complete line of Wilber’s Spectrum of Consciousness. If art exists to translate or transform an individual along the Great Chain of Being, and if the highest level of this chain is the state of nondual reality, with Formless existence (like being conscious in the deep sleep state) being the one just below it, then Blake is in error to depict Eternity as the place of his archetypes. They belong two levels below the Formless, in the subtle realm. Though he is right to

praise the power of Imagination, he isn't right to fold it into the persona of Los or of Jesus the Imagination. These personages, in the Wilber system, could be seen as stages towards nondual reality and as triggers or exemplars to those stages.

Imagination can carry us beyond the archetype. In fact, Imagination may be the power that created the archetypes in the first place, the field out of which all worlds, all stories arise, or so I am assuming within *The Silence Inside the World*.

Second, there's Hermann Hesse and his *Siddhartha*. As indicated earlier, though I felt the novel contained wisdom of the type I was looking for, the story seemed incomplete, possibly because it didn't address contemporary concerns, such as how to apply such an approach to spirituality in a normal life as opposed to that of a Brahmin who decides to be a wisdom seeker. My reading in the Perennial Philosophy also indicates that Hesse's wisdom does not include enough ontological 'evidence' for my satisfaction. There is nothing in the book about the levels of being and the stages of development necessary for a being to achieve enlightenment.

Though the novel is an accurate portrayal of those processes inherent to the Eastern conception of spirituality, because there is no grounding in Western approaches both to normal and to pathological cognitive and spiritual advancement, the story lacks general applicability. Of course, whether this argument is chicken or egg is an interesting point. When I was younger I was only interested in finding a single Way that would lead me to absolute knowledge. Eastern meditation approaches seemed to be the answer, though my own variety of interests and life's little knots and tripwires prevented my full application of such a methodology. Now I sense that a proper Way

¹²⁰ Bloom 66.

should take into account such pressures and distractions, as should an art piece that purports to enact, express and reveal such a Way.

Kenosis

The third ratio is ‘*kenosis* or “emptying,” at once an “undoing” and an “isolating” movement of the imagination’.¹²¹ In it, the strong poet performs

a revisionary act in which an “emptying” or “ebbing” takes place *in relation to the precursor*. This “emptying” is a liberating discontinuity, and makes possible a kind of poem that a simple repetition of the precursor’s afflatus or godhood could not allow.

“Undoing” the precursor’s strength *in oneself* serves also to “isolate” the self from the precursor’s stance, and saves the latecomer-poet from becoming taboo in and to himself.¹²²

Bloom’s pragmatic formula for this ratio is stated thus:

Where the precursor was, there the ephebe shall be, but by the discontinuous mode of emptying the precursor of *his* divinity, while appearing to empty himself of his own.¹²³

Have I emptied myself and my work of the influence of a precursor, of the precursor himself? I’m not sure. As the ratios become more complex, more intense, the ability of a poet/writer to self-diagnose becomes more fragile. Maybe the concept of Orms—those wish globules thrown out by Mt Alkerii, the dream or story mountain, the home of all stories—is an attempt at *kenosis* of all influences, by emptying each poetic ego of ownership, by emptying each poem of authority, even my own, though of course the story that declares this concept is mine on one level (the same for all other poetic egos, being channels for their poems), and not mine on the ‘kosmic’ level. That such a concept is in keeping with the Perennial Philosophy

¹²¹ Bloom 87.

¹²² Bloom 87-88.

¹²³ Bloom 91.

means that I am acknowledging others in the tradition while also saying that these others not only went in the wrong direction (clinamen) or failed to complete their poetic thought (tessera), but didn't realize that their personal and poetic egos had little to do with the poems they created. These poems were already somewhere else waiting to be discovered, a full acceptance of inspiration. Even those poets who disavow inspiration are of the devil's party without knowing it.

Daemonization

After kenosis comes *daemonization*, the process of the Counter-Sublime:

Turning against the precursor's Sublime, the newly strong poet undergoes *daemonization*, a Counter-Sublime whose function suggests *the precursor's relative weakness*.¹²⁴

In *daemonization*, the augmented poetic consciousness sees clear outline, and yields back to description what it had over-yielded to sympathy. But this "description" is a revisionary ratio, a daemonic vision in which the Great Original remains great but loses his originality, yielding it to the world of the numinous, the sphere of daemonic agency to which his splendour is now reduced. *Daemonization* or the Counter-Sublime is a war between Pride and Pride, and momentarily the power of newness wins.¹²⁵

Again it seems that Mt Alkerii and related concepts comprise the key, for the poem itself is an attempt at exploring and expressing the numinous out of which the daemons that inspire poetry come. Though it could be argued that my major poetry precursors Dante, Milton and Blake were also exploring the numinous, the answer to this is to say that *The Silence Inside the World* is operating on the assumption that all

¹²⁴ Bloom 100.

of them are mere Orms in the core of Mt Alkerii, and that their openings to the numinous are mine also. In fact, the intention is that *The Silence Inside the World* not only reveals instances of the numinous, but also provides for the reader subliminal methodologies for accessing more instances, cleansing ‘the doors of perception’.¹²⁶

Askesis

The fifth ratio is *askesis*, purgation and solipsism. The ‘Prometheus in every strong poet incurs the guilt of having devoured just that portion of the infant Dionysus contained in the precursor poet’¹²⁷ and he handles this through the sublimation of his aggressive instincts:

Poetic sublimation is an *askesis*, a way of purgation intending a state of solitude as its proximate goal. Intoxicated by the fresh repressive force of a personalized Counter-Sublime, the strong poet in his daemonic elevation is empowered to turn his energy upon himself, and achieves, at terrible cost, his clearest victory in wrestling with the mighty dead.¹²⁸

Instead of correcting or completing the precursor’s poems or repressing the presence of the precursor, this ratio deals with the precursor head on. The sublimation practised in this ratio is:

a self-curtaiment which seeks transformation at the expense of narrowing the creative circumference of precursor and ephebe alike. The final product of the process of poetic *askesis* is the formation of an imaginative equivalent of the superego, a fully developed *poetic will*, harsher than conscience...¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Bloom 101.

¹²⁶ ‘A Memorable Fancy’, plate 14, in ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’, Blake 93.

¹²⁷ Bloom 115.

¹²⁸ Bloom 115-116.

¹²⁹ Bloom 119.

In *askesis*, then, the movement of the poet is ‘not towards a sharing-with-others as Dante does’ [with Virgil, in *Purgatorio*, XXVII], ‘but towards a being-with-oneself’, and so ‘is a revisionary ratio that concludes on the border of solipsism’.¹³⁰

And it is here that I may have to abandon the search for instances of the use of these ratios in *The Silence Inside the World*. This is because this ratio and the following one recount the direct confrontations between ephebe and precursor, and I feel it presumptuous to claim I am yet strong enough to have done so with my precursors. Only an antithetical critic would be able to identify whether or not I have, and how and where this may have been achieved.

Apophrades

So now to the final ratio, which is *apophrades*, the return of the dead. When the strongest poets, such as Yeats and Wallace Stevens, are visited by the dead, by their strong precursors (usually when these strongest of modern poets are clarifying their own contribution to poetry, what they wish to be remembered for), they are able to:

achieve a style that captures and oddly retains priority over their precursors, so that the tyranny of time almost is overturned, and one can believe, for startled moments, that they are being *imitated by their ancestors*.¹³¹

I do not know how to look at *The Silence Inside the World* without seeing it as my poem. However, a reader may be able to see the influences of those precursors I’ve named and others of which I may not even be aware, and identify places where I

¹³⁰ Bloom 123.

¹³¹ Bloom 141.

have succeeded or failed in evading the influence of such writers, especially through this particular phenomenon:

the triumph of having so stationed the precursor, in one's own work, that particular passages in *his* work seem to be not presages of one's own advent, but rather to be indebted to one's own achievement, and even (necessarily) to be lessened by one's greater splendour.¹³²

Besides, it is unlikely that *The Silence Inside the World* is a late enough work of mine (I plan to write poetry for many more years) to be concerned with poetic reputation and so attract 'the return of the dead'.

The above sequence of revisionary ratios can be reduced to the following: the ephebe first corrects the precursor's poems (Clinamen); then completes them (Tessera); then, upon finding out that those two activities don't accomplish separation, the newly strong poet empties himself of that which in the precursor influenced him, that is, represses him (Kenosis); then fills himself with the daemon, the numinous that once belonged to the precursor (Daemonization); after which, so empowered, he tackles the precursor head on, by surrendering to his (the newly strong poet's) own poetic ego/will (Askesis), and finally wins or not, by seemingly making the precursor indebted to him (Apophrades). An even simpler version would be:

1. He (the precursor) didn't get it right.
2. He didn't go far enough.
3. He's not that good anyway.
4. I know more than he does.

¹³² Bloom 141.

5. I'm going to tell it like it really is.
6. He really is more like me.

There is still one evasion technique that Bloom has not identified, because it is one that reduces the impact of his theory, at least for the practising poet. Ever since I first read *The Anxiety of Influence* and subsequent books such as *A Map of Misreading* I have disagreed with his assumption that all poems (and for that we can read all stories, plays, film scripts, essays and so on) are reactions to other poems: 'The meaning of a poem can only be another poem'.¹³³ What about the poet's reactions to other forms of life? What about the reader's reactions to the poet, given the reader's own level of experience with life and with poetry? Even if Bloom would allow that the inspiration for a particular poem comes from 'real life', however that is defined, he still insists that the writing of the poem is so constrained by the presence of the precursor—the poem and poet that introduced the ephebe to poetry in the first place—that unless the fetters of indebtedness are broken, the new poem is hobbled in some way. His whole theory rests on the assumption that such a precursor poem and poet opens up within the ephebe the potential for poetry, as if a father (or mother) opened up the possibility of life within the child and the child needs be permanently indebted for that opening.

It seems to me that Bloom is relying too much on Freud's analysis of the Family Romance, for what is evident to any adult is that individuals generally outgrow this dynamic. They detach themselves from their parents. They move out into the world and seek their own fortune, which is gained by the judicious use of their own skills and experiences. They move towards the summit of their potential as

¹³³ Bloom 94.

physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual beings. They grow out of their entanglements with their families and produce new families. They learn to act out of their own centre, though it is admitted that to reach their centre—their ‘song-spark’ as I term it in *The Silence Inside the World*—they must shed what is not theirs, the skins of their upbringing that don’t serve to aid their centre. For many, such a process of shedding is long and torturous and may not bring success. So I suppose Bloom may be right in suggesting that the creation of a strong poet has its parallel in the creation of a strong individual. However, such individuals do not require a strong personal father for their development. Many succeed quite nicely not knowing at all who their father was or after suffering horrendous abuse from fathers or father figures. Many succeed brilliantly after childhoods with quite ordinary fathers. To assume, because Nietzsche implied that encounters against strength create strength, that strength actually requires such encounters, of the human or poetry kind, is false logic. We needn’t even fall back on saying that the world can be the strong antagonist and the poet is reacting against the world. The world doesn’t need to be completed or swerved from; it only needs to be engaged with. Strong individuals acknowledge the influence of their parents then go on with the task of fulfilling their potential, are pulled forward by some intimation of the future, are not pushed forward by the past. Each of us is drawn forward to meet and create our Self, which is a concept that operates for the poet *qua* poet as well as the poet *qua* person. Such a process Jung calls individuation, and it happens whether or not the Family Romance is strong or weak.

Furthermore, I sense that the drive to create such a theory as Bloom’s Anxiety of Influence is an attempt both to undermine the poet and to elevate the critic, specifically Bloom. If all poems are responses to other poems, then poets are critics in

reality, and thus critics are poets. I sense Bloom undergoing his own *kenosis*: he is emptying out the divinity of poets while seeming to empty himself (because he also is an epebe, a would-be strong poet), though not in actuality, for the theory is *his*. Who can come along now and out-theory his theory of influence without subscribing to it in the first place? What matters, though, is that a poet will always be able to write a poem even if critics do not exist, but if there were no poets, no poems, critics would not have any subject matter, unless they create some, and then they would be poets.

However, Bloom's theories may still be relevant when we consider the whole problem of what it is we are experiencing when we engage with 'reality' and try to communicate that experience to others. As Eliot once noted:

Some one said: "The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did." Precisely, and they are that which we know.¹³⁴

Not only do we now know more of 'reality', but we are also contaminated by what we know: we cannot experience the world without such experiences being mediated by the words of those who were before us, whether parent or great writer. The world of nature is not the same after Wordsworth saw and wrote about it as it was before. And so we cannot write of nature or Nature/Spirit without overcoming what has already been written about these domains. We are 'poets' by our engagement with the world, with all forms of life, whether written text or sensual experience, and become 'strong poets' by applying something like Bloom's ratios as ways when we want to experience the world afresh, without the blinkers and rose-coloured glasses of those who have come before us. If we want to communicate this raw experience to others we again have to use the words and concepts available to us in such a way that we are

¹³⁴ T S Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920; London: Methuen, 1969) 52.

not regurgitating what was seen or said before. So, in order for *The Silence Inside the World* to be a strong poem of the divine, a poem that will provide something along the lines of what David Tacey calls a ‘new experience of the sacred’,¹³⁵ something that will aid in a ‘fundamental re-enchantment of the world’,¹³⁶ then Bloom’s ratios may not only show how to evade the pressure of one’s textual influences and precursors, but also how to clear the vision so as to experience the sacred in as pure a form as possible for transmission to others. In the end, only a reader will know if I have managed to avoid both types of contamination in the writing of *The Silence Inside the World*.

¹³⁵ David Tacey, *Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 1995) 147.

¹³⁶ Tacey 152.

1.6 Applied Intuition

Call the world if you Please “The vale of Soul-making”.
John Keats¹³⁷

Threshold

It is lunchtime and you are walking to a city pub to meet a work friend and discuss speculative fiction. The night before you had finished re-reading the last book in a new fantasy trilogy ‘Comparable to Tolkien at his best’. The setting of these books is the Land, a place of wondrous beings and deadly confrontations, a place where vivid Earthpower, a magic of stone, wood and water, inter-penetrates the landscape and all it contains. You start to cross the plaza in front of the hotel and walk past a tall, thin evergreen tree poking out of its protective metal cage. Suddenly, out of the corner of your eye, you see numinous light flare about and through each leaf and twig and shimmer with rainbow glints for the paused split-second it takes you to turn and stare at the wonder, which fades to memory-dazzle.

As a theoretician of consciousness, Ken Wilber has introduced a number of useful concepts, not just for therapists and philosophers, but also, I believe, for artists, especially this writer. When we look at the journey of the self-system, we wonder what it is that draws the self from one level to the next. Wilber and other theorists might say that there is a telos operating, that we are being drawn ‘back’ (a Platonic ‘remembering’) to the Ground of our being. When the infant bites its thumb and registers pain, but feels nothing when it bites its blanket, it grows to understand that it has a separate body from its environment (fulcrum F-1). But what is it that the mature

¹³⁷ John Keats, ‘Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, Sunday Morn Feby 14th’, *Selected Poetry and Letters*, ed. and intro. Richard Harter Fogle (1951; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964) 329.

rational being needs to experience for it to realize it is has a soul and is a spiritual being (fulcrums F-6 and F-7)? Some form of Beauty, or Good, or Truth. It is my contention that Art can trigger such ‘peak/peek’ experiences for the rational being that is ready for exposure to higher realms. This is surely what Kathleen Raine means when she says that poetry is ‘the language of the human soul, through which the spirit speaks’¹³⁸ and that the true function of Art, of poetry, is to transport the reader to Eternity, which is just another name for one of the Higher Stages along the Great Chain of Being: ‘Poets of the imagination write of the soul, of intellectual beauty, of the living spirit of the world’.¹³⁹ As she also says, ‘A work of art is precisely an expression in words of some intuition of imaginative reality’.¹⁴⁰

Anything that moves a being along the chain (transformation), or prepares that being for such a movement (translation), or triggers the telos, the impulse for movement, in the first place (peak experience), is a worthwhile endeavour. Once we recall Wilber’s discussion of legitimacy and authenticity as applied to psychosocial institutions, we can see that art pieces, too, can be divided into two types: legitimate, those that help translate a person, and authentic, those that help transform, whether temporarily (peak experience) or permanently. And what powers these transitions is not just imagination but capital ‘I’ Imagination.

¹³⁸ Brian Keeble, ‘An Interview with Kathleen Raine’, *Temenos Academy Review 7: Kathleen Raine Memorial Issue* (London: The Temenos Academy, 2004) 36.

¹³⁹ Raine, *Journey* 18.

¹⁴⁰ Raine, *Journey* 21.

But what is Imagination, especially in relation to the Great Chain of Being? In her explorations of Blake and Yeats, Raine indicates that Imagination is not only the power that makes the poet, but is also the realm of investigation for the poet:

But by virtue of the Imagination, the universal cosmic knowledge is available to whoever, poet or prophet, raises his mind into *those regions*: ‘One thing alone makes a poet’, Blake affirmed, ‘Imagination, the Divine Vision’ [my italics].¹⁴¹

C M Bowra in his seminal study of the Romantic Imagination says something similar:

Indeed, imagination and insight are in fact inseparable and form for all practical purposes a single faculty. Insight both awakes the imagination to work and is in turn sharpened by it when it is at work.¹⁴²

The Romantics were concerned with the things of the spirit and hoped that through imagination and inspired insight they could both understand them and present them in compelling poetry.¹⁴³

The implication of both these assessments is that Imagination equals inspired insight and imagination, and deals with ‘things of the spirit’, Raine’s ‘universal cosmic knowledge’:

Imaginative knowledge is immediate knowledge, like a tree, or a rose or a waterfall or sun or stars...Imagination as understood by the Romantic poets is nothing less than the fundamental ground of knowledge.¹⁴⁴

How does such insight, such use of the Imagination occur? Ken Wilber notes:

¹⁴¹ Raine *Learning*, 94.

¹⁴² C M Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination* (1950; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980) 7.

¹⁴³ Bowra 10.

¹⁴⁴ Raine *Learning*, 23.

St. Bonaventure...taught that men and women have at least three modes of attaining knowledge—"three eyes," as he put it...the *eye of flesh*, by which we perceive the external world of space, time, and objects; the *eye of reason*, by which we attain a knowledge of philosophy, logic, and the mind itself; and the *eye of contemplation*, by which we rise to a knowledge of transcendent realities.¹⁴⁵

The *eye of flesh*, with its act of simple empirical cognition, called by Hugh of St Victor *cogitatio*, seeks knowledge of the material world (the domain of *sensibilia*¹⁴⁶). The *eye of mind*, by using the mind's eye in the act of *meditatio*, seeks truths of and within the psyche (the domain of *intelligibilia*¹⁴⁷). The *eye of contemplation*, in the act of *contemplatio*, reveals 'the knowledge whereby the psyche or soul is united instantly with Godhead in transcendent insight'¹⁴⁸ (the domain of *transcendelia*¹⁴⁹). The two domains of knowledge represented by the first two 'eyes' could be termed Relative Knowledge, what Madhyana Buddhism (founded by Nagarjuna) terms *samvritti*, whereas the third type of knowledge is of Absolute Truth, *paramartha*. It is in the use of *contemplatio* that the great Romantics attained their 'inspired insights', their knowledge of 'things of the spirit' (*transcendelia*), though their interest was not just in experiencing such knowledge, such illumination, but also in transmitting it to others.

It seems to me that there are many different types of Imagination, especially in its formulation of 'imagination and inspired insight', which is a type of *contemplatio*—let's call it *imaginatio*. There is a hint of this in Raine:

¹⁴⁵ Wilber *Eye*, 2-3.

¹⁴⁶ Wilber *Eye*, 39.

¹⁴⁷ Wilber *Eye*, 39.

¹⁴⁸ Wilber *Eye*, 3.

¹⁴⁹ Wilber *Eye*, 39.

Traditionally, there are four worlds, or levels, and poetic inspiration may take its origin in any one of these four—that of the natural world, the world of the individual soul, that of universal archetypal reality, or, it is claimed for certain sacred scriptures, from a source beyond the human order altogether. Mystery is in its nature immeasurable.¹⁵⁰

From nature comes the work of poets such as Hopkins and John Clare, nature poetry ‘enhancing, celebrating, the sensible world and its creatures and our living participation in it’;¹⁵¹ from ‘the world of feeling, of the individual soul—much of Shakespeare, Keats’s world, Thomas Hardy, or the songs of every folk-tradition’;¹⁵² while, ‘from beyond this world of feeling...another voice, as from an order that would once have been called the celestial’,¹⁵³ the great poetry that ‘speaks for the universal mind all share—Dante and Shakespeare, Shelley, Rilke, Yeats’.¹⁵⁴ Now, while these worlds may not exactly match up with the gross, the psychic and subtle, the causal, and the nondual realms, the idea is obvious: that the best of poetry is not simply the record of observations of ‘Single vision & Newton’s sleep’,¹⁵⁵ but that which has the ‘resonance from higher worlds of meaning and qualities’.¹⁵⁶ Such poetry ‘speaks *from* the spirit innate in all, *to* the spirit innate in all’,¹⁵⁷ and the intent of such poetry is to free up this spirit, the eye of contemplation—acts of *imaginatio* to enhance *imaginatio*:

¹⁵⁰ Kathleen Raine, ‘What is the Use of Poetry?’, *Temenos Academy Review 7: Kathleen Raine Memorial Issue* (London: The Temenos Academy, 2004) 19.

¹⁵¹ Raine *Learning*, 101.

¹⁵² Raine *Learning*, 101.

¹⁵³ Raine *Learning*, 101.

¹⁵⁴ Raine *Use of Poetry*, 19.

¹⁵⁵ William Blake, ‘Letter to Thomas Butts, November 22, 1802’, *Blake’s Poetry and Designs*, eds. Mary Lynn Johnson and John E Grant (New York: Norton, 1979) 462.

¹⁵⁶ Raine *Learning*, 101.

¹⁵⁷ Raine *Learning*, 101.

Only when each 'degree' [each world] is open to that upon which it depends can the universal life circulate and flow within the Tree whose roots are above and whose branches [are] in the lower worlds.¹⁵⁸

Or, as Ted Hughes also puts it, poetry is 'the record of just how the forces of the Universe try to redress some balance disturbed by human error'.¹⁵⁹

So Imagination is both a place and a power, with the latter itself both a vision of that place, that realm, and the act of (re)creation of that vision. One division of Imagination into types is clearly Coleridge's:

The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify...

FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.¹⁶⁰

Another division is obviously Blake's:

¹⁵⁸ Raine *Learning*, 102.

¹⁵⁹ Ekbert Faas, 'Ted Hughes and *Crow* (1970)', *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe—With Selected Critical Writings by Ted Hughes & Two Interviews* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1980) 198.

But when the New Age is at leisure to Pronounce, all will be set right: & those Grand Works of the more ancient & consciously & professedly Inspired Men will hold their proper rank, & the Daughters of Memory shall become the Daughters of Inspiration.¹⁶¹

What do I here before the Judgement? without my Emanation?

With the daughters of memory, & not with the daughters of inspiration?¹⁶²

An analogical formulation of these terms and phrases would be ‘Imagination: Fancy:: Daughters of Inspiration: Daughters of Memory’.¹⁶³ Thus, it seems to me that, given the analysis of the Spectrum of Consciousness in earlier chapters and the above realizations of various poets, there are degrees of Imagination and Fancy. Essentially, for a poet who is open to it, inspiration can come from any state of the spectrum, and what the poet does with that inspiration depends on whether he or she has a sense of the extent of the Great Chain of Being; and the clarity of this sense and of the poet’s understanding is reliant to some degree on where the poet resides in the Great Chain and with which eye (flesh, mind, contemplation) the inspiration is received.

Some may argue that all sources of inspiration reside within the human psyche (leaving aside whether or not the psyche, the self, has been ‘constructed’ by its social environment and/or by language). The Perennial Philosophy doesn’t disparage the idea of a personal or a collective unconsciousness; nor does it ignore the possibility

¹⁶⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘Biographia Literaria’, *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. and intro. Donald A Stauffer (New York: The Modern Library, 1951) 263.

¹⁶¹ Blake, Preface of ‘Milton’, 237.

¹⁶² Blake, Plate 14, ‘Milton’, 257.

¹⁶³ A is to B as C is to D.

that elements in the world of *samsara* are constructed by other elements. However, its chief concern is *paramartha* (Absolute Truth), not *samvritti* (Relative Knowledge), and so it acknowledges levels of being beyond the personal and the collective, as discussed earlier, and recognizes, in the imaginative literary tradition, the existence of inspirers from these realms, whether they be muses, Yeats's Instructors, Graves's White Goddess, or Hughes's Goddess of Complete Being.

Of course, what must be remembered about the application of the various types of Imagination¹⁶⁴ is that the insights obtained through them will be interpreted according to the worldview in which the poet is operating. A poet fully involved in the Conop level, in mythic-belongingness, may interpret a subtle level inspiration/insight/peak experience as a message from his or her personal deity, and use it to reinforce sociocentric devotion, rather than realize that the deity is just a path through to the subtle and causal realms, where all deities dissolve. Of course, if the poet is on the threshold of shifting to a higher level, the right insight may trigger or fuel the transition, whether as a direct transformation or as a translation leading to transformation, and the resulting poem(s) will show or enact the transition(s), and be seen as a poetry of self-transcendence.

Once we look at the personal/rational realms, however, complications arise. As Raine and Hughes, among others, have argued, 'the three hundred years of rational enlightenment'¹⁶⁵ have resulted in a denial of inner worlds and a change of premise, through the materialist ideology, from spirit as the foundation of the world to matter as its foundation. Thus, if an inspiration arises from the personal and

¹⁶⁴ See Appendix Six for a detailed examination of the types of Imagination when considering the source of inspiration and the level of the receiver (poet).

prepersonal realms and the poet acts with the latter premise, no matter what level/fulcrum he resides upon, then the insight can only be accommodated as an intuition about his current level and thus only lead to inadequate translation:

Within the terms of the secular, materialist ideologies still current in the West and westernized world, the role of the poet as legislator of values cannot rise above the level of political spokesman or protestor for some sort of civil rights. This might lead to some reform or change of government, but not to the raising and widening of consciousness itself.¹⁶⁶

This is because such a poet is only working with Fancy (because Imagination is disavowed); like Blake's Daughter's of Memory, there is no insight, no inspiration, only a shuffling around and recombining of 'fixities and definites', which are obviously held in memory, whether conscious or unconscious. However, for a poet at vision-logic, say, who believes that poetry is 'not a mere passive reflection but an agent in the evolution of consciousness',¹⁶⁷ then even an insight from the personal and prepersonal realms will be aligned towards higher realms, and likely lead to transformation of the poet and his/her readers.

Of course, the effect on the reader depends on what worldview the reader is operating with and what premises, in that these would colour the response to the 'inspiration', the experience, provided by the text. A person fully involved in the Formop level, in rationality and individualism, may interpret a psychic level inspiration/insight/peak experience, whether direct or mediated through a text, as, for

¹⁶⁵ From Ted Hughes's first 'Myth and Education' essay, *Children's Literature in Education* 1 (APS Publications, March 1970, 55-70), quoted in Ann Skea, *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest*, (Armidale: University of New England, 1994) 6.

¹⁶⁶ Raine *Use of Poetry*, 20.

¹⁶⁷ Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition Volume I, Bollingen Series XXXV-11* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1968) 265.

‘matter’ premise, either a call to arms for ecological repair through systems theory or an indicator of regression back to pre-rational thinking that needs to be combated; while for ‘spirit’ premise, such an insight might be seen as a call to join an earth-based religion and carry out ecological repair through spiritual development and care for the immediate environment. Since the poet cannot know the level or readiness of the readers, the important thing is to prepare the work as well as possible, in truthfulness to the original inspiration, so that something of that insight can be transmitted to others whatever their level: ‘A simple tale, told at the right moment, transforms a person’s life with the order its pattern brings to incoherent energies’.¹⁶⁸

And so, the imperative is to create poetry in its purest sense: ‘Poetry, and poetry alone, operates on the vertical axis of the four “worlds”, opening a way of communication between lower and higher, narrower and fuller experience’.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Hughes, ‘Myth and Education’, *Winter* 153.

¹⁶⁹ Raine *Learning*, 102.

1.7 Upaya Ensemble

Three things that enrich the poet:
 Myths, poetic power, a store of ancient verse.
 Robert Graves¹⁷⁰

Threshold

A day and a half of chanting, of meditation to the beat of a flat Native American drum, of discussions about Dreamtime Beings and vision quests, and you and the other students are told to find a tree, sit with your back to it, close your eyes, and listen to the wind. At first it is difficult to hear anything other than your mental chatter, but soon your breath slows, your body and thinking fades from attention, awareness widens. You see the wind in your mind's eye as you follow its to-fro patter-bump through the forest, then its rising, swirling slice through the air above. The more you listen and merge into listening the more you ride the spiral paths it takes from the eight-point horizon to a funnel gap high and to the left; and the higher you ride, the more you know this as the pattern the wind will always make: to disappear behind the sky and somehow emerge everywhere at once, horizons flowing into this one instant.

In his first book, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, Ken Wilber discussed the necessity of travelling towards Buddha-nature, even though, when we arrive, like a man who believes in a flat earth and then travels around the world, we arrive in the place we started:

¹⁷⁰ A Triad in the *Llyfr Coch Hergest* ('The Red Book of Hergest'), Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A historical grammar of poetic myth* (1948; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966) 20.

This reflects the fact that, in Nagarajuna’s [sic] phrase, “There is no difference whatsoever between *nirvana* and *samsara*; and there is no difference whatsoever between *samsara* and *nirvana*,” and Dogen’s statement that “the goal and the path are one,” and similar statements by the Masters of every tradition that enlightenment and ignorance, reality and illusion, heaven and hell, liberation and bondage—all are non-dual and not to be separated. Thus “you are already where any path can take you.”¹⁷¹

However, because we do believe we are not there, that we are not enlightened, we need to start travelling, which requires us to have a means for this journey, just like we need means to travel the ‘flat earth’ (by train, boat, carriage, balloon, as Phileas Fogg does in Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days*) and discover it round:

The means whereby we travel “towards” Mind are technically called *upaya*, “skillful means,” a word that is often translated as “trick” because we are tricking ourselves into looking for what we have never lost.¹⁷²

(In *The Perennial Philosophy*, Aldous Huxley describes a similar term, ‘expedient means’, those ways that Ashvaghosha writes about in his treatise *The Awakening of Faith* ‘whereby unitive knowledge of Thusness may be achieved’.)¹⁷³

Wilber then uses the work of Dr Hubert Benoit, who analysed the ‘inner gesture’ process that can help us surrender ‘all of our concepts, mental images, and mental objects’ so that we may reach a state of satori.¹⁷⁴ This process, which produces an ‘attitude of vigilant expectation’,¹⁷⁵ can be seen to underlie all *upaya*, and has three essential factors:

¹⁷¹ Ken Wilber, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, (1977; Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1989) 308.

¹⁷² Wilber, *Spectrum* 308-309.

¹⁷³ Huxley 330.

¹⁷⁴ Wilber, *Spectrum* 310.

¹⁷⁵ Wilber, *Spectrum* 313.

Factor 1: Active Attention—a special type of intense yet relaxed alertness...a burning attention-authorization to what is Now, watching inside and outside with equal eye. When this active attention is carried out correctly, it results in:

Factor 2: Stopping—the suspension of thought, of conceptualization, of objectification, of mental chatter...It is a suspension of space, time, form, and dualism, and in this condition an utter mental Silence prevails...If this “stopping” is clean and complete, it will result in:

Factor 3: Passive Awareness—a special seeing that is *seeing into nothing*...And one instant of this pure awareness *is* itself Mind. Whether we realize it or not, it *is always already the case*.¹⁷⁶

One could say then that any psychosocial ‘institution’ (which would include literature and thus texts themselves) that somehow encourages these three factors would create a puncture through Relative Knowledge and open up a moment of Absolute Truth.

One could also say that every moment offers this possibility, which is why the practice of Mindfulness (‘of bringing the scattered mind home, and so of bringing the different aspects of our being into focus’)¹⁷⁷ is so important a ‘trick’ in Tibetan Buddhism. Even if the moment doesn’t create a puncture, it can at least provide an opportunity for growth along the Great Chain/Nest of Being, so that in the proper attention to a future ‘present-moment’ the person will be closer to creating such a puncture. That is, every moment, and everything done in the moment, such as reading

¹⁷⁶ Wilber, *Spectrum* 314-315.

¹⁷⁷ Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, eds. Patrick Gaffney and Andrew Harvey (London: Rider, 1992) 61.

a text, can be a fulcrum. If the text itself encourages/engages/presupposes fulcrum experiences, is itself an *upaya*, then growth must be easier and a taste of One Mind closer.

Another way of looking at the *upaya* process is through the use of Gregory Bateson's analysis of learning as enunciated by Morris Berman in his book *The Reenchantment of the World*. In Bateson's view there are three types of learning. The first type Bateson calls proto-learning, Learning I, the 'simple solution of a specific problem',¹⁷⁸ as when a rat learns to push a bar to receive food. The second type he calls Deutero-learning, Learning II:

Progressive change in the rate of Learning I. Understanding the nature of the context in which the problems posed in Learning I exist; learning the rules of the game.

Equivalent to paradigm formation.¹⁷⁹

Berman suggests that '[c]haracter and "reality" have their origins in the process of Learning II; indeed, character and reality prove to be inseparable',¹⁸⁰ which is similar to Wilber's contention that there are different worldviews for different cognitive levels. As Berman notes of Bateson's findings:

Behaviour, says Bateson, is controlled by Learning II, and molds the total context to fit in with those expectations. The self-validating character of deutero-learning is so powerful that it is normally ineradicable...Of course, many individuals go through "conversions" in which they abandon one paradigm for another. But regardless of the paradigm, the person remains in the grip of a deutero-pattern, and goes through life finding "facts" that validate it.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (1981; New York: Bantam, 1988) 354.

¹⁷⁹ Berman 354.

¹⁸⁰ Berman 213.

¹⁸¹ Berman 214.

What this seems to be saying is that the person is stuck on whatever level they are operating, even with translations, and is accepting facts that support that level while dismissing negative responses or lack of responses (those things that do not validate the premise or learning of the level) as anomalies, a common feature in the scientific paradigm when discussing, for example, paranormal events. If we take the case of the child at fulcrum one biting its thumb and experiencing pain, it may at first dismiss the event, then try again, be hurt, then again, each time not only experiencing the pain of the wound but also the pain of puzzlement about the failure of its ‘model of the world’, which at this point is itself. Eventually the child discovers that there are other things it can bite that don’t bring such pain, and so begins to modify its conception of itself and its environment, its worldview. The child doesn’t change paradigm, doesn’t translate, but changes its conception of the paradigms at that level; it transforms its consciousness. This is a type of what Bateson calls Learning III:

An experience in which a person suddenly realizes the arbitrary nature of his or her own paradigm, or Learning II, and goes through a profound reorganization of personality [consciousness] as a result.¹⁸²

The process of this jump in learning is akin to the double bind situation that Bateson discovered in the case of schizophrenics. Without going into the details of his theory, the point is that the setting up of a double bind can also cause creative responses, as in the case reported by Berman of the porpoise that was trained to the point it was decided to reward it only when it came up with a new trick:

The creature goes through its entire repertoire, either one trick at a time or in sets of three, and gets no fish. It keeps doing it, getting angrier, more vehement. Finally, it

¹⁸² Berman 354.

begins to go crazy, exhibit signs of extreme frustration or pain. What happened next...was completely unexpected: the porpoise's mind jumped to a higher logical type. It somehow realized that the new rule was, "Forget what you learned in Learning II; there is nothing sacred about it." The animal not only invented a new trick (for which it was immediately rewarded); it proceeded to perform four absolutely new capers that had not before been observed in this particular species of animal. The porpoise had become trans-contextual.¹⁸³

One could say that the porpoise had gone from the Daughters of Memory to the Daughters of Inspiration.

This use of the double bind, as Berman points out, is similar to that of the koan technique. In Zen Buddhism the koan is usually based on a statement once made by a Zen master from a state of satori, and is used to promote an 'extraordinary state of spiritual tension'¹⁸⁴ out of which an 'intuition of the truth of Zen' is attained.¹⁸⁵ As here described by D T Suzuki, one of the greatest twentieth century authorities on Zen, the koan was developed as a pointer that would function in two directions:

- (1) To check the working of the intellect, or rather to let the intellect see by itself how far it can go, and also that there is a realm into which it as such can never enter; (2)
- To effect the maturity of Zen consciousness which eventually breaks out into a state of satori.¹⁸⁶

Such an event constitutes a breakthrough to a special type of Learning III, from all paradigms of rational inquiry to an opening into transrational reality. And once such an opening, such a peak experience, occurs, further training will stabilize the opening, will convert the state to a trait, will result in continuous satori, nondual reality.

¹⁸³ Berman 229-230.

¹⁸⁴ D T Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism: Second Series*, ed. Christmas Humphreys, (1949; London: Rider, 1974) 95.

¹⁸⁵ Suzuki 95.

What the above analysis provides is not only a sense of what happens at a fulcrum (a jump from Learning II to Learning III), but also a realization of how such a jump can occur, how an *upaya* works: through a type of double bind. What is not so obvious is the sense that it almost doesn't matter what paradigm is used at the Learning II level, as long as it contains a double bind. In this, I am reminded of the question discussed by the sorcerer Don Juan in Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*:

This question is one that only a very old man asks...Does this path have a heart? All paths are the same: they lead nowhere. They are paths going through the bush, or into the bush. In my own life I could say I have traversed long, long paths, but I am not anywhere...Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't, it is of no use. Both paths lead nowhere, but one has a heart, the other doesn't. One makes for a joyful journey; as long as you follow it, you are one with it. The other will make you curse your life. One makes you strong; the other weakens you.¹⁸⁷

If one interprets this as 1) all paths lead nowhere other than to the knowledge that we are in the Tao often without knowing it, and 2) that some paths enable this realization more than other paths, then maybe what Joseph Campbell terms a person's 'bliss' is the best path through and along the Great Chain of Being for that person. Even Suzuki talks about the fact that seekers after satori may not choose to pursue Zen and the koan tradition, even if they have the requisite mental equipment for its 'spirit of inquiry':

It may be that he [a devotee] is more attracted to the Shingon or T'ien-tai method of discipline, or to the recitation of the Buddha's name as in the Pure Land sects, or to

¹⁸⁶ Suzuki 95.

¹⁸⁷ Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (1968; Middlesex: Penguin, 1976) 106-107.

the repetition of the Daimoku as in the Nichiren sect. This is where what may be termed his religious idiosyncrasies rule, which are due to his previous karma.¹⁸⁸ Notwithstanding the fact that any path can ‘further’ development along the Great Chain of Being, the trick for each of us is to find, through courage and clarity, the path, the ‘bliss’, the domain of living, that enables relatively easy translation and transformation at all times, though this ease does not preclude the possibility or even necessity of a double bind occurring, which will propel us into transformation, even if we are unwilling.

I now would like to draw together the key insights, techniques and approaches illuminated in the preceding discussions. The resulting ensemble would then contribute towards an understanding of the parameters of the project and form the basis of a methodology that should benefit the creation of a strong, imaginative text.

The first group of ensemble elements are at the macro level of the project:

1. *The Silence Inside the World* will act as an upaya, a trick to enable Learning III growth towards the upper reaches of the Great Chain of Being, by exposing the reader to insights from those realms (from transcendelia) and triggering further insights (through contemplatio and imaginatio).
2. *The Silence Inside the World* will be a peak experience of the Great Chain of Being and comprise peek/peak experiences of various levels in the lives of its characters, as well as examples of translation and transformation, both positive and negative.

¹⁸⁸ Suzuki 125.

3. *The Silence Inside the World* will function as a koan, as a creative double bind, a pointer to the limits of rationality and a stimulator of satori-type events. The resulting punctures should come through the encouragement of active attention—stopping—passive awareness, achieved through the particularities of language and poetics and the dynamics of setting, character and plot.

The second group of ensemble elements relates to the micro level of the project, to the particularities of character, plot, event and setting. The information in this group, which was gleaned from the Perennial Philosophy, will contribute to the creation of *The Silence Inside the World* but will not be slavishly followed; it will be used as ‘orientating generalizations’ and raw material for imagination. Thus, the details given below are quite general. Particulars will be presented in ‘Reflections’, where relevant, or in appendices.

This group can be further split up into three subsets. The first involves those major narratives/structures identified from the Perennial Philosophy as useful in enacting or enabling Learning III opportunities and upper level peak experiences for the characters of *The Silence Inside the World*. These can be further divided into two types.

First of all, there are those systems that deal with ascension towards the nondual, which is a task all of the characters in the poem are engaged in, though they may not be conscious of it. One such process is the seven level chakra system, which is closely aligned with the Spectrum of Consciousness. Each chakra is situated in a part of the body and deals with an aspect of human consciousness. For example, the third chakra, Manipura (‘lustrous jewel’) has the symbolic colour yellow, is located in the solar plexus, is associated with the element of Fire, and has the function of Will

and the emotions of laughter, anger and joy.¹⁸⁹ Another system is the Kabbalah, with its Tree of Life displaying the ten *sefirot*¹⁹⁰ (ten ‘Archetypes of Value and Being’¹⁹¹), and its 22 paths of development to and through the various *sefirot* towards Ein Sof (‘The infinite Godhead’¹⁹²), which is beyond the highest sefirot, Kether (‘Crown, Will, Delight’¹⁹³).¹⁹⁴

The second type of narrative involves, effectively, the descent from Spirit to manifestation, which is what occurs to those characters who are have died or are awaiting birth, and seems symbolic of what can happen in all ‘death’ moments. This narrative is summed up in the bardo process as described in the *Bardo Thödol*, the actual translation of which is *Liberation by Hearing on the After-Death Plane*, though the book is commonly known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The book describes the 49 days of the after-death period and the various encounters the soul (or, as preferred in the Buddhist tradition, the ‘consciousness-principle’¹⁹⁵) experiences during this time as it strives for enlightenment or a meritorious rebirth. With each failed test or transition, usually because of accumulated negative karma, the possible outcomes become worse, from Liberation into Buddha realms to rebirth as god or brute or human. This descent in value is akin to a negative or reverse Spectrum of Consciousness.¹⁹⁶

¹⁸⁹ See Table of Correspondences in Anodea Judith, *Wheels of Life: A User’s Guide to the Chakra System* (1987; St Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn, 1995) 46-47. Details of this table are reproduced in Appendix Eight.

¹⁹⁰ Also spelled *sephiroth* and *sefirah*.

¹⁹¹ Drob 18.

¹⁹² Drob 18.

¹⁹³ Drob 18.

¹⁹⁴ Appendix Eight has more details of these systems.

¹⁹⁵ The ‘sum total, or aggregate, of *karmic* propensities, composing, or bound up with, personality and consciousness’, W Y Evans-Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1927; New York: Oxford UP, 1973) 86n.

¹⁹⁶ For more details see Appendix Eight.

The second subset of the second ensemble group involves those symbols and motifs identified from the Perennial Tradition as pertinent to the exploration of spiritual growth. Examples of symbols would be cave and light, river and sea, maze and gate, the tree of life and its fruits, birds of the soul, cauldrons, the patterns in stars, dark towers and gardens. Motifs would include characters, elements and encounters from myth and legend, some of which may well be disguised: the broken sword, the gods' blacksmith, games of chance and imagination, riddles and monsters, dragons and winged beings.

A third subset involves those questions examining the nitty-gritty of the various techniques outlined above. Examples are

1. At what fulcrum is each of the major characters?
2. What double binds are operating on them?
3. What paths are they on, and are these 'of the heart'? In the terminology of *The Silence Inside the World*, are the characters aligned with their 'song-sparks', and if not, why not?
4. What peak experiences do they have?
5. What premise is each character operating with?

Much of the above can be simplified into what I will call, following Ted Hughes's identification of Shakespeare's Tragic Equation,¹⁹⁷ the Threshold Equation. Every fulcrum transition, every peak experience puncture, involves a threshold, a choice either to step forward, usually into the unknown, where one is changed, 'death' leading to 'Life', or to step back, 'life' possibly leading to 'Death', a harder path, a

¹⁹⁷ See Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

path without a heart. In fact, not only is every moment a fulcrum for whatever level one is at, it is also a threshold into the nondual. As Walt Whitman observes, ‘All truths wait in all things’,¹⁹⁸ and these truths, including Absolute Truth, are available if one but has the eyes (of contemplation) to see, as Blake attests:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
 And a Heaven in a Wild Flower:
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
 And Eternity in an hour.¹⁹⁹

Thus, *The Silence Inside the World* will depict its characters undergoing their Threshold Equations (their transitions along the Great Chain of Being) and thus enable its readers to share in and learn from such translations and transformations. The poem will achieve this by a writing process that itself enacts the equation. In other words, the poem is an effect not only of those drafting operations where creation is occurring—the writer being open to inspiration—but also of those redrafting/rewriting operations during which the status of poetics, scene, event and character interaction is checked against the equation. The first case, of creation, will partly occur through the methodology of the *upaya*. That is, the act of writing itself is an *upaya* that involves the writer opening himself to inspiration from or insights into (peak experiences of) the four transpersonal realms. The intention thus is to be open

¹⁹⁸ Section 30 of ‘Song of Myself’, Walt Whitman, *The Portable Walt Whitman*, ed. Mark van Doren, rev. Malcolm Cowley (1945; New York: Penguin, 1977) 63.

¹⁹⁹ ‘Auguries of Innocence’, Blake 209.

to what Imagination wishes to disclose about Absolute Truth through story and poetic music. This being the case, the use of the above-mentioned common symbols and narratives, the understanding gained through ‘the learning of the Imagination’, will not be prescriptive. In fact, one result of this investigation into Imagination may be the notion that all story, all acts of Imagination, are co-created with those higher realms, with the assistance of such learning but not restricted to it. A modification of this result may then be the understanding that story itself, *Imaginatio*, is what comprises nondual reality.

Another important aspect of the Threshold Equation is the sense that with all truths contained in any instant then all worlds are coterminous. This is consistent with the observation earlier that there is ‘no difference whatsoever between *nirvana* and *samsara*’. Thus we can say Nirvana equals Samsara, Eternity equals Time, Heaven equals Hell, all Bardo states are equivalent, and so on. Of course, these worlds are only experienced as one when ‘the doors of perception’ are cleaned;²⁰⁰ otherwise, the worlds are separate and our lives filled with the pain of separation.

This understanding of coterminous worlds can be seen as a major application of the nondual realization depicted in the following statement (quoted by Wilber) by the great Vedanta mystic Sri Ramana Maharshi:

The world is illusory;
 Brahman alone is Real;
 Brahman is the world.²⁰¹

One way of illustrating this understanding will be to have *The Silence Inside the World* depict a setting where such an equivalence of worlds occurs. This enactment is

²⁰⁰ ‘A Memorable Fancy’, plate 14, in ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’, Blake 93.

²⁰¹ Wilber *Sex*, 310.

implicit in the original connections with the two main characters already mentioned, Zane and Jessie, who come from two different universes but are somehow connected. As will be explained in ‘Reflections: *Tikkun*’, the other two main characters also come from other domains, and so the meeting point for all of them, Thexlan, will be a nexus of all their worlds, as well as of the personal and transpersonal realms. And thus the poem itself will become a sacred space (a *temenos*), with Thexlan (and more specifically, Mt Alkerii, the dream mountain) its centre: ‘a point at which hierophanies occur, at which the barriers between the physical, psychic and spiritual dimensions of reality become permeable and transparent’.²⁰² Moreover, with the emphasis on story that *The Silence Inside the World* seems to encourage, one possible implication of the Threshold Equation is that not only are each of these worlds and dualities equivalent, but that all experience is *Imaginatio*, that act of *contemplatio* that not only sees but creates.

What all the above means for *The Silence Inside the World* is that every aspect of the story and the storytelling should somehow be consistent with the intricacies of the Threshold Equation, for only then can a reader fully experience a Learning III peak experience of transitions along or through the Great Chain of Being, and so be led to the wisdom of Imagination, ‘the fundamental ground of knowledge’.²⁰³ The intention of *The Silence Inside the World* then is to tackle Blake’s ‘great task’:

To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of man inwards into the Worlds of Thought: into Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination.²⁰⁴

²⁰² Harry Oldmeadow, *Mircea Eliade and Carl Jung: ‘Priests without Surplices’?—Reflections on the Place of Myth, Religion and Science in Their Work*, Studies in Western Traditions, Occasional Papers No. 1 (Bendigo: Department of Humanities, La Trobe University, 1995) 16.

²⁰³ Raine *Learning*, 23.

²⁰⁴ Plate 5, *Jerusalem*, Blake 315.

THE SILENCE INSIDE THE WORLD²⁰⁵

*Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.*

W B Yeats, 'Long-Legged Fly'²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ For reference purposes, Appendix One contains chapter summaries, what may be called the poem's 'Argument', and Appendix Two is a glossary of terms used in both the poem and the exegesis.

²⁰⁶ Yeats 381.

1. Beyond the Last Gate

The way-gate slams, with the deep rolling sound
of a cavernous bell struck once, so deep
the long cadences shiver the bone's core.

The woman flinches from a dream of light
so intense she remembers nothing but
a grief quickening as she whirled away.

She blinks. The wavering starlight shows trees
and tombstones braided with shadows. She starts
to turn. Darkness engulfs her from above.

She is reminded of a feather cape
she once made, but this smothering is thicker,
wilder, a whiff of bile, more like a beast

thrashing its meal. She feels no breath from it,
recalls her father locking the hall cupboard,
her hot breath against fur coats, his command:

'Stay there until you learn how to behave
like a child of God instead of a whore.'
Just ten years old, all she had done was spread

her new church dress for everyone to see
and smiled for her mother. What is a whore?
Splinters of ice jag through her consciousness,

form dark maws that suck light from memory
till breath and sense begin to whimper-fade
no matter how she struggles, how she prays.

Then hands grip her arms, shake her. Darkness falls.
Her mind stumbles like every child alighting
from the merry-go-round. Hands hold her tight

as she hauls breath through posture, sense and thought.
Strong hands. Without the just-wrench of her father
pulling her from the packed and humid gloom:

‘Never do that again. God does not love
those who wallow in filth. They go to Hell.
Go to your room. You will not eat today.’

She shakes her head, then hears a deeper voice,
and tender, not her father’s: ‘Can you stand?
Are you all right?’ Tilting her head she shudders

at the dark shape before her. He lets go,
stands back. She hugs herself, observes his bearing,
the knee-high leather boots, the hooded cloak,

the tunic and dark breeches. He is tall,
wiry, a hint of stealthy elegance.
A bulging sack hangs behind his right shoulder.

She wonders what saga she now is dreaming,
what new distillation of her strained studies
is tainting thought and vision, recent pain.

She trembles at his wary stillness, notes
deep worry lines on his dark, angled face,
grey eyes like veiled mirrors that follow her

but allow nothing past, as if protecting
a deep fragility, or worse, a core
of emptiness. She wants a simple truth.

He removes his cloak and hands it to her.

‘You were like a statue, then you began
to twist and thrash about, flailing the air

as though drowning, and when I grabbed you, shadows
slid from your body and slithered away.

I fear this graveyard is not safe for us.’

The thick cloak is lined with fur and she welcomes
the warmth, not knowing till now she is cold,
has bare feet, wears only a thin nightdress.

Her knees buckle as she looks about her.

He goes to help, but she pushes him off.

‘Who are you and what am I doing here?’

He hitches his sack, smooths his long, dark hair.

‘I know I have been here before. Each time
is never the same, the people, the landscape,

the path we follow. Memory for me
is wayward, like leaves swirling in a river.

Of two things only am I sure, my name,

and that we must travel this sacred road,
learn what we can before we reach its end.

That gate will not open for us.’ He pauses.

‘My name is Zane.’ His hand is warm and gentle,
calloused edge, knuckles. A fighter, she guesses.

‘Mine is Jessie.’ He bows slightly, then points

at her scant clothing. ‘What do you remember?’

His voice is command-strong, yet frayed a little,
as from fatigue. She closes her eyes, sees

other snippets of childhood: the rose sparkle
of water spray she hurtles through again,
again, her mother urging her, then quiet

when her father appears; the serene owl
one night in her tree, its vanishing wink;
the whispered snatch of story-time, with dragons

that tickled, trees that talked, and singing swords
that opened the white way to paradise;
her cramped tears in the middle of the night

with her parents shouting, then that slap-silence.
But as she knows such memories are not
just theatres of time for carefree indulgence,

are links to bitter-dark that rarely fades,
and flares when open, she tries to recall
anything of her time before this place,

tells him of bare grey walls, fusty aromas,
something tight at limb and chest, how blood tastes.
Like one who also knows of brutal secrets

his face remains impassive as he nods.
She hugs the cloak to her, looks at the hill
behind the stone wall: 'I want to go home.'

The hilltop is efflorescence, all curves,
shapes, textures, all shifting angles and colour,
a vast chameleon hiding in nothing.

Sometimes it seems a hovel of mud huts,
other times a metropolis of gleam
and moving shapes of smoke and strangling flame,

machines flitting about towers like moths.
The activities of man and man's structures
make no sound, wonders seen through jellied air.

Suddenly there is a tremor beneath
their feet. Jessie hesitates, starts to run,
stops when she sees him standing still, eyes closed,

head craned as if tuning for distant notes.
A moment later, another vibration,
which spirals through her body, and her atoms

scatter, like dandelion clocks she blew
while sitting against her favourite tree
as a child, an hour of peace for each puff.

After the third tremor she breathes again.
Nothing appears to have changed, except for
a new gist of substance within her limbs.

Somehow now there is light enough to see
her hands in front of her. Where Zane is dark
of feature, like deep water in a cave,

she is wan, though hazed with blood radiance.
Jessie brings her hands closer, is amazed
by deep tracteries of veins visible

through her translucent skin. Now she remembers
her white hair, her pale blue eyes that flash red
or purple in bright light, her frailty,

how she was deemed a judgment on her parents
for past sins, a test of faith, for her also.
A pale witch they called her, not just her skin,

but her manner, the projection of pride,
choosing to sit with tree and grass and air
and not play or read or converse with others.

She knew more than they. The patterns of lines
would tell her things about the world. A vein
abruptly throbbing would signal a summons

from her father. A spasm on her thigh,
a visit from other brethren, or worse,
the minister, who often stared at her

from the bedroom door. A twitch in her palm
and she knew to leave the house before dawn,
stay all day with her tree and watch the wind.

When her mother left them, she searched the patterns
all over her body for any clue
to the reason, found only jumbled lines.

As she drops her arms to demand firm answers,
the steel and ivory gate behind them
creaks open and a bulbous mass of shadows

avalanches through, twists around to hammer
the quick-shut gate, the stone wall on each side,
gathers itself like a giant amoeba,

rushes forward. Dozens of twisted faces
leer or wink at them then vanish within
the roiling tangle of misshapen bodies,

limbs at awkward angles, the stench of slime,
flecks of stagnant colour. Shadows of tombstones
and statues detach themselves, slink towards

the foaming mass, which swells with jeers and moans,
then splits around the two companions, joins
behind them, slowly starts to pulse-press inwards.

Zane chant-gestures and a bone staff appears
in his hands. He swings at each fetid limb
that stretches towards them, pivots and strikes

again, again, each blow a crimson blaze
that sear-blasts the limb; but too many reach
towards them, and each one that touches stuns

skin and nerves, till the whirling man is lurching
into his blows and Jessie is shriek-huddling
like a small child left inside a rage-mob.

A sizzle-rush of air engulfs them all.
The dark mass collapses to either side
of a dazzling female being, hair swaying

in waves of black, red, white about her poise
as she floats down the path, skin fair then dark,
the air filled with a lute-shimmer of music.

As she passes, tendrils of hair stroke them,
healing their wounds, while others fling away
foul remnants the creature left as it fled.

She pauses, nods at them in turn, then glides
down the winding narrow path to the archway
with its broken emblems of flight and chasm.

Jessie's body is still twitching with static
from the goddess's touch, her breasts and belly
tingling wildly, but Zane sprints after her,

demands she stop and face him. His speed blurs
Jessie's vision, yet the goddess glides swifter
than he, no effort, no glance back. He stops,

gapes, drops a hand. When Jessie reaches him
Zane is shaking with confusion and urge,
as though this goddess were lure, sorrow, secret.

She waits till his posture straightens, then asks
what was happening and why. He walks on
without answering. She pulls him around,

ignores his glare and raised staff. 'Answer me!'
He breaks his staff in two. The pieces vanish.
'We have to go. Those shadows may come back.'

Jessie crosses her arms. He sighs and points
to the slowly rising vapours of rose
and orange light circling the far horizon.

'The tremors signal *Glymsen*, the new day.
I've seen so many dawns here, none the same.
As for what then happened, I have no knowledge

other than the danger is real, is close.'
His tone is urgent, his gaze cold. He shrugs,
turns, strides towards the broken light ahead.

2. Two Gifts

Jessie studies the graveyard she is leaving:
 no flowers left by mourners, no trimmed lawns,
 no foraging insects, no swooping birds.

The tombstones lie in drifts of dust, inscriptions
 weathered beyond repair. Gloom muffles all
 so that even singing would choke and fade,

if anyone could remember a song.
 A chill snakes along her spine and the thought
 of walking on her grave catches her throat.

Once it leaves the graveyard, the path becomes
 a narrow road covered in the same dust.
 There are no footprints. The light is so dim,

perspective so warped, she bumps into Zane
 before realizing the shape she sees
 is not a road-curve shadow but his back.

Zane shows her the sign suspended above
 a bridge damasked by mist. Scored on red wood
 are lines of script that change like flame whenever

she recalls the alphabet of each tongue
 she knows. Rubbing her eyes, she hears inside
 her mind a female voice say, 'Trust in this,'

but still the script moves. Zane touches her shoulder:
 'Something about silence. Can you read it?'
 She sigh-shrugs, so he peers again, moves forward.

The instant he mounts a step the air chills,
 the mist swirls. A male voice booms from within:
 'Can't you read? Now take a wish and be judged.'

Zane plants his other foot, his voice the stealth
of an old hunter. 'No one judges me.'
'Don't be too sure of yourself,' says the mist.

Zane takes another step. Glares. 'Show yourself.'
From deep below the bridge a whistling starts,
rises louder, shriller, the closer, faster

it comes, a concatenation of frenzy
as air tumbles, colours shatter, breath teeters
to the crescendo of a thunder-blast,

then abrupt silence. When their vision clears,
before them stands a monk in tattered robes,
ascetic body tinged like a moon halo.

He smiles, bows, then offers his begging bowl
with his left hand, his right limb a stump only.
Jessie stands before him. 'What did it say?'

He rattles the bowl. 'Some things only open
to wisdom after all else is well tested.
That's why we travel. Take one and be judged.'

She peers within and sees a broken shell,
a leather pouch inscribed with triple spirals,
a long, bent nail, crimsoned by rust or blood,

a green feather, a globe of crystal filled
with spinning flakes of gold. She takes the pouch,
which is heavy, hums softly at her touch.

The monk faces Zane and notes his crossed arms.
'Not choosing is a choice.' He waves his stump.
'And not all choices lead the way we think.'

Zane snorts his disdain. 'No one judges me.'
'Except yourself. Take a look anyway.
You have nothing to lose, this time as always.'

Zane smiles as he chooses the nail. Before
the monk can return the bowl to his robes,
Zane cuts his palm and drips blood into it.

The monk nods as he fades into the mist,
a slow spinning mass that draws to a point
above their heads, then wink-swallows itself.

The bridge is made of wooden struts and pylons,
but its planks are shafts of quivering light.
As Jessie opens her gift, Zane steps up

to a swarm-frenzy sounding far below.
The light beams bend with his weight, and he sees
between them a colossal maw of darkness,

like looking from the bottom of a well
at a stark black sky, the sides swiftly folding
back its mass to a mountain underneath.

Zane breathes a sudden ease that he will know
what lies past all darkness, or cease to know,
if only the bridge planks would weaken further.

But they stay firm. He steps across the bridge
in disappointment, sits at a low bench,
rubs his palm, wonders about endless quests.

Jessie inspects the gem she found, is startled
by the rainbow shapes inside that spin-tumble
at a slower rate than she rolls the jewel

between her fingers, and by the sensation
of living warmth it exudes. She puts it
back into the pouch, steps onto a beam

that instantly becomes a wooden slat.
When she reaches the apex of the bridge
she spies the glide-glow of their goddess saviour

in the distance, the luminosity
reclaiming and filling the shifting landscape,
shields her eyes as the radiance erupts,

a thousand bonfires lit at once in front
of a giant cauldron of focussed mirrors.
Seconds later, eyes still stinging, she senses

a strange eagerness quicken step and breath.
She notices too how the fringe of light
at the horizon has stopped climbing, leaving

most of the sky filled with stars, though all things
are now visible, clearly emanating
their essence, even Zane, whose darkness glimmers.

From high overhead comes a sound like crows
in fierce debate. Jessie feels she could leap
into the sky and join them, and their cries.

Zane heaves himself up. She watches him shift
his sack and wonders what stories it holds.
As they stride down the road, she pats her pocket,

tries to recall more of her former life—
nothing, as if remembrance were a candle
always being snuffed out before her eyes.

If not her past, what of this bizarre present
that trigger-echoes images of fable?
Something about rulers of sun and moon,

something about hidden jewels of the soul,
something about blood sacrifice and hope.
But why recall stories instead of life?

Soon Jessie loses count of hills they climb,
a way to measure time where nothing moves
except themselves, no sun but narrow band

of varied light that rings the world and leaves
a frost patina on all but the living,
her nimbus a firefly's afterglow.

Finger at her throat, Jessie barely feels
a pulse, more like sludge stirred by random flutter
than beat of vital force. She strains against

the mounting fact of death: the fields of briar
and thistle; silence under foot; the constant
squeeze-weight of cold that steals beneath her skin

to smother breath, carriage of bone and sight;
her lack of memory; though now she knows
this afterlife is nothing like rote lessons

drummed by cane, purple glare. This is not hell,
nor heaven, nothing like those sacred vistas
unveiled in ancient texts upon her desk.

And here, a strange companion, so unlike
anyone she would ever meet, except,
perhaps, in dream... She stops, stares after him,

scans his face when he turns to hurry her.
 The spinning chasm in her belly says
 she's known a dream-incarnation of him.

But when? She closes her eyes, tries to force
 her mind down thin traces of recollection.
 One of them persists: a boy skipping pebbles

across a surface speckled by green light,
 the lure of solid radiance within
 waving and clutching water weeds, the strain

of reach through clinging liquid, abrupt plunge,
 limbs clawing for air, one final burst, gasp
 as light and breeze again touch skin, the thanks.

She senses Zane peering at her. 'The more
 we walk,' she says as they move on, 'the clearer
 become some memories. What about you?'

He does not answer. Whenever he shuts
 his eyes to probe the murk of his mind, all
 he feels are ghost inklings that bring disquiet,

the belief he has planned this path before
 and may again, the thorny satisfaction
 that his way brings sleights of soul down upon

all here, futile havoc for those he loves.
 Deeper thrusts of will pierce the gloom, but show
 images shuffle-merging endlessly:

constant discord of battle-cry and sobbing,
 smoke haze, blood tang and fever, tumble stars,
 no constant thread of self, no hint of reason.

Zane does not answer, does not look at her.
Jessie scowls, then notices how his aura
ebbs and flows like a dispute, turns away.

As they walk, the grey dust billows about
yet does not choke them, even though it enters
mouth and nostril. Silences enfold them.

3. Stone and Blood

They round a bend and see a huddled form
beside the road. It does not move as they
approach, does not flinch when Zane touches it.

A strangled hissing rises from its throat,
like hot, hammered metal plunged into water.
As Jessie turns its head, she sees a gaze

like eye-holes of some statue, but without
the trick of light that summons life to marble.
The man is cold to touch. Her stomach spasms

as she starts to cover him with her cloak.
Zane admonishes her, wants to move on.
She glares her defiance till Zane relents,

draws a circle around the man, unhitches
his sack and takes out a lyre unlike any
Jessie has seen or read about. He plucks

the strings, long, glossy black hair tightly wound,
and corrects the tuning, flame notes, eyes closed.
He sits beside the man and starts to play.

Jessie perceives the air swirl into shape,
an embodied darkness that brings to mind
recollections of sermons and rank depths.

She shudders, but is drawn to sway within
the binding rhythm, the resurging song,
the erupting visions that cleave the will.

The music swells from simple four-beat measure
to intricate melody-skeins of fire,
wind, flow and pause as Zane's fingers explore

the lean boundaries of chaos and stasis,
his voice a low counterpoint to the pitch
of his strings, the wild pace-turns of his playing.

Within moments, Jessie sees what Zane sees
behind closed eyelids. She hears him command
the man back from the depths, is just as shocked

when new eddies of darkness coalesce
into two lofty shapes of wings and shadows
that hint at hidden spheres of light and heat

and are flaying at each other with whips
of fiery darkness. First one then the other
staggers under the blows, but when Zane casts

a ball of light at them, the taller one
hisses then streaks skyward and disappears.
The other one folds its great wings and waits.

All through the conflict, Jessie isn't sure
if the beings are present in mind only
or also in the circle with the man.

Zane stops playing, gestures the sign of locks
reversed: 'Who are you?' The dark being laughs
and Jessie thinks of magpies carolling.

'Though your magic has no effect on me,
tell me where first we met and I will answer.'
Jessie feels Zane struggle, sees rapid scenes

of battles with sword and flame against men
and creatures concocted from man and beast,
sees voluptuous women held in globes

suspended over mist and gaping lakes,
 but is not sure if these are history
 or spinning phantasms of lust and spite,

or if there is any difference here.
 She loses contact as he plunges deeper
 into his story, yet still she can see

the winged being, who has been watching her
 all this time. She hears a child singing nonsense
 rhymes, finds herself crying. She sees tears, too,

in the star-shimmer orbs of the weird creature
 and realizes Zane is again speaking,
 though with strained voice. ‘We met one night outside

my village. You were searching for those lost
 from the star realm and I was practising
 the laying out of sand songs’—a pause, and

Jessie again hears singing—‘with my sister.
 You are Rynobar, a *hoya*, though you
 never harmed us, unlike other star-demons.’

‘And you are Zane the Immortal, denier
 of gods and life, though not when we first met.
 I do not think you will succeed this time.

Or ever. What is behind life can never
 vanish, though we have argued this before,
 which you always forget, and will again.’

Zane chuckles. ‘And what of your search, my friend?
 Found your lost *hoya*?’ Rynobar spreads out
 its wings, presses its palms together, bows,

and fades from sight. Zane studies this new absence
that echoes behind his eyes, packs his lyre,
smudges the circle, watches Jessie massage

the cold limbs of the man till he awakes,
then helps her lift-prop him against a boulder.
His face is round, with almond-shaped brown eyes.

His mane of black hair drip-straggles with sweat,
like an over-taxed athlete, though his belly
and thick frame would belie such a pursuit.

After blinking a few times he stares wildly
around him, drops himself into a ball,
starts to rock. Jessie coos to him, calms him,

tells him how they found him beside the road,
and asks how he came to be there, says nothing
of the scars she saw as she massaged him.

‘My name is Remesh.’ He pauses to search
his memory, blanches, says nothing more,
rocks a little as he stares into space.

Zane pulls Jessie aside. ‘We should leave him.
He’ll slow us down.’ She indicates his lyre.
‘What about Rynobar?’ Zane starts. ‘You saw?’

‘Not everything. What does it want with him?
And what is a star-demon anyway?’
Zane paces back and forth. ‘I don’t quite know.

In my world, *hoya* come down at night, kill
anyone who wanders far from protection.
Rynobar was not like that, but was searching...’

Remesh's raspy voice sounds behind them.

'So everyone I meet is on a quest.'

Zane moves towards him. 'And how would you know?'

The man eases himself to his feet, dusts himself down, smiles, does not allow Zane's height to intimidate him. 'It appears death

gives one certain knowledge. You both are seeking an atonement of sorts, though why you bother is beyond me. Dead is too late. There's nothing

but the wait for nothing, no formal judgment, no blessing or curse for life's strategies, just illusion of company, then nothing.'

Jessie can't accept his words. Death is more than nothing, though not her father's belief in punishment or reward, constant guilt.

'So why don't I know what you know?' she asks.

Remesh half turns to her. 'Maybe you don't want to accept you're dead. If you are real.'

Zane smiles. 'What of me, who has never died?'

Remesh shrugs. 'We all have our fantasies.

I'm starting to think you're both part of mine.'

'We are all real,' Jessie insists, then wonders how to prove a thing so obvious, here where nothing is familiar, except

thoughts and memories dredged from deep within.

She has felt cold, she has felt muscles move.

Her body is as she remembers it,

colour of hair and skin, smallness of breasts.
 Yet, can she know her memory is true?
 To pinch her skin, as in a dream, can't help.

Better to accept this place, follow paths
 mapped by those who have come before, and if
 self-delusion, then nothing leads to nothing.

As if reading her mind, Zane counsels faith.
 'No matter what we believe this world is,
 or is not, and our destiny in it,

we are here and have only this grey road,
 unless,' and he stares at Remesh, 'we have
 a liking for the condition of stone.'

Remesh sniggers. 'And where does this road lead?'
 For an answer, Zane edges with his foot
 another circle, smaller than before,

sits cross-legged beside it, takes a bag
 from his vest. 'I remember the first time
 I saw my mother use this, a dawn rite

all families in my village conducted
 to ensure good fortune for the men fishing
 on Lake Tarlkarni, for whatever wares

we needed to ease life. The *murga*, path
 of prayer.' He opens the woven bag, pricks
 a finger with the point of his small knife,

lets fall three drops of blood into the bag,
 shakes it, then pours sand grains onto his palm.
 'It is said Ghajat was first formed from these.'

Jessie sits beside him. ‘What do you mean?
What is Ghajat?’ He gestures around them.
‘Ghajat is my world. Maybe this world, too,

for I sense similarities: *Glymsen*,
the sway of song, the vision-hints of landscape.
Yet I have wandered so long, many lands,

the memory hoard is too vast to hold
no matter how many tricks I have tried.
But skill and sight are never lost, if used.’

He sprinkles grains around the circle, hums
a tune Jessie suspects she also knows,
maybe an air her own mother once sang.

The grains form a black outline to the space.
Zane takes some more. ‘Before there was a world,
there was only grey sand, and the first Kenri

sung Ghajat into existence from it.
So we prepare our sand songs before dawn
to renew the world and seek aid.’ He casts

the grains over the circle and begins
to chant. Though Jessie can’t decode the language,
pictures of sunlit pools and flowers blooming

form in her mind, and she feels her pulse quicken.
She smells the aroma of summer grass,
of soft rain, sees wings emerge from those flowers.

Remesh, however, coughs his disapproval.
‘If there was only sand, where did this god
come from?’ Zane smiles. ‘Maybe the sand itself.

No matter. The only truth is the song.’
Jessie urges Remesh to let Zane finish
without interruption. They watch as swirls

of sand coalesce into flowing patterns,
change colour with every note of his song,
become a detailed living map, with gorges,

mountains, and a ribbon of road on which
can be seen figures surveying a map.
Remesh jumps into the air, and his figure

does the same. ‘That’s impossible,’ he mutters,
watches as Zane’s song defines even more:
a field of red trees, fortress clumps of rocks,

a coastline with lapping waves and low island,
a swamp, a walled garden, abodes of light,
hilltops with swaying trees, how the road passes

a series of ancient craters and ends
at the base of a strange volcano, though
the more fierce he sings, the more details blur.

Suddenly the air above the map splits
and a small object speeds towards the mountain.
Shadows seep out of the landscape and follow.

Before they can see what happens, white clouds
shaped like immense beings made from deformed
spheres and cubes fill the space above the map.

They look up, notice white tendrils of mist
about them, and shudder. The map dissolves
to grey sand. Zane bows his head, claps his hands,

then scoops the grains into his bag. He looks
at them. 'I remember her stories now.
This is not Ghajat, but Thexlan, creator

and final world of all possible worlds.
That mountain is Mt Alkerii, from which
all things arise, to which all things return.

My mother once told me that the first Kenri,
Larandor, came from here, may even be
Thexlan, may yet live deep in Mt Alkerii.

We should find all our answers on its slopes.'
He puts away his bag of grains, and stands.
'Or a deeper awareness of our questions.'

When Jessie and Remesh query him further
he ignores them, reminds them of the mass
that may be falling somewhere above them.

Back on the road, no one speaks as mist swirls,
as high whispers tug at the ear, and each
wonders what things can ever be judged real.

4. The Service of Names

When the mist dissipates, they find themselves
passing through fields of high, wilted spike-grass.
In the distance can be seen a scarecrow,

which quickly becomes a tall, thin-faced woman,
the grass parting before her, a bow-wave.
Her black hair flops across a face that seems

caught between smirk and grimace. She greets them
with a slight nod, regal acknowledgment,
then graces the air with a quick high laugh.

They see her staff is covered by small skulls
that emerge near the base and spiral-stream
up its length, becoming flesh, gazing eye,

before vanishing with smile after passing
under her hands and crowning the staff briefly.
Others flow downwards, all rage and despair,

sometimes delight, as they wrinkle and fade.
She is dressed in rags. Eyes sparkle with humour,
scent of lilac blossoms all about her.

She holds her staff, poise patient, acute gaze.
Jessie discerns questions are not in order.
She gives her name and that of her companions.

‘Thank you,’ the woman says, and strokes her staff,
‘but tell me who you really are and why.’
Violet flames dance around Zane. ‘Why should we?’

The woman chuckles. 'What have you to lose, now you have volunteered your names?' She raps a skull half way along the staff. Zane staggers

as though cuffed by a giant. His eyes blaze, but Jessie restrains him. The woman nods. 'Names are everything in this world, so be

careful to rely on them. Now, your answers.' Remesh hides a smirk. 'I seek to know who I was.' The hermit taps another skull.

Remesh turns white as knees collapse. 'Too smug. If you wish to follow this road and live, you will need to know the right answers. So,'

she draws a circle on the road and strikes the centre three times, 'here's a hint for you.' They watch the grey surface disappear, nothing

taking its place. They reel with vertigo, clutch at each other, at the shredding air, as they feel themselves fall outside their selves

into nothing there, bodies only mist, minds the wind that weaves vapour from itself, the rhythm behind minds a shifting pause.

The staff strikes twice. The travellers fall back from the sealed chasm, wipe their eyes of sweat, grip shaking limbs, find breath, find sight, find speech.

Jessie recovers first, perceives that gaze burrow deep inside her, but dares not flinch. 'Who are you and what do you seek from us?'

A finger hovers near a glowing skull.
The woman leans forward. 'Not without merit,
though my answers may not help you find yours.'

My name and my nature is one. Guess it
and I will help you on your way.' Zane waits
on the balls of his feet. 'And if we fail?'

The woman smiles like a teacher rebuking
a favoured, frustratingly-wayward, pupil.
'We go our separate ways, nothing more.'

Remesh moves alongside Zane, though his stance
is nothing like the predator attention
of the fighter, is barely held alarm.

'I don't trust you. I don't believe you would
help us for nothing in return. What game
are you really playing? I say we leave.'

Jessie sees the woman's eyes pity-glisten,
knows now that some give without need of payment:
'No. We have nothing to lose.' Zane agrees,

but the task is almost impossible
without a hint. 'And I don't mean that image
with which you tricked us before. Too dramatic.'

'Each hint will mean one less thing I can do
for you when you win.' Everyone agrees.
'My first hint is that I do what I ask.'

There is silence as everyone recalls
her exact words, though Jessie interrupts
to ask if false answers are penalised.

They won't be. Jessie continues. 'You know our names, which are everything, yet imply we do not know our nature as our name.'

She pauses. 'What you asked was to tell you who we really are and why. This you know.' The woman nods. 'So you want us to know.'

The woman nods again. Jessie's scalp tingles as images and ideas fire-cracker each other so fast she gasps, shivers, steadies,

body elation-flushed. 'This is your function, is the function of Thexlan, of all worlds, to help reveal what is already known.'

The woman gestures that Jessie continue. 'You are Thexlan, at least its advocate. As Larandor is for Ghajat. Its symbol.'

Zane joins in. 'But Larandor formed Ghajat. He's not its symbol.' Jessie faces him. 'In Thexlan, names, symbols, nature are one.'

She returns to the woman. 'To name you is to refine your nature. I call you Enheduanna, my world's first known author,

who balanced the human and the divine, as good a name as any, which declares service to creation, to revelation.'

The woman's laughter quivers throughout Thexlan, and they are cocooned by the sound. They stare as all the world flows from her rags and staff,

as laughter issues from each skull, as light
erupts from cavern eyes to glaze each blade
of grass, each curve of rock and hill, to cleave

the gap beneath each grain of mass, from which
each thread of sound and light and texture comes,
the world a prism of all seas of nothing.

‘Well done,’ she says, the land again distinct.
‘I gladly take the name you guess, for now,
and owe you much, three answers for your grace.’

‘If you are a symbol-song for all this,’
Zane gestures around him, ‘how were you made?’
‘I have always been. Besides, we create

whatever world we live. Before I thought
or dreamed, there was no I to know the I,
and after, dream-thoughts cascade into life.’

‘So you are a second without a first,’
Remesh suggests, his tone consciously even.
Enheduanna’s face shows slight annoyance.

‘I will ignore that, which was never meant
to be a question. What is it you really
wish to know?’ He closes his eyes a moment.

‘Am I dead, and if so, why am I here
and not with my one God?’ Her sage eyes soften.
‘Your god is always with you, though you sin

in his name. Those sins prevent you from seeing
his true nature, which is yours.’ Remesh scowls.
‘Fulfilling my God’s word is not a sin.’

‘That depends on whether your heart is filled
with your god or you hear him with a heart
turned rock by harsh desire. It’s up to you.’

Remesh uncurls his fist and moves away.
‘And your question?’ Enheduanna says
to Jessie, who bows her head. ‘I have none.

May I ask it of you some other time?’
‘Of course. You’ll know what to ask at that point,
though you may be beyond an answer then.’

Enheduanna continues the course
she took across the fields. As the staff strikes
the ground and the grass parts, the skulls start singing.

And abruptly she is gone, though the wind
carries a muted musical susurrus
that echoes in their ears for hours after.

5. The Soul Mirror

For some time the road is nothing but hills,
each one higher than the last. Though their vigour
is greater here than in their former worlds,

the way saps them quickly, as if the meeting
with Enheduanna asked more of them
than she gave. Soon they top another rise,

are thankful for the flat terrain they find,
can see how the road continues straight, till
it bends around a distant breast of earth.

After a while, as they stride out with something
like a child's abandon to downward slopes,
they feel the road coil itself to itself,

a silk ribbon twisted, its two ends joined.
They fathom the instant as utterly
endless, flooded with the exhilaration

that comes from rolling down a grassy hill
the first time, before the regret of stopping.
The event passes before each of them

knows the others have conceived the same thing,
and they continue their glide-pace advance
without mentioning such a passing fancy.

As they approach the mound they detect drumming
under their feet. Closer still they hear singing
coming from the bare summit where smoke rises

to form a troop of grey and silver horsemen,
their voices like cascades of tiny bells.
When the last rider fades high above them

there bursts streaming showers of pulsing orbs
that chase each other in widening circles
to the horizon, and the drumming stops.

Remesh sneers as he faces Zane and Jessie.
‘And I suppose you’re going to tell me
that those are fairy folk, this mound their home.’

‘It seems to me,’ Zane says, his tone low, even,
‘the drummers are more than likely the owners.’
He turns towards the base, which is embedded

with upright slabs of basalt fused together.
He points out how one is mirror-sheened, while
the rest show signs of constant weather-scour.

Jessie recalls the distant brilliance
of the floating goddess that morning, wonders
whether the mirror is result or cause.

Zane steps towards it, but she pulls him back.
Remesh joins them: ‘What are you afraid of?’
She tells them about the sight, is uncertain

plain curiosity is called for here.
Zane nods, stares into her pale eyes. ‘But surely
you want to know about this road, this world?’

Jessie shrugs. ‘I don’t have his certainty
that consciousness fades to oblivion.
And I don’t have faith in sweet paradise.’

Zane touches her arm. ‘How do you explain
this place or your presence here? Just a dream?’
She looks upward. ‘Yes. Everything a dream.’

But no one who wakes up. Not me. Not you.
Everything not real.' She drops to the ground.
Zane bends down, but she turns her face away.

'Do you want to be a rock like he was?'
He grabs her shoulders, forces her face upwards.
'I happen to think all dreams have some truth.'

Zane looks at both of them. 'Let's all agree
to accept we are alive in this place,
that we are separate and have a purpose.

If we find reasons to doubt these, then fine.
Until then, let's not waste what souls we have
in futile argument.' The others nod.

Zane moves closer to the flickering mirror,
which is taller than horse and rider, wider
than three abreast, heavier than tradition.

His image shimmer-sways briefly, then firms.
Slowly a milky swirl forms around him,
blotting out the reflection of the road.

The swirl grows, divides, forms shapes that become
people and creatures, some bleeding, some screaming,
some open-mouthed, some mouthing their disdain,

his mother, father, sister, brothers, lovers,
foes, mentors, friends, over millennia
of endeavour and failure, sin and grace.

Shivers circle his spine. Sweat beads his skin.
Breath flutters in a long diminishing,
along with his body, till he is vision.

Zane watches his image move through events
of consequence with each being, though shown
from their viewpoint; how with them he pursued

only his path of knowledge, a wild wind
seeking its spiral centre, battering
all centres outside its circumference.

He feels himself shatter into the gamut
of emotions he has provoked in others,
becomes the mirror itself and each scene,

as if a drop of rain in a storm-cloud,
the storm itself, the drop about to dimple
the skin of sea, break open to itself.

But then with strain like bending tree to earth
he reels in his filaments of mind, wrenches
himself from the darking mirror, and falls.

Zane awakes with his head in Jessie's lap.
The revelations drum incessantly
at his temples: pain wreaked on him, by him,

through him, and the rising fear that he is
destined to live the mirror for all time,
finding no way to break the wheel of life.

Though still groggy, Zane sits up, asks what happened.
Remesh offers his hand. 'You only looked
at the mirror a few seconds then fell.

You've been unconscious a minute or so.
Did the mirror harm you?' Zane rubs his cheek.
'Not in so many words. It shows you things.'

Jessie hands him his sack. 'What did you learn?'
His gaze at the slab is all the reply
she needs, doubt, burning fascination, awe.

She approaches the mirror, steels herself,
a pale resolution that quickly splits
into many pale selves, all ages, sexes,

a parade of flesh-roles from gentleman
to temple harlot, each self drawing others
to the contamination of its life.

Like Zane, she suffers all that ever happened
from both sides. Like Zane, she starts to know why
the complicity of pain and release.

She merges with each event, with the mirror,
with the mirror's own image. Grief and laughter
take turns to remind her of fear and fate,

affiliation of lightning with earth,
a liberation path, the quickening
between silver and glass. Like Zane, she falls.

Jessie awakens to the taste of water.
The first thing she sees are Zane's eyes. They flicker
with the afterimages of her trial,

star-bursts and shot-streams and cataract-ripples,
and she sees completely past his blockades,
feels a vigour of affection link them,

yet knows the mirror may have opened them
too raw to counteract each other's rawness,
that emergence from black into shared light.

Zane props her against a boulder and waits
for Remesh as he moves towards the mirror.
They see nothing but his image stretch out

its hand and touch his, an instant, and then
he steps away, mumbling about his God
again proving itself a disappointment.

6. Blood Seeds

Instantly, the drumming begins again
and the air about the mound hums. The mirror
swarms with dazzle-light and wild forms that change

into wizened female dancers who twirl
about a blazing cauldron, till exhaustion
spurs one then another to leap inside.

Breath and blood resonate deep within Jessie,
the urge to dance so her whole being soars
and yields to the benevolence of flame.

She turns to consider Zane and Remesh,
their outlines becoming distant to her,
like memory of day once sleep arrives.

Jessie steps closer to the mirror, feels
hands restraining her, peers at frantic eyes,
knows dimly that her time is still ahead.

She allows the men to absorb her weight
as they retreat towards the road. They watch
a stream of butterfly-winged maidens spiral

from the top of the mound and float towards
the stationary stars far above, voices
high and mellifluous, like summer birds.

As the music fades, Jessie shakes herself,
says nothing about what happened or why.
No one looks back as they resume their journey,

the distances between them filled with silence
and will o' wisps their passage seems to summon
from the dust at the edges of the road.

When the wisps fade, Remesh approaches Jessie.
 ‘Where did you meet Zane? In Ghajat, or here?’
 She tells him of the gate and the strange city.

‘He acts without hesitation,’ he says.
 Jessie sighs. ‘And you act with revealed knowledge.’
 Remesh taps her arm. ‘And what of you, then?’

She doesn’t know. This world has dream-sense only.
 There is a road, companions of a sort,
 the mystery of what is to be done.

Atop the next rise already, Zane urges
 them to join him quickly. They rush to him,
 the slope steeper than those before, and gape

at a plain filled with rows of stunted trees
 poking through a miasma of pale light
 that ripples as trees flicker, without wind.

As they descend, waves of putrescence threaten
 a detour—senses and stomachs heave-reeling—
 yet fade to minor nuisance at the bottom.

The trees are linked to the road by a network
 of wavy crimson lines from base to verge.
 Jessie realizes each snaking trail

is blood seeping from entrails wrapped around
 the limbs of each dead tree. She steps near one
 and starts to sink, yet before Zane yanks her

back onto the firm road she hears a voice
 much like her own, and thinks she sees a tree
 blaze with incandescence and become bare

of flesh before sprouting leaves. When she looks
the tree, silver fir, is still dripping gore.
The afterimage dances before her.

Zane and Remesh stare at her. She is wearing
slacks and boots, tight sweater, large woollen jacket,
Zane's cloak folded on the road between them.

She tells them these are the usual clothes
she wears when bushwalking, that the encounter
with the tree somehow gave her a small grasp

of how thought can become true in this place.
'Just like a *makir* or Dremaan,' Zane comments,
explaining that those who perform the *murga*

are *makirs*, who by tradition are female,
while the Dremaan—especially the Kenri,
who is the dream sentinel of Ghajat—

is as far above the *makir* in skill
of making as the *makir* is above
the rock in skill of breathing. 'Maybe here

we all can be Dremaan, with skill and insight.'
Zane wonders how this will affect his quest—
he has no time for dull competitors.

He retrieves his cloak. 'Don't do that again.'
She dusts herself down, gestures to the trees.
'Surely this road is not only concerned

with what lies at its end. What if we fail
to reach it? What if there is nothing there
and we dismiss the only chance for learning

why we are here by always rushing there?’

Zane paces before her. ‘We can’t dismiss our safety.’ Remesh grabs him. ‘We are dead,

or still dying, and fading into nothing.

What does it matter what we do or say?’

Zane stares down at him. ‘Believe what you will,

but I have known this world longer than you.

Even if we are dead, I know there is more than mere nothingness awaiting us.’

Remesh glowers. Zane does not flinch, but widens his eyes into combat vision, soft focus on all, lowers his breathing, primes strike-muscles.

Each settles their stance. Each waits for the other. Each thinks of blows that hurt. Each barely knows this preening has reasons other than faith.

Jessie starts to interpose, but a voice subdues them all. ‘You haven’t changed, Zane. Always the search for what cannot be found, unless

you detach yourself from the urge to search.’ For a moment they think no one is there, that the road itself spoke, then the air sizzles

around them, body hair on end, hearts racing, throats dry, extremities sparking, ears popping, and a gold-skinned version of Zane steps through.

He is dressed in brown tunic, breeches, sandals. He bows to Jessie. ‘Who are you?’ she whispers. ‘His past, his future, his ideal. Or none.

I call myself Gedon, who was forgotten.’
Zane confronts him. ‘And why are you here? Now?
I didn’t summon you.’ Gedon shrugs, smiles.

‘Maybe I summoned you, and also them,
to do my bidding, which is always yours,
if you remember.’ He laughs, and the road

crumples an instant. Remesh throws his arms
around in exasperation. ‘What rubbish!
I was told death would be a simple task.

There would be a reward for duty done.
But I was fooled. There never was a God,
as I was led to believe. Now this nothing.’

His face contorts with despair and confusion.
Jessie moves towards him. He backs away.
‘Leave me alone. This is plainly illusion.’

He steps onto the verge and starts to sink.
Jessie and Zane rush to him, but are held
by Gedon’s gaze. ‘It is his wish. For now.’

By the time he sinks to his knees, the motion
has slowed, and then stops. He appears unsure.
‘Now we can help,’ Gedon says as he strides

towards the tree on the left side of Jessie’s.
He grabs a coil of flesh, stretches it fine,
and wraps it around Remesh, who looks up

in surprise as eddies of blood ooze down
the intestine and slowly engulf him.

The birch tree emits a low-pitched hum, glows

more ruddy, more exuberant, like flame
from a furnace than from a dying candle.
It spreads to Remesh, who sinks to his groin

though now his face registers puzzle-doubt.
Abruptly he decides to extricate
himself, using the entrails as lifeline.

Soon he lies panting on the road, no smears
of blood on him, tree draped with viscera.
'What happened?' Jessie asks. He shakes his head.

Zane turns to his double. 'What do you know?'
Gedon wraps himself with another tree.
'I know what you know, and it doesn't help.'

The hazel bursts into a swelling rush
of light and heat. They are thrown to the ground.
When their sight clears, the tree is blood once more.

Jessie checks Remesh, who is shaking wildly
and refusing to talk, then turns to Zane.
'Why is Gedon like you? What does he mean?'

Zane stares at the trees, head cocked. 'We should leave.'
Jessie helps Remesh to his feet. 'Why now?'
'Because we are never meant to stay long.'

Closing her eyes, she observes a cocoon
of contradictory whims, white affection,
black dread, undone by a serrated edge

of excitement and stupor, yet can't tell
if these feelings exist inside or outside.
This new unease makes her agree with him.

As the group begins to walk, a breeze gathers
from both sides of the road and nudges them
from behind. Gone completely is the stench,

in its place the elevation of flowers.

They look back and, though the glow is still pale,
the trees are prouder, are wreathed in fine tendrils

that sway and lift within the breeze, then drop
their tips into the streams below, to drink
until they burst and spray the air with seed.

7. The Striking of Shadow

Sometime later the travellers traverse
a pass that opens to a low depression
with palm trees, red sand, thin pillars of rock,

some as high as nearby knolls, same brown colour
but smoother, as though polished by harsh winds,
though now there is no breeze, or by design:

the nearest pillar shows finely inscribed
whorls and circles that resolve into patterns
Jessie and Remesh recognize as phases

of the moon surrounding blank and dark suns.
Other pillars have many moons and suns,
or none, different intervals for eclipses.

The columns are scattered about the valley
like termite mounds, though there is a large clearing
about the central one, which has no pattern

except for seven bands of incised shading,
each of different texture, though equal height.
At its summit is a clear crystal globe

that from time to time projects shafts of light
onto other pillars, which hum as one
while shooting tight beams of intense flame skyward.

The first time this happens, Zane sees a hole
appear in the third band, shift sideways upwards,
then disappear when the shaft of light ends.

He wonders what will occur when the hole
reaches the summit. Will the globe explode
or will the hole reappear at the base?

An impulse for wild ruin now grips him,
quickenng his breath, flush-tensing his body,
battle-cry threatening to burst his chest.

With an effort he controls himself, hopes
no one has noticed his excitement, joins
Remesh and Jessie as they leave this pillar.

After more twin displays of light and flame,
with no clear sign of change to world or sense,
except a subtle shifting of star pattern

or the brief flaring of a star, the group
decides to move on. As they leave the valley,
Zane looks back, sees the pillar shoot a beam

towards them. It strikes him and splits in two,
both strands of light spiralling about him,
two snakes that then merge into the one being.

The light is so swift no one else sees it,
and Zane doubts the event, for as the beams
danced around him, he felt no sting of power,

no burning sensations, nothing but ice
at the core of his being, the beams nothing
but fate honouring his ardent song-spark.

A few yards from the valley their ears pop,
skin tingles, nape hairs bristle, air sting-sizzles.

The road in front bulges upward, thins, splits,

stretches horizontally, forms loops, curls,
tresses, shapes itself an enormous tree
through which the road now travels, as if always.

Then starts a muffled hammering, with sparks
showering the road from one side, each spark
splitting into two again and again

before vanishing with crack-wisps of colour.
Peering into the hollow of the tree
Jessie sees the back of a thickset man

working an anvil, short tongs in left hand
holding something against the massive forge,
right arm lift-dropping a double-head hammer,

corded muscles in double-beat pound-strokes.
As he limps without discomfort towards
his deep water trough, the thing he is grasping

seems itself made of the heat waves and steam
that quickly fill the hollow on the plunge.
Looking up, he beckons her and the others

to wait. They watch him inspect his creation,
the wafer-thin object held to forge-light,
smile in satisfaction, wrap it in felt.

He waves them to the hollow opposite,
joins them after cleaning off sweat and grime.
He puts the parcel on an oval table

grown instantly from the floor as he entered
and looks at Zane. 'So you have come again,
though not to ask me to repair your weapon.'

Zane stares at him. 'What weapon? Who are you?'
The smithy chuckles. 'Your means of salvation,
though only you can do that, when all dies.'

Jessie can't contain herself any longer.
 'I'm sick of riddles. Tell us who you are.'
 The smithy bows. 'My apologies, daughter.'

My name is Dukor, husband-son of Neshxi,
 whom Zane has met many times, many guises,
 as have you all. Some may think me a god,

but I am merely a worker of worlds,
 a Dremaan, as we all are at some point
 during this long homecoming into wisdom.'

Still with a scowl, Jessie confronts Dukor.
 'I am not your daughter. Nor anybody's
 now I am dead, as everyone is here.'

Dukor rubs his beard. 'Again I am sorry.
 I called you daughter because in some ways
 the worlds in Thexlan form one birth, one song,

and I, like all Dremaans, parent and midwife.'
 He peers at her from under bristle-eyebrows.
 'As for your states of death, forget them here.'

Nothing is as it seems, as with the life
 you led before appearing here. Death is
 any brief instant when you forgo life.'

'Then we aren't dead,' Remesh says with relief,
 'and this is some foul dream or fantasy.'
 Knowing all such queries do last forever

Dukor does not answer, but leads them through
 a door that was a mere pattern of grain
 into a smaller chamber of the tree

lit only by chinks high above their heads.
Mounted at eye-level around the wall
are a number of large, white, round objects.

As eyes adjust to gloom, they see each plate
is a slowly swirling vapour contained
within a thin border of whorling flame.

‘I have seen such frames before,’ Zane observes,
‘but showing scenes of impossible realms.’
Dukor nods. ‘This is my art, to make *Turma*,

canvases that act as maps and as doorways,
as containers for memories and dreams,
as triggers for things forgotten or lost.

Many are called to pay the price, but none
can predict what will appear when the work
is breathed upon, or how this will affect

its owner. And no one can rid themselves
of their *Turma* once bought.’ Remesh averts
his eyes from the one he is studying.

‘No need to worry.’ Dukor adds. ‘No picture
will form until you buy it.’ ‘And the price?’
Remesh asks as he returns to his study.

‘No more than you can pay, only the breath
that compels a true picture, and the life
you lead once you discover such true breath.’

Zane trails his index finger through the middle
of one disk, watches the milky-white substance,
more like thickened smoke than layers of oil,

follow his motion, creep along his finger,
and slowly start to drag it to the centre,
before discarding it as something foreign.

The finger emerges clean. 'Who or what
decides the breath is true?' The blacksmith smiles.
'That's the secret of my art, as of all.

But now you may find an answer yourself.'
He begins to unwrap his latest *Turma*.
'Those on the wall are for one; this, for three.'

Though slightly bigger than his other works,
this one retains the rim of fire, the white
smoky canvas, thin when looked at edge-wise,

of great depth and suggestion when held up
to any light and looked at far too long,
as when staring at one's eye, nose to mirror.

Jessie folds the felt cloth and turns away
from the whispered summoning of their *Turma*.
'But none of us knew of these things before.'

Dukor shrugs. 'I was inspired to make one
such as this. Now the three of you are here.
Call it fate, if you like, but this is yours.'

He places the artefact on a dais
that grew from the wooden floor as he moved.
Zane, Jessie, Remesh reach for it as one,

instinctively taking hold of the rim
with left hands equidistant. They peer into
the swirling depths and, as one, breathe a sigh.

The vigorous motion snap-stills, as though
contemplating the flavour of their breath,
then fractures soundlessly into minute

globules that change colour, that fly within
the fiery frame, that fuse with one another,
flatten, stretch, break and recombine again,

weave themselves into a picture unlike
anything they have ever seen, not even
Zane's sand paintings: a deep landscape of mist,

and rocky outcrops shaped like ragged profiles
of feathered and long-snouted beasts. They hear
the high whistle of wind or bird, the piping

of frogs. They watch a bubble push aside
the scum atop a nearby pool, and gag
when it bursts with a strong whiff of decay.

Wrenching her sight from the scene, Jessie turns
to the blacksmith. 'What is this place?' He shrugs.
'The vision is true to all of you. Maybe

it represents your common past or future,
maybe a symbol of your common soul.
I make the canvas; you reveal the image.'

She returns to the picture, feels herself
lured in so far she hears a rustle-cracking
of brush behind her, large creature advancing

slowly towards her without haste or stealth.
She spins around and is back in the chamber,
the others as puzzled and awed as she.

Swarthy face tinged by white, Remesh asks her,
 ‘Besides the mist and rocks, what did you see?’
 ‘Nothing, just a sound’ she replies, then looks

at the two men. ‘What about you? Sounds? Smell?’
 Remesh: ‘A cylindrical mass of flies
 opening its maw to discharge jewel streams.’

Zane: ‘The fright-marvel of slithering into
 a pool of viscous liquid that melts flesh,
 then becomes that pool again, without motion.’

Intrigue slants his gaze. ‘What’s wrong?’ Jessie asks.
 ‘I remember the day my brothers gained
 their boat rights. In celebration and homage

to Haal, the ancient goddess of the lake,
 our father took us to a quiet cove.
 I was young and only wanted to play

amongst the rushes and the trees, or climb
 around the headland to see what was there.
 My father warned me not to go too far

but I ignored him, as I did the counsel
 of the *Forii*, our ancestral rule-voices.
 I found a narrow pool, began to jump

from one rock to another with the poise
 and speed of mighty fighters in the midst
 of battle, like those in my mother’s stories.

I slipped and fell much deeper than I thought
 a pool on the lake shore could be. I struggled
 against tentacles of water and worse

snatching at my limbs. The flickering surface
dwindled, air bubbles shrank from me, in me.
I thrashed once more, then felt my body hush.

Before my sight completely dimmed, I saw
a haloed face, dark eyes splintered with fire,
playful cat-gaze, with hint of venom swiftness.

I awoke on the beach to laughter-scorn.
My father and brothers claimed I cried out
Help as I slid under, and always after

would chide me when I chose my mother's lessons
before the manly arts of lake and boat,
but I was sure I had called out to Haal.'

He turns to Dukor. 'Maybe these are nothing
but scenes of past troubles, reminding us
of what we hate about ourselves or others.'

Dukor passes a hand over the *Turma*.
'As I said, each shows meaning for its owner.
I suggest you look for a common truth.'

Remesh raps his knuckles against the doorway.
'Zane's childhood experience is not mine.
I don't recall anything from my life

about flies and jewels. Besides, truth is mist,
elsewhere, as here. We have nothing in common.'
As he walks away, Jessie grabs his arm.

'Except having to walk this road. Let's take
the *Turma* and discuss the visions later.
Nothing is by chance, even if bizarre.'

Zane joins them. 'Besides, we have to keep going.'
Remesh nods, and for a short while consensus
softens the taut air that had filled the chamber.

Suddenly Dukor choke-gasps with amazement.
Turning, they see him dwarfed by a thick pillar
of revolving smoke growing from the *Turma*,

a clicking roar like millions of wrath-hornets.
The pillar widens and bends towards them,
but Zane dodges it, grabs the glowing frame,

and dashes it against the wall again
and again as the column lashes out
like an enraged serpent. The *Turma* bends,

the creature stiffens. One last slam against
the wood and the *Turma* shatters. The pillar
shriek-rears like a thunder-head filled with lightning

then collapses into a stinking vapour
that forces everyone onto the road.
The haze drifts skyward, slowly dissipates.

'Nothing like this has happened to my work,'
Dukor says. He looks at them with suspicion,
whistles a triple command to the air,

and returns to his vast smithy, which starts
to shrink and slowly fold back into silence
until there is nothing but the grey road.

For a long while they continue to stare
and wonder if they had imagined all,
but for the broken *Turma* in Zane's hand.

8. The Story Game

‘What now?’ Jessie asks. Zane places the frame inside his bag and points to where they see Mt Alkerii, finger-thin in the distance.

‘With the *Turma* destroyed, there’s nothing more to discover here. Let’s be on our way and worry about any visions later.’

As they walk, the landscape in a brown haze, with sound of wind running through crevices, Jessie ponders the lack of sun, drops back

to ask Remesh what he knows. ‘I presume this land of the dead is without the light of salvation,’ he says with a tight smile.

She is not sure if he is serious or is baiting her. She looks straight ahead, keeps voice even. ‘What religion are you?’

Remesh looks skyward for some seconds, sighs. ‘I once belonged to the Monady Church.’ Her stomach quivers, though there seems no reason.

‘I’ve never heard of it.’ He laughs aloud. ‘Likely because we are of different times. Or else different universes, if tales

of parallel worlds are true, which I doubt. There is only one world, one God, one way to rejoin God, one Heaven. So I thought.’

‘What way?’ She shakes a little with recall of her father’s prayers, messianic glare. ‘By helping those who believe in the many

to find the right way themselves.’ Her breath cramps
 a little. ‘How?’ He also stares ahead.
 ‘By any means, which is why I am here.’

Before Jessie can ask him to expand,
 Zane joins them, whispers caution. He points out
 how a few stars are now starting to waver.

‘In Ghajat, the stars only move at night,
 and here they appear to have the same law.
 We’d better find shelter, or fear attack.’

Taking some grains from his song-bag, he whispers
 a spell of finding and tosses them high.
 They swirl into incandescence, then point

towards the hollow of a nearby hill,
 before fading and dropping to the ground.
 Zane starts to move there, but Jessie stops him:

‘So much for caution.’ ‘We have no choice now,’
 he replies, steps off the verge, turns around,
 spreads his arms, a sure conceit: ‘See, no danger.’

Remesh joins him, and they stride around tussocks
 of white, five-petalled flowers on long stalks.
 Picking one up Jessie stifles a shriek

as the face at its centre winks at her.
 Abruptly the eye detaches itself
 and is borne away by the wind, to join

those other tiny insects gathering
 nectar from inner sanctums of the flowers.
 Laughing, she follows the men up the hill.

Their shelter is a hut of broken boards
and thatched leaves, just sufficient to keep out
the biting gusts that come with rapid night.

Jessie can hear voices summoning her
within the vortices of wind, the dead,
the misplaced in heart and soul, the forgotten,

all those who call her to a type of death.
She knows, now, that in Thexlan she can't follow
their bright tumult until she knows what follows.

After marking protection signs at door
and windows, Zane throws wood on a fireplace
that looks like it has been used every night

for a million years, so deep are the ashes,
their texture like Zane's *murga* grains, their colour
the road's charcoal grey. Maybe all of Thexlan

lies in a vast hearth, and their passage through
just the breeze flicking cinders to complete
their service of breath to the hearth's creator.

Jessie envisages worlds nesting worlds,
but draws little relief from the idea
as wind jostles wall and ceiling for access.

'What is so dangerous out there?' she asks
as Zane puts away his fire kit and sits,
lifts his palms to the flames inches away,

a faint bewilderment filling his features.
'As I've said, star-demons come down to kill.'
'That's just fear-fantasy,' Remesh replies.

‘The stars are furnaces of light and matter.
Nothing exists but what we can touch, measure.’
Zane passes his hands through the fire and smirks.

‘Maybe in your world. Not Ghajat or Thexlan,
though I suspect all worlds have the same root.’
Remesh grunts and moves away. Jessie follows:

‘How do you explain Rynobar?’ He stops.
‘Who?’ ‘One of the two *hoya* we encountered
when we found you. Maybe they were both trying

to kill you.’ He shakes his head. ‘If I’m dead
how can they do anything?’ Jessie shrugs.
‘Maybe they need souls for their furnaces.’

Zane speaks from his seat. ‘Maybe they are souls
looking for bodies to possess. I’m sure
Rynobar has proposed such an idea.’

Jessie leaves Remesh to consider this
and sees Zane playing with the flames again.
She sits on a log beside him. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘At the mound and elsewhere I have felt cold
and heat; here the flames give light but no heat.
Maybe Thexlan is nothing like Ghajat.’

Remesh grins. ‘This is the realm of the dead.
You encounter only what you bring in.
Maybe there is no fire in you. Not ever.’

Zane rushes and subdues the plump man quickly,
drags him to the flames. ‘Maybe I have more
fire than I need. What about you, Remesh?’

What did you bring, leave behind, never have?
We don't know you.' He grabs a burning brand,
thrusts it towards his face. 'Does this help you?'

Jessie knocks it away, though the blow hurts.
The men move apart. Remesh rubs his face,
takes up a position across the fire.

Zane notices Jessie nursing her hand.
'Let me look.' She glares at him and returns
to her seat. 'Leave me alone. Both of you.'

As the wind dies down footsteps sound outside
the barred front door. There is a single knock.
Zane conjures a staff from a heavy bough.

The second knock rattles the door and frame.
'We are already dead,' Remesh insists,
'so nothing can harm us. Just let it in.'

A voice they recognise as Gedon's issues
from beyond the door, and the air gild-shimmers.
'Yes, let me in. You know I can't hurt you.'

Zane refreshes his warding spells. 'You sound
like me, but *hoya* are cunning. Leave now
and feast on less suspecting travellers.'

For an answer, gold slivers of light flare
through the door and Gedon appears, all scowl
and crossed arms. 'How hospitable of you.'

As he moves to a seat, Zane accosts him.
'Why are you plaguing us? Who are you, really?'
Gedon leans back. 'Just a seeker, like you.'

I am you. Or else an imagined you.’
Jessie sits near him. ‘Imagined by whom?’
Gedon raises his left eyebrow. ‘Good question.’

He takes her injured hand. ‘But you are hurt.’
She senses warm assurance in his touch.
He closes his eyes, slows his breathing, passes

one hand back and forth above the bruise, stops.
She feels the flesh tingle, watches it blister
frenetically for a second then hiss,

then wrinkle back into pale skin, marked only
by a pink outline that gradually fades.
‘Thank you, Gedon.’ She touches the raw skin.

‘You said you were forgotten. Why? By whom?’
Gedon considers Zane. ‘Another time.
Besides, it is as good a name as any.’

Jessie flexes her hand. ‘So what are you?
A god, demon, Dremaan, or something dreamed
by all of us as wishful interlude?’

‘I’m not sure where there is a difference.’
He pokes the fire. ‘All we can know is this.’
Remesh shuffles in his seat. ‘What of God?’

Zane nods. ‘I agree. There is always more.
I want to know the why, the how of being.
Or else existence is a waste of time.’

Gedon rolls his eyes. ‘Always the same quest,
though you never mention the other one,
both hopeless as a sword cutting itself.’

Zane's eyes fill with fresh rage and for a moment
the twin beings lock wills like two great beasts
over territory. Breath and thought teeters,

till Zane laughs, Gedon nods, tension snap-fades.
Jessie and Remesh exchange puzzled looks,
and the room settles into awkward silence.

Turning her body away, Jessie takes
the rainbow gem from its pouch, which had stayed
on her person when her clothes changed. Its highlights

still move mysteriously, but one facet
shows a tree with ten stars in its bare branches,
another, strange maze shapes. She returns it,

takes a quick look around the rundown room,
rummages through dusty shelves, broken cupboards.
Remesh walks over to her, questions her,

informs her that the dead do not need food.
'What if I'm not dead?' she says. 'I am hungry.'
Gedon joins them. 'The habit of your life.

Still, even here such addictions have power.'
They turn as a mist appears in the room
and slowly forms into a ruffled servant

standing before a sumptuous banquet table.
Remesh pats his belly, but makes no move
to join the feast. Gedon accepts a drink,

sniffs its bouquet, rolls eyes in mock regret.
'What you eat here you have only brought forth
with your mind, which may not even be yours.'

Zane whirls on him. 'My mind is always mine.'
 Gedon turns one palm outwards. 'You are here
 because you deny such knowledge and being.'

Jessie tosses aside the tasteless fare,
 watches the feast and servant disappear.
 'How do we attain such wisdom? With thought?'

'Ask him.' Gedon points to Zane. 'He knew once.'
 Zane throws a branch on the fire and sparks shower
 all around them. 'As always, you talk nonsense.'

Gedon points to a spark floating in circles.
 'Wisdom is not accumulation, but
 an unburdening, which is easier

when you follow that song-spark deep within.
 You gave me that, but have forsaken it,
 and will drag all of us into disaster.'

Everyone stares into the flames that jump
 and tumble-dance as wind rattles the hut.
 The burning wood emits a smell like myrrh.

Remesh thumps two logs together and smiles.
 'I propose a game, since no one is tired
 and sleep apparently not needed here.

It's called *Fable, Lie or Life*, and is simple.
 One of us tells a story and the rest
 choose whether it is made up, or from life,

or something else.' 'What do you mean?' Zane asks.
 Remesh looks at them over steeped fingers.
 'A story can come from that complete tale

governing all life. Not real to one life,
not false to all. Difficult to do well,
if at all.' Zane leans forward. 'And who wins?'

'The speaker, if the listeners are wrong.
The listeners, when they choose the right type.
With Gedon as judge if we can't agree.'

Zane hunches near the fire so that flames flicker
across his face like hieroglyphs, coughs once,
stretches his neck, then begins in a whisper.

9. Zane's Story

'I was born on the shores of Lake Tarlkarni.
My father was a fisher—and my brothers,
who were nine years older than I—all strong

in the ancestral voices that guide us.
The *Forii* were never that strong in me,
and my dreams my own. My mother saw this.

Here, as elsewhere in Ghajat, women sang.
Before dawn my mother would sprinkle sand
on a cloth, hum a tune of conjuring,

and the day would bring whatever she sought.
All women had this art, but as no girls
were born to us, I was trained in this skill.

A storm took my father when I was eight.
Some of the villagers saw this as doom
for my mother breaking *makir* tradition.

They did not shun us, for men often died
on that lake near the mist-edge of the world,
but they were wary. Then, after a year,

my sister was born. Dimples. Tight blond ringlets
like my father's. Green eyes, not seen in Tarlkar
before then. Olive skin, lighter than mine.

We named her Kerrilea, the bright joy,
though the others cursed her as *hoya*-spawn,
as if strange births were unlike *murga* gifts.

At Kerrilea's fifth birthday, my mother
would have started training her, as is lore,
and I would have returned to fisher ways.

But weeks before, my mother made a garland
of rocks and the ancient lake swallowed her.
I saw her too late, arms outstretched, head high.

She couldn't hear me because she was singing
to someone in the lake's star-phosphorescence,
someone who was keening for her. My father.

Some say my mother died because a *hoya*
visited her after my father's death.
Some say she wished to be with him again.

Some say my sister was a cunning demon
bent on destruction of our family,
the village too. But the truth is much simpler.

Lake Tarlkarni forms the edge of Ghajat.
Above that edge is Aimal, Shultar's home,
with groping shadows and plummeting blasts,

like cautions told to children before sleep.
Shultar is a Dremaan, mistress of lake
and our land, and would often demand tribute,

eight barrels of *sorra*, a purple plant
that grows on the lake's bottom. Failure meant
the casting of lots to see who would die.'

Zane takes a deep breath, stares into the fire.
'My mother was chosen that year. Not chance,
but the terror-reprisals of our neighbours.

Two years later the tribute again failed.
Shultar asked for Kerrilea. My brothers
held me back while the headman lit the fire—

the drawing of lots, the ancestral voices,
 never wrong. Her screams haunt me every night.
 Her imploring eyes I see every day.'

Once more he pauses, his gaze to the flames,
 then rubs his eyes, throws back his head, and stretches,
 and all know the pause has become an ending.

Remesh claps softly. 'Very entertaining.
 And very skilful. By setting the story
 in a place none of us have seen, or know,

you make it hard for us to judge its truth.
 Still, I think it *Lie*. Too much background detail,
 tragedies so like mere divertissements.'

Jessie waves her hands. 'What of his distress?
 The story feels true, though I can see how
 the tragedies seem like they've been contrived.'

Remesh demurs. 'The sadness may be real,
 but it is a clever weave of emotion
 to deflect attention from fabrication.'

Zane stands. 'Though the events are from my life,
 both of you may be right, in a strange way.'
 Jessie moves towards him. 'What do you mean?'

'I may be a tale myself, a sand painting
 woven into words someone tells another.
 Thexlan is womb and home to dreams, to stories.'

Remesh lets out a bellow and then slaps
 Zane on the back. 'I might believe your tale
 was *Life*, if I accepted Jessie's instincts,

but your last comments show a skilful jest.
So, a false story. Do you agree, judge?’
Gedon blinks, his mind wrestling with Zane’s musings.

‘All stories have pleasure, once you unravel
the spirit inside. But I cannot judge
upon this tale till Jessie casts her vote.’

She frowns. ‘I believe Zane has told a truth,
though whether it is history or fable,
his life or essence of all lives...who knows?’

Gedon glances at Zane. ‘Because I know
a little of his path, I will judge *Life*,
though others would say *Fable*. Jessie’s next.’

10. Jessie's Tale

Jessie looks at each in turn. 'I'm not good
at making up stories. That's why I read
the past and stories that help me forget.'

She sighs, closes her eyes. Her breathing slows.
She rolls her shoulders twice, as though uncoiling
from herself. Eyes flash open, firelight-glitter.

'Around the globe called home is endless space
in which ships travel filled with sleeping pilgrims
who do not breathe. Their focussed dreaming pauses

the universe-weave, cleaves the emptiness
of vast reach, drops itself through, then reknits
the arc of crossing closer to its goal.

When a ship touches earth again, its people
awaken from their single blink, unload
seed and beast, channel water, build stockades

against those hordes who come to repossess
what was conquered. Soon towns and roads begin
to leach the land of sustenance, of title.

The pilgrims infest their world, wrestle-war
for wealth they can eat, carry or display,
wreck the elements till nothing remains

but the ribs of their vessels and the stench
of despair. Others arrive, quickly leave.
Nothing remains. Maybe a beetle rolls

ripe dung across the land until it reaches
the size of a world.' She sighs. 'Maybe not.'
Jessie looks at each of them, then leans back.

Gedon nods approval, but not so Zane.

‘There is nothing beyond Ghajat but mist,
as here in Thexlan. ‘Not true,’ says Remesh.

‘In my time craft strive to reach other worlds,
though not in the manner Jessie describes.’

Zane shakes with incredulity. ‘And why

would people destroy the world that feeds them?’

Remesh shifts around, the thought of such greed
reverberating deep-dark within him.

Zane continues: ‘Such a race deserves death,
though not the worlds they conquer.’ Jessie clasps
her hands. ‘That is my wish also.’ Zane narrows

his eyes, wonders if her claim at the start
as to a lack of skill was just a ploy
to off-balance them in the story game.

As his admiration steepens, he knows
such cunning tactics call for equal guile.

‘As I think about your tale, I recall

a vision from my distant past of worlds
in mist-swirl formation. Yet I vote *Lie*,
for the story seems a life not yet lived.’

Jessie looks askance at him, but says nothing.

‘While this time my vote is *Life*,’ Remesh says.

‘The storyteller wins again. My turn.’

11. Remesh's Account

'There is a tree with bitter yellow fruit.
 There is a man who mourns his lover's death.
 There is a god who does not wish to live.

The man begs his god to retrieve the soul
 of his lover. The god agrees, but only
 if the man brings him the fruit of that tree.

The man journeys far, but all those he questions
 decline knowledge of the tree. His hope withers
 till he meets a dishevelled mage who knows

how to reach the tree, to be revealed only
 for a share of the fruit. The man agrees.
 Given a small boat, he is told to sail

where the horizon folds over itself,
 to find an isle of magnificent birds
 who will try to prevent him taking fruit,

for they feed on it. To attend the man,
 the mage sends his familiar, a fiery
 baboon that speaks in riddles. The man sails.

At first he must sway the wind to bear him
 on the right course. The wind agrees, but only
 if the man cremates himself above ground

when he dies, which may happen any time.
 Soon the craft skims the waves faster than birds,
 faster even than the bending of rainbows.

A sun-moon cycle later the man senses
 the world drop, and the sea surges a wave
 that lifts him far above the tracks of clouds.

When the boat teeters on the edge, he sees
the island just above him. The wave lurches,
but the wind ferries his craft to the beach.

Watched constantly by the baboon, its talk
of ghosts in flesh, of demons in disguise,
of maps that only lead to fading maps,

the man enters the dank and fertile jungle.
All about him are the frenetic cries
and whoops of unseen beasts that even quieten

his riddling companion. He battles through
dense foliage and rank aromas, tripping
on roots, falling into holes filled with feathers

and dead leaves, ignoring always the sounds
that seem to say, 'Go back, ruin draws you.
Go back, your soul is at risk. Go back, now.'

He spurns phantasmagoria of shapes
and fetid pools, grotesque camellias,
noxious orchids, the zigzagging escarpments,

and stumbles into a clearing, the ground
littered with shards of gleaming rib and skull,
skeletal hands not always with five fingers.

The man pants for a long time, hands on knees,
head barely raised. Before him is a presence
more like a mountain forest hanging from

a giant earth pole trailing knotted cables,
a monstrous apparition of a tree
with lily-white flowers and immense clusters

of yellow globular fruit, spectral sheen.
 Around the tree, flocks of rainbow-flecked birds
 with long gossamer tails wheel in wide spirals

before returning to its laden branches
 to eat more of the fruit, then quickly launch
 once more in rapid cataracts of colour.

Each time the birds pass near him, their wings flash
 keen prisms into his eyes, fixing him
 with their brilliance. The baboon's sudden chatter

jolts him out of his reveries. He straightens,
 takes out the brooch his lost beloved gave
 with the words, "I will always be near you,

a halo of scent till we are pure scent."

The birds roost again and watch him approach.
 As he stretches out to pluck the first fruit

he can reach, he hears his beloved's voice.
 "Please, my sweet, let me rest among the dead.
 You will see me soon. But if you continue,

we will never see each other again."

Recalling the wizard's words, he ignores
 the voice, plucks three fruit, one for the god, one

for the mage, and one for himself—he needs
 to know the truth. Each time the tree pause-trembles
 and the birds let loose shrieks that cloud the air

and dim the glow from the remaining fruit.
 With the third cry they surge upwards like flames
 in a forest combusted in wild fire

and disappear into the too-hushed jungle.
Nothing moves as the man bites the first fruit.
The pulp is fine, but the juice is so acrid

it burns tongue and throat. The man gags, but frantic
to know the tree's secret he bites again.
Nothing happens. He closes his eyes, summons

the face of his beloved. Again, nothing.
He tosses away the core and returns
to the beach the way he came. He sails back

to where he set out, gives the second fruit
to the wizard, who allows him to watch
the ritual: he splits the fruit in two,

takes out the kernel, pounds it in his pestle,
pours in the juice, opens a vein, lets fall
three drops of blood. The brew hisses and bubbles.

He pours it into a goblet, drinks half,
gives the rest to his pet, who has been silent
ever since the birds vanished. Nothing happens

till the familiar begins to chant
a formula in an unknown tongue, while
the mage dances about it widdershins.

The more emaciated he becomes,
the more the animal acquires the shape
and stance of a human, then beyond-human,

its features swelling, its body and limbs
thickening and lengthening, like a god,
and in one stride it disappears from sight,

the wizard now a flimsy sheet of skin
that dissolves into dust scattered by light.
After much travel and travail the man

returns to the vast temple of the god,
near the edge of a chasm. Noxious fumes
rise from beneath, swirl about the huge columns.

The man steps over the threshold and calls
for the god. "Neti, Neti." Vapours merge
into a massive statue, which consumes

the proffered fruit whole, attains flesh and breath,
then contracts to human size. The man asks,
"What of my beloved?" "Soon," Neti says,

settling into a cross-legged position
on the temple floor and remaining silent.
When the building judders with sudden thunder,

Neti smiles at the giant shape approaching.
Now wearing the mage's rage-torn visage,
the god-like baboon towers over them,

for the wizard had also lost a lover,
had made the same pact. Neti ate the fruit
to become a god but then refused payment.

The wizard strikes the god and the stone temple
crumbles into the chasm. The man plummets
and feels the fumes ravage his flesh and spirit,

then finds himself clothed in feathers, and eating
the yellow fruit of the tree. Other souls
surround him, including the contrite god,

but nowhere can he discern his beloved,
not in the jewelled eyes of the other birds,
not in the bilious taste of the fruit.'

For a long time the listeners are stunned,
then Jessie speaks. 'The story makes no sense.
What happened to the beloved? And why

did the god lie? I find the story mean.'
Remesh stands and puts more wood on the fire.
'It's what happened to a man. Life's like that.'

'Whether true or not,' she says, 'I feel cheated.
The man did what he was asked, yet was robbed
of his reward.' Zane calms her. 'But did he?

No one told him to eat the fruit first. Maybe
it was a drug. Maybe he is still there,
a statue holding a half-eaten fruit,

the baboon panic-chattering in riddles,
his beloved hovering about him,
imploring him to wake up. I like it.'

'So how do you vote?' asks Remesh. They both
decide on *Lie*, while Gedon judges it
a mix of *Lie* and *Fable*. Remesh wins.

Gedon now stands. 'The night is ending, time
for us to take up our own humble story.
I hope the road will grant us what we seek.'

He opens the door, smiles, and they watch him
melt to auric-sheen light that flows so swiftly
clouds of dust motes stream-melt into his wake.

12. *Murga* Flight

Jessie sees Zane put both hands to the ground,
 dig fingers into earth, close his eyes, listen.
 ‘*Glymsen* is coming.’ He takes out his song-bag

and knife, starts to prepare a *murga* space.
 Remesh taps him on the arm. ‘What are you
 going to request in this ritual?’

‘Speed and ease of travel. Maybe some answers.’
 Remesh points his hand to the world outside.
 ‘Since thought is so strong here, why can’t you open

a direct path from here to Mt Alkerii?’
 Zane glances at Remesh, ponders a moment,
 then nods his head. ‘It might be possible,

though I’m not sure such a thing has been done.’
 He closes his eyes, thinks through all his lessons.
 ‘Both of you will have to help.’ He gives them

some grains, sits them around the circle, tells
 them to form a clear picture in their minds
 of the mountain they saw in the map *murga*.

He tunes his lyre, then, as they sprinkle grains,
 he starts playing, instrument and voice spinning
 a plea-chant that fills the room with warm mist.

The *murga* grains waver, refuse to gel
 into a constant picture, whirl through colours
 like all seasons in an instant, then lift

from the ground and speed-swirl into the mist.
 Jessie struggles to hold the mountain image
 as the mist jostles her and the heat rises.

She feels the floor drop, then vanish completely,
knows herself part of the spinning mist, sees
the *murga* itself open into space,

in which appears a tiny shard of darkness
that rapidly grows, and she realizes
they are speeding towards their summoned goal.

Her smile falters as the mist shudder-shifts.
The music lurches, strives to regain tempo,
is cuffed again. The mist ruptures. They fall.

Jessie sees a woman in a bed, wrists
bandaged, older woman holding one hand
and crying, someone else chanting in shadow.

Zane sees a sword plunging into the chest
of a grey-haired man who wrenches a jewel
from the pommel and throws it into darkness.

Remesh sees a woman gather a mob
of children into a small room and sit
singing songs with them as the flames draw near.

After picking themselves up from the ground
they survey their surroundings: no dawn yet,
which means the danger still of *hoya*, or

whatever else interfered with their *murga*.
They have landed someway along the road,
which here is smothered by thick, motley creepers

and bent-over tall reeds, dense foliage
beyond these on both sides, striated dark
quivering, now becoming still. The stench

of a bone factory, maggots in marrow.

Suddenly a roar like a million frogs
judders the air, the reeds, the leaves, the road,

draws all into a giant murky membrane
that towers over the group. The rank shape—
world-skin scrunched into a giant fist—trembles,

shreds itself to a rain of haggard creatures
armed with spears, then bamboo shafts spouting poison,
then cross-curved knives that make a whistling sound.

Zane shoves Remesh and Jessie behind him
and surrounds them all with a barricade
of flame that repels creatures who approach,

but does not prevent them from hurling missiles.
He conjures a wooden staff to deflect
the attacks, is stunned to see Jessie standing

near him, using twin sticks to ward off missiles
out of his range. She shows great skill and speed,
but there are too many for both of them.

One hits her left temple. The sight of her
spinning from the blow and hitting the ground
so maddens Zane he summons all his will

and fans the flames into a raging mass
that billows with such speed towards the creatures
they cannot evade their doom. Moments later

there are only slivers of vegetation
on the verge of the road and smouldering
shadows where their strange attackers once stood.

Though there are no ill effects from the blow,
Jessie lets Zane inspect the wound. She finds
the touch of his long fingers strangely soothing

as he cleans the wound, presses the skin flaps
together, applies a salve, and sing-whispers
a healing heat, the precision and flair

of a master craftsman in a bazaar
while a buyer watches the handiwork.
She lets herself relax and, as eyes close,

hears her mother calling her to get ready
for church. She doesn't want to go—no one
else to talk to, nothing to do but listen

to the minister's drone in the hot-cramp
wooden chapel with glory-windows shut,
or those screech-sermons that make her sit up

in sweat-fear her father will test her later—
but if she doesn't go, another sin,
her father will use the strap or do worse.

Her eyes snap open with fear as she thinks
her father is before her with a gag
to stop her screaming, then sees it is Zane

with the cloth he used to wipe away blood.
She smiles her thanks and slowly finds her feet.
To Zane's question about her martial skills

she explains that a childhood friend taught her
moves and techniques during the games they played,
though she hadn't thought about them for years.

They only move a few yards down the road
when they feel tiny tremors ebb and flow
through their soles. A stronger series rocks them

and they look up to see a mist-plume spurting
high in the distance to touch stars. It thickens
in the middle, flattens to a wave-ring

racing across the land and ruffling all.
When the wave passes overhead, the land
buckles and tilts, their senses prickle-hum.

A short while later they notice the light
at the horizon is yellow with green,
and a little higher than their first day,

notice too the dancing stars are still moving
ever so slightly, and know this to mean
increased danger from *hoya*. As they walk

two ravens appear from nowhere, dip-sway
in front of them, rock wings as they ascend
to a high branch and watch them, all in silence.

13. Of Crooked Signs

The road travels through lightly wooded fields,
with tiny birds flitting through the trees or
wheeling above them in great swathes, the circles

of flight dictated by instinct of flock
not leader, single wing beat, bank and soar.
In the distance is the curve of low hills

that are tinged with saffron, like prostrate monks.
Zane sniffs the air. 'There's a faint whiff of salt.
A sea, though it must still be someway off.'

He sees Jessie sniff and scowl. 'What is wrong?'
'The seaside means sun, but my lack of pigment
meant I could never enjoy it. I wanted

to swim, to be like other boys and girls,
but fun was not my father's faith.' Except,
she almost adds, when she was very young,

and he used to make finger-people vanish
then return again, to her glee. 'Because
I feared the sun, the forest was my haven.

The smell of leaf and fresh earth. The way light
makes shapes of spaces between leaves and branches
when you look through the canopy of trees.

Leaf to bough to space, my gaze leapt and paused.
Hours later my father would summon me.
I would get home always two minutes late.'

'What was your father's faith?' Zane asks. 'A rigid
belief in holy book and pain,' she says,
'though the book only came when I was older.

If I dared ask questions to point out flaws
 in scripture, the pain increased, so I stopped.’
 Her voice is bitter. Twitching vein at temple.

Though his father and the village boys taunted
 Zane about his *murga* training, their scorn
 arose through ancient laws and roles, but not

her father’s abuse, more a fault of soul
 than an outrage to change. ‘What of your mother?’
 ‘She left not long after he joined his church.

He claimed my affliction drove her away.’
 Jessie pauses. ‘My dearest recollection
 is her hushed voice singing nursery rhymes.

I liked the one about the crooked man.
 Maybe because I’m crooked in some way.’
 She pauses again. ‘I hate missing her.’

‘My mother also sang, humour and wisdom.
 Before bed, my sister and I would listen
 to fables and tales of Ghajat and Thexlan—

true world that forms Ghajat—and the wish rings
 Mt Alkerii flings over and through Thexlan
 every morning. How these rings form that world

and our world anew, maybe other worlds,
 where they are she did not know, but could fill
 our dreams with tales of birds with wings like shells,

enormous cities, worlds that rise and fall
 in the tear-blink of an elephant’s eye,
 gossamer creatures that float in scorched darkness.

She told how the rings are composed of Orms,
world bubbles from the depths of Mt Alkerii,
which bear answers to prayer and dream and hope,

and how at times gem fragments of Orms drop
out of the rings, Keth shards, which can be used
to predict the future or find the past.'

Jessie recalls the strange gem in her pouch,
but thinks it is too well-crafted to be
a Keth shard, though what it could be is vague.

She looks at him. 'I thought you didn't know
much about our task or our destination.'
He strokes his chin with his thumb as his gaze

turns inward a few seconds, then he shrugs.
'Maybe all the stories we have been telling
are starting to unlock my past, my plans.'

A sensation of dread knots Jessie's stomach,
whether from the tone of his last two words,
or the strange sight before her, she can't tell.

Their road continues over a small plain
of flat basalt rock in which are incised
swirling lines a drunk engraver would make.

With each new step the area vibrates,
then the rock between the markings slides upwards,
becoming walls of white stone ten feet high,

inscribed with interlaced spirals and crosses,
some crudely slashed and gashed, anger-despair
of other travellers blocked by this trial.

Jessie wonders whose monster they will meet
in the centre of the stone maze, and what
lesson awaits them if they do survive.

She joins Zane at the wall blocking the road.
‘What do we do?’ He checks along both sides.
‘It’s not too wide for us. We go around.’

Remesh agrees and steps off the left side
of the road, disappears as through a door,
which shuts behind him, and completes his stride

to their right, then staggers when he sees them.
Zane walks past him, looks briefly at the verge:
brown dirt, a scattering of milk-white pebbles,

tiny tufts of thin grass, swings his leg over
the ground. The limb vanishes. He leans back
and sees his lower leg emerge from air.

He shakes his thigh, and the suspended foot
wobbles. Some probing confirms there is no
severing of the leg, so he moves back,

leans his vertigo against the wall, shuts
his eyes briefly. A hand touches his arm.
He gives a smile to Jessie’s concerned look,

then begins tracing the sigils and runes
on the rough stone, some geometric, some
ornate, some finely cross-hatched, some distorted.

‘I’ve seen something like these before, but not
on a building. Something smaller. Much smaller.’
He knocks his forehead against the wall, stops,

turns to Jessie. 'You study ancient scripts. Can you decipher these?' Remesh guffaws. 'I thought you were a powerful Dremaan.'

Zane spins on Remesh. 'Why don't you help us, instead of these useless comments.' Remesh glares back. 'I know nothing of magic symbols.'

Zane grabs him by the throat and lifts him high with one hand, even though the man weighs more than he. Jessie leans her weight on Zane's arm,

is surprised at his corded strength of muscles. The struggle continues as Remesh wriggles, chokes, then Zane lets go. Remesh slumps to the ground.

Zane glares at him. 'I don't care what you do, beat the stone with your hands or head, but help!' Just as he turns back to the wall, he sees

Jessie standing, head aslant, in front of a huge inverted triangle containing smaller and smaller versions of itself.

'You've seen this before?' he asks. 'Not the same,' she says, 'but such a symbol could mean *woman*.' As she studies the triangles, they seem

to shift back and forth, rhythm of her pulse. Her gaze is drawn deeply into their centre, then her eyes widen. 'I know what to do.'

She turns slightly from him, hunches a little and plunges two fingers into her groin. As she thrusts them back and forth a few times

her mind is enthralled by the memory
of passion and patient intimacy,
though her lover's face is hidden by shadow.

She is alert to what she's doing, what
she's remembering, of who's watching, how
the channel of triple energies forms

as she smears the juices into the runnel
of the innermost triangle, and how
power flash-blazes through each nested symbol.

In the instant before the stone within
the outer triangle dissolves, she wonders
if she created the opening, or

merely uncovered what was always there.
In the same instant the lover's face turns
from moonlight memory, and has Zane's smile.

14. Leap and Echo

After checking the door for sign of ambush,
they enter single file, a floating ball
of light before them: Zane, Jessie, Remesh.

Immediately they face a blank wall
and are forced to turn right. A few steps on
is another wall, paths to either side.

The floor is packed dirt, trodden by the passage
of countless pilgrims. The breeze touches them
on all sides, is cool, with sickly-sweet fragrance.

‘Which way now, Jessie?’ Zane asks. She joins him
and takes a deep breath. Her shoulders drop slightly
as she exhales, then draws another breath

into her lower lung, holding it there,
sensing its poised vitality vibrating
through and quickening muscle, organ, skin,

sensing its echo too in the breeze lifting
the fine hairs on her right arm as it rises
of its own accord and points to the left.

‘Once we take that path,’ Zane notes, ‘we should stick
to the left wall, thus ignoring those paths
that look useful but would lead us astray.’

They walk steadily, left hands touching rock.
As they leave yet another cul-de-sac,
Zane cranes his head skyward. The high walls block

the bank of light from the horizon, leaving
the faint stars above for illumination,
yet their vision within the maze is clear.

He looks behind him, sees the others glowing more than normal, magenta iridescence stretching like lifelines between each of them.

As Zane turns back to the front, the air chills and a dark mass hurtles down from the sky to form a monstrous, snarling, bat-winged creature,

body-bulk of vapour and spider webs, shell-plate head with long, razor-thin, hooked beak, clicking claws, a *hoya* unlike his friend

Rynobar of the star-blaze limbs and body. A cry from Remesh says another *hoya* has appeared behind them. Zane hurls light-balls

at both of them and pushes his companions into a small room. He conjures a curtain of indigo flame at the doorway, but

before he can cast a flame barrier to protect them from above, the two *hoya* leap the walls and advance towards the group.

Zane and Jessie conjure their weapons, step towards the star-demons, who hesitate at this audacity, then laugh in voices

like glass breaking and loom-charge towards them. Then another blur of winged darkness plunges into the room, not to join but to batter

one *hoya* aside and attack the other. Zane recognizes Rynobar and rushes to help. He throws a bolt of incandescence

at the first *hoya*, follows up with blows
from his staff that keep the creature off balance,
throws a net of fury-light over it,

and keeps pummelling till Jessie pulls him
away. The other attacker is limp
in Rynobar's arms. Zane sees his friend sobbing,

asks what is wrong. 'This should never have happened.
Now the stars are moving during the day
and these *hoya* are in league with a darkness

even beyond us. I can't leave them here.'
Rynobar picks up the other star-demon,
unfurls vast wings, soars skywards without sound.

After checking for wounds and speaking briefly
about the strange events, the travellers
decide their only path is to move on.

They only make a few more turnings
before coming across an open space
in the centre of which is a still pool.

A thin causeway runs around it, with many
openings to other dark passages,
too many for the left wall strategy.

Remesh slumps against the wall. 'What now, Jessie?'
She rubs her eyes, the battle with the *hoya*
rupturing what link she had with the maze.

Zane tries a *murga*, but the grains refuse
to settle into shape. He sends a probe
around the space, but it is just as listless.

‘If your *hoya* friend was here,’ Remesh says,
‘it could fly above the maze, guide us out.’
Zane ignores him, because he notices

that Jessie has been distracted. He touches
her arm. She doesn’t notice. She is looking
intently at the black water that glitters

occasionally with the overhead stars.
Her eyes are shifting rapidly as if
she were striving to snare a fleeting scene,

sear it into mind. All at once she throws
herself into the pool and sinks from sight
without a sound or splash, without a ripple.

Zane dives after her, but finds himself skidding
across the causeway on the other side.
He dives again, but ends up where he started.

He joins Remesh to scan the pool for bubbles,
or other signs of life, then chants a spell
to part the black stillness, reveal her fate,

but nothing happens. ‘What now?’ Remesh asks.
A voice sounds from the passage behind them.
‘She should return, but it may be some time.’

Wings barely fluttering, Rynobar glides
out of the dark and stops in front of Zane,
who greets the *hoya* with a puzzled smile.

‘Thank you for your help before, but what is
this place and where is Jessie?’ Rynobar
says he knows little, but the pool is used

by *hoya* when they have captured weak souls.
Having gone in by herself, she will be
drawn back soon enough to her path in Thexlan.

Although reluctant to talk to the *hoya*
for reasons he can't fathom, Remesh asks
if Rynobar can carry them out, or

at least guide them while flying overhead.
'It is not possible. When seen from high
the maze is a shifting blur of shape patterns.'

'But you found us after taking those *hoya*,'
Remesh says with a harshness that surprises.
Rynobar peers at him with lava eyes.

'That's because I was able to drop back
to the exact place in the maze I left,
and then I followed your trail from that room.'

With the hope that music will sooth their tensions
and draw Jessie back, Zane pulls out his lyre
and begins to play, in a halting rhythm.

The discords, someway between muffled sobs
and shrill keening, fill the space so that nothing
is untouched by their dark concern and grief.

Eyes closed, Zane restrains his rage at this loss
and lets his fingers tap into pure sorrow,
the sound like cold wind caressing bare trees,

or a new shoot breaking through frozen earth.
Using sustained notes, Zane tries to transmute
the seething din of his mind into calm.

He barely registers a tiny echo
coming from deep within the music, yet
also apart, like a distant wind chime.

Then Remesh nudges his arm and he opens
his eyes to see the pool stippled with starlight,
waves rippling to the rhythm of his music,

the pattern drawing their gaze across water
to where Jessie stumbles out of a passage
one third of the way around the pool's edge.

When they reach her she has collapsed, face gaunt,
clothes ripped, sweat-smearred, hands and face scratched and bleeding.
Rynobar brushes the others aside,

leans over Jessie, drapes its giant wings
around her till no one can see within.
As the *hoya* chants softly, subdued light

filters through its wing tips, the colour spinning
rapidly through the rainbow as though searching
for an apt tincture for healing. It settles

on roseate light, and while the soft thrumming
echoes throughout the chamber, the glow brightens
and dims as though the tune were a breeze ruffling

the drapes protecting an eternal flame.
After some seconds Rynobar steps back.
Eyes blinking, Jessie declares, 'I'm not dead.'

'How do you know?' Zane asks as he helps her
stand up, notes weariness and certainty
in her pale eyes. 'I don't know why I dived

into the pool. Intuition. And then
I found myself in a bed, could smell Daphne,
my favourite flower, could hear machines humming,

but couldn't open my eyes, couldn't speak,
though I sensed people nearby.' Her eyes glisten,
for she is sure that one of those hold-squeezing

her hands was her mother, not seen for years.
She massages her forehead as she tries
to make out the other person...the skin

much smoother than her mother's, yet mist-cool.
'Then a weariness crept over my mind,
quicker than I could battle, other people

rushed into the room, I felt immense pain,
like skin being ripped from muscle and bone,
then woke up outside the maze, though I couldn't

be sure if it was the entrance we used,
or the exit. I followed the left wall
in a stupor as time circled itself.'

After Jessie rests a while, the group enters
her tunnel, right hands on rock, though each person
feels a keen itch at the back of the neck

as they slowly retrace her journey, more
twists and dead-ends than the way in, more glances
upwards each time starlight reveals their path.

15. Matters of Trust

Just when Jessie is sure the exit is
around the next corner, the passageway
opens into a small chamber, with Gedon

seated nonchalantly on a flat rock.

The gold being looks up at her, then glances
at Zane, Remesh, lingers on Rynobar.

‘I see the troupe is whole once again, and,
you have discovered death is not the only
reason to travel the grey road of Thexlan.’

Zane stamps his staff. ‘What are you doing here?
What do you want?’ Leaning against the wall,
which moulds itself around him, Gedon says,

‘You called me here. Or maybe I called you.’
He shrugs, and the slab shrugs. ‘It doesn’t matter.
We are all here till someone lives or dies.’

Again Zane stamps his staff in sheer annoyance.
‘How can you know what task we face unless
you inflicted it upon us?’ He glares

at the gold being. ‘Tell us who you are.
Maybe you’re the one who will live or die.’
Zane smiles, and Gedon returns the same smile,

no rancour, more humour, gaze resolute:
‘But you may not survive, and so not know
the true meaning behind this quest of yours.’

Jessie thinks this banter is more than useless.
‘We have to keep moving. Either you have
something for us or we find the maze exit.’

Gedon nods, then stands. 'In fact, I have two.
A warning: Trust no one, not even me.
And this.' He holds out his clenched right hand, waits.

Remesh mutters, 'Again, more paradoxes.'
Gedon lifts one eyebrow. 'To exist is
a paradox of choice, for you to live

another thing must die. The food you eat,
the restrictions on others your own presence
requires.' He lifts his hand. 'So, what's your choice?'

Zane considers the options before them:
'We can't trust him.' Rynobar nods, then says,
'Whatever we do he will win. I favour

defusing his threat now than having it
hang over us. Only by trusting him
do we discover if he is worth trusting.'

Zane bows his head to the star-demon's logic
and steps away. Rynobar locks his gaze
on Gedon, gently touches the clenched fist.

When they discuss the moment afterwards
they all agree the palm was empty when
first unfurled. They all agree a small object

appeared from nowhere, a squat cube of stone
that quickly formed the columns of a temple
portico, aged and gloom. They all agree

that nothing changed yet they were drawn inside,
to walk the badly-worn flagstones alone
towards a darkened niche, the air cool, clean.

Rynobar sees a shaft of swirling smoke
suspended above a hollow with wood
laid out as for a fire, but still unlit.

Remesh sees nothing at first, will claim later
there was always nothing, does not know how
to tell of a babe the colour of maggots,

its face and voice his own, the words it spoke
confounding him as when first he met truth:
'That time is false, if this time claims the same.'

For Zane, the temple hasn't changed. Again
the niche is empty and again a voice
coming from within commands him to bow

if he wishes to master everything.
Again he declines, not because the goal
is one he does not desire, but because

he will never allow another being
to rule him. He will find another way
to master all knowledge, all power, all.

With each step, Jessie sees clearly, becomes
more puzzled by what she sees, what sees her:
an oval shape resolves into a face,

eyes closed, bare lines, smooth sheen of rock, a smile
halfway between bliss and surprise, awareness
of those eyes watching her with her own eyes.

Then another step, a ripple of mind,
and the sweet sting of rupture as two faces
male and female, blaze and flow, scowl and grin,

appear on either side of that first face,
their eyes open now as more faces part
the dark with ceaseless interplay of light

and music, of movement, and Jessie feels
this rhythmic poise form the body, mind, saga
of her dialogue with the dance, feels too

herself as the dance, as each pulse of life,
as the open eyes of the two lost faces
always turned from each other, until now.

When everyone blinks, Gedon is not there.
All that remains is the small temple model,
which crumbles into the sand as they look.

After long silence, there is hesitant
discussion, more shuffled silence, a question:
'Has anybody changed because of this?'

No one confirms a change, but Zane can tell,
because nothing changed for him, that some others,
tone of voice, shift of bearing, were affected,

and wonders if this were Gedon's intention
and why. Was this about trust? What could he
gain from such manipulation of minds?

How could he uncover Gedon's true nature
when he still did not understand his own?
This thought he realizes is not his,

but comes in the voice of one of his teachers,
a croaky whisper from the distant past—
or, the future, another voice insists.

He grabs his head as it fills with the clamour
of advice, his father, brothers, all those
whose wisdom he sought, all those he evoked

within a circle and questioned, all those
whose minds he invaded when they were dying
as he snatched at the art of life and death.

His mind reels within the maelstrom of sound.
He wills everything to silence, but nothing
happens. He applies his will like a sword

clearing a path through charging warriors,
but the melee thickens further and threatens
to engulf him. He sees an opening

and rushes towards it, but is held back.
He releases his will, allows the sound
to bear him through the rushing gap, and comes

face to face with Gedon, who winks, then opens
his mouth into another chasm, out
of which come minute, rainbow-coloured versions

of himself, each of them opening mouths
for more minute versions to burst out, all
singing the advice, but in harmony.

The song bears him into a floating warmth,
a constrained comfort much like he imagines
a child experiences in the womb

though here all memory is his, and light—
soft, fibrous—replaces the dark he knows
exists as a baby grows into being.

He rocks from sharp pain. He opens his eyes
to find Jessie hovering over him
and his cheek stinging from her slap. The look

of relief in her eyes tugs at the music
fading in his invigorated mind,
and he savours the momentary concord.

‘What happened?’ Jessie asks as she helps him
stand. ‘I suppose I answered my own question.’
Nothing more is said till they leave the maze

and watch the walls slide back into a pattern
on the road and the surrounding flat rock,
two bubbling flows filling the complex path

from both exits to a hole where the pool
should be. They collide with a roaring sound
and jetting spumes of smoke. After a while

the pattern fades, the hole shrinks to a mere
depression like a footprint in the middle
of the road, which the dust quickly fills in.

Zane goes up to Rynobar. ‘Well, my friend,
I suppose you will return to your search.’
The *hoya*’s wings flutter. ‘If you permit,

I would like to travel with you a while.’
Remesh stares vehemently. ‘I say, no.
We don’t need a *hoya* to kill us later.’

Jessie glares at him. ‘How can you say that
after what happened in the maze?’ He waves
his hands around. ‘It could all be a trap.’

Barely controlling his anger, Zane raises himself to the balls of his feet and whispers, 'I can vouch more for Rynobar than you.'

Remesh splutters. 'Then what about this search? How can we be sure it won't bring us harm? This road has already brought too much danger.'

The star-demon sniffs the air, as if testing for the source of the man's aggression, or checking the man's aura, his inner self.

Eyes narrow, and the mouth twists with disquiet. With severe effort, Rynobar relaxes. 'I seek lost stars, first in Ghajat, now here.'

Jessie blinks her eyes, but can't firm the edges and colours of the *hoya* as she looks. One instant it is solid, the next, barely

there at all, only diaphanous shapes of light that change colour and size as they float over, slide through, and absorb each other,

like watching through the surface of a sea the bright and many-coloured creatures living deep within and occasionally exposing

themselves to the watcher and the night sky. She can't be sure what gender it is now, though the curves suggest more female than male.

'What makes you think the lost stars are in Thexlan?' She watches the fluorescent patterns steady, the boundaries of the curved body firm.

‘As you surely suspect, Thexlan is all there is, can be, or ever was, disguised, however, by the gates before our eyes.’

Zane can’t recall his friend talking like this.

‘What do you mean by gates? And what makes them?’

‘They are the ways we choose to see the world.

They are closed to things we decide are not possible or worthy of our attention.

They can open wider, but only if

we desire to see things that are unwelcome.

I have exhausted my search, so it’s time to find whatever will open me further.’

Muttering that Thexlan is a phantasm anyway, Remesh gestures his disgust and walks a little distance down the road.

After glancing at the stars, Zane tells Jessie and Rynobar to start after Remesh while he casts a quick *murga* to check progress.

He then looks back over their line of travel. In the distance he sees a swirling creature of lightning splinters and darkness, which glides

then stops every now and then. A grim smile plays across his face as he hurries after the others, and the beast catches a scent.

16. A Vow for Fate

The road before them rises gently through
fields filled with purple flowers that give off
a scent that reminds Jessie of the incense

inside a church, though Zane is taken back
to his childhood, to the barrels of *sorra*
harvested from the floor of Lake Tarlkarni.

He shudders, clamps down on the memory
of screams as flames ravage his sister's body.
He clenches fists, renews vows, stares ahead.

Though she has her own images to clear,
Jessie notices Zane's discomfort, starts
to move towards him, is held by a touch

on her arm, a quiet cough. She turns slightly.
Rynobar's face is softened with concern.
'When one heals another, one takes a measure

of that person's pain, the reasons for it,
the reasons preventing any self-healing.'
Jessie sees again how the *hoya's* body

is constantly changing shape and size, sometimes
the contours of a female, sometimes male,
sometimes both at once, or neither, though now

the changes are less dramatic, less frequent,
and the form becoming more and more female.
Rynobar looks back to the vanished maze.

'What happened to you is still happening.
Like him, there are deep needs you must confront.
And such tasks can only be borne alone.'

She glides off before Jessie can reply,
 if she could, for her memory is still
 fragments of sound, kaleidoscopes of scenes,

hospital and childhood, the niggling puzzle
 of why and when, of mother-loss and coma,
 what was meant to happen, here, anywhere.

She is not dead, is clearly someplace else
 as well as here, this Thexlan Remesh thinks
 is a half-way house between life and either

paradise or complete annihilation.

For him, judgement, for her, a dream unlike
 any she's ever had, though she can sense

a familiarity, an old secret
 kept from her father, who could never value
 anything beyond the strictures of faith.

Jessie hears Remesh panting as he strives
 to stay ahead. She suggests he slow down
 and, when she catches up, asks him what's wrong.

'Whenever I look at Rynobar, fear
 wracks me, as though she were my past sins, or,
 in some way, my future ones, thus my judgement.'

She decides not to delve into his sins.

'So what will you do?' His look gives her shivers.

'Stay well away and hope someone kills her.'

Too shocked to answer, Jessie merely nods
 and moves off a little. Remesh's rage,
 righteousness and mania remind her

too much of her father. She couldn't do
anything against him for all those years,
but leave home and never look back, and now

these companions fill her with the same fears,
same sense of helplessness. Should she rage too?
Then she remembers the first time she stretched

for a branch from another without fear,
though the gap was much larger than expected,
the secure confidence of leap and grab

only tapped when there was encouragement,
a presence not a parent but a friend
whose face even now she can't yet recall,

whose existence Jessie dared not reveal,
though her mother guessed, her own wistful smile
when recalling imaginary friends.

The friend taught Jessie many other things,
then vanished in a splinter of blood music.
Yet how could such memories help her here?

Zane looks up to see the others stretched out
along the road. He wonders if their maze
encounters are meant to so divide them.

Did Gedon form the maze, or is he part
of some larger plan? In some person's dream?
Zane hates to think he is being controlled,

but doesn't know how to discover this
unless he fulfils his own quest, the answer
to the corruptibility of life,

the insistence of death, the need for both.
Too many times he has opened a book
that promised solutions, or woven spells

designed to bring him closer to the source
of total knowledge, and discovered nothing
but more questions, more mystery, more doubt.

Maybe the only answer was to end
the search, or the province of the search, or
the need for anyone to search at all.

A long-forgotten memory snags breath:
a circle in sand, a drum between knees,
a chant over and over to a tune

he was sure existed before time birthed
itself out of the silence outside silence,
the black dragon that sings time's moving breath.

Someone had taught him the tune, but the words
were carved in crystal, his very own writing,
though he never could remember the act.

This someone was supervising the rite,
or maybe he was watching himself, once
exhaustion set in and he collapsed, fleeing

his body in delirium, and floating
above it, and looking down at a mirror.
A voice called him and he turned to a fissure

in the sky the width of lightning, the colour
of cold lips. The voice told him to renounce
his quest or else be damned to wander always

in dark disappointment, all love forgotten.
'Only when you accept that gain and loss
are both the same, oasis and mirage,

that what you seek is only true when neither
desire nor plea, then you will be set free
of contention, though never free of fate.'

The voice was soft, like when his mother sang
the bedtime tales of quiet heroes slaying
those monster foes that ravaged land and life,

and then returned to mortal life, good sons,
loyal fathers, no battle lust to taint
the home, no further gleam for destiny.

But always he bristled at any power
not his own, so dismissed the voice and vision.
With no need for wisdom he could not live.

Besides, he knows himself already damned,
though he has forgotten why, his true fate
to dissolve the means of fate, and not care.

He looks up to see Remesh sprinting back
down the slope and screaming at them to hide,
as there is an apparition approaching.

Zane directs them to an overgrown hollow
and stands guard, balls of lightning in each hand.
His breathing quickens at the thought of combat.

Within seconds a large, long-snouted creature
with speckled scales and eight stout legs strides over
the hilltop. A wide enclosed pannier

of wood and leather is strapped to its back,
and inside a white-haired man holds the reins.
Two large ravens launch themselves from his shoulders

and circle the travellers' hiding place.
Zane gets ready to cast the balls, but Jessie
whispers that she doesn't sense any danger.

The man stops his beast as near as he can
to their hollow. 'No need to hide from me.
Hurry up. We've got a long way to go.'

His voice is deep, is without any tenor
of malice or duplicity. As soon
as Jessie appears, the man waves at her.

'I have your message. I'm sorry it's taken
so long to answer.' She narrows her eyes.
'What message? Who are you?' The wizened man

whispers to his mount, and the beast kneels down.
'All in good time. Now, climb aboard.' He whistles
to his ravens, who burst skyward, wing inland.

'There's enough room for you and your three friends.'
Zane stops her. 'I don't trust him.' She walks past
and climbs one of the bent legs. 'That's your choice.'

Remesh follows her, while Rynobar flies
directly to the pannier. Zane pauses,
then hitches his lyre-bag and joins the others.

'Welcome. My name is Azra, for today.'
Jessie introduces the others, though
the nodding, old wizard seems to know them.

‘Remesh. So you made it through The Ice Temple.

Sorry I didn’t get to you in time.’

Remesh looks askance at him. ‘How is it

you know me?’ Azra gestures around him.

‘We all know each other in Thexlan, once we recognize our nature, which is one.’

Azra surveys Zane’s calm pose. ‘So, you’re trying the sacred path again. How’s my good friend Elgron? Have you passed his water test yet?’

As when trying to answer someone speaking in a foreign tongue, Zane has no choice but to lapse into vague gesture, puzzled look.

‘A hard path you’ve chosen, my friend, but one that should bring you great success. As it will for everyone here. Always a fine tale!’

He clicks his tongue, and the beast, which he calls Phaox, gets to its feet, more gracefully than expected from one of such great bulk.

Azra directs it to follow the ravens, then sits back in his seat, reins loose, as Phaox nimbly speeds across the broken terrain.

Jessie taps him. ‘Where are you taking us?’

He points to the gathering clouds above.

‘To my home, where we’ll be safe for the meantime.’

He turns to Remesh. ‘What of The Ice Temple?

Did you find your key?’ Everyone observes his right hand involuntarily reach

inside his coat. Disbelief fills his face.

‘How did you know about that? No one knew.

Except...’ He stares wide. Azra nods. ‘Ah, yes,

how is Nikolina? She is my daughter,

though of course, how could you know. I am sorry

she gave you so much anguish. Always was

a wayward child. So sweet, when things go right,

though she often doesn’t see it that way.

Still, your key is sure to help us all later.’

Remesh ignores Azra and hunches deeper

into his seat, face twitching, eyes blank-staring.

The white-haired man looks ahead. ‘Not long now.’

17. Broken Hope

The landscape they travel over is brittle,
as if a blast of steam has scalded it.

Only here and there a few ragged tufts

of grass or scraggy tree. No animals,
no birds, no habitations. Jessie wonders
about this change from other places seen.

She asks Azra. 'Thexlan has become barren,'
he replies. 'Or maybe it's our own minds
that are bleak, in fallow, Thexlan as bright,

as vibrant, as it always is.' He clicks
his tongue once more and Phaox picks up speed.
'All this to help us shift our pulse of soul.'

Jessie squints at him. 'I don't understand.'
Azra smiles. 'It's simple, as are all wisdoms.
Do you recall the day you went horse riding?'

Her father had sent her to study-camp,
but the last day, encouraged by her friend—
someone not from school, someone always known,

someone holding her hand after the beatings,
someone always telling fantastic stories
those cold nights her thin blankets weren't enough,

always showing her magic tricks, and always
telling her to listen to her own song—
she sneaked out to visit a riding school.

'Remember how you were scared, and the horse,
named after a great female warrior,
knew your fear, as all creatures can, and wouldn't

obey your commands. It was only when
you relaxed, when you forgot everything
but feel of leather reins woven through fingers

and ease of body in saddle and stirrup,
dropping the heels, cocking the wrists, when you
gave her one last pat on her neck, spoke softly

but firmly, when you kicked her flanks, leaned forward,
only then did your ride truly begin,
a revel of movement, from walk to trot,

canter to gallop, wind pluming your hair
and the horse's mane, your laughter, its whinny,
indistinguishable, and when you stopped,

those flanks sweaty, those muscles full of fire,
exhilaration like breathing all worlds,
only then did you recall who you are.'

Jessie doesn't know she has closed her eyes
till Azra stops talking, pulls back the reins,
then whispers: 'Here we are. My humble home.'

She opens her eyes. Although it is still
morning, dark tumbleweed clouds fill the sky,
the land a shifting patchwork of their shadows,

except in one valley fountained with light.
Azra waves his hand. The blaze vanishes,
leaving behind a ruddy flickering.

A few strides downhill shows the travellers
that Azra's abode is of dimpled glass,
which glow-prisms the small fire at its centre.

In answer to Zane's raised eyebrows about the earlier radiance, Azra says, 'A little trick to avoid getting lost.'

The next shock comes after they disembark and start walking towards the house, its walls made of bottles of all shapes, colours, lengths,

stacked orderly one on top of another, the chimney the neck of a huge decanter. The door is made of heavy slabs of driftwood.

'Welcome,' Azra says as he pulls the latch. 'Given the look of the weather, we may have to remain here till tomorrow morning.

Come, come, it's cosy. I'll make us some tea.' Walking on a thick, woven hallway runner, they file past coat-rack, wooden cabinets,

then enter the middle room, which is furnished liberally with cushions, couches, low tables, the small fire casting soft encouragement.

Jessie strolls about the room and examines the bottles in its walls, some crudely blown, with misshapen knobs or twisted flaws, some

designed with whorls and other complex shapes embedded in glass, crystal, or clear metal. Most contain furred pages just as diverse.

Azra appears beside her, air of teacher with student. 'Ah, you've noticed my collection. Do you remember now?' She props herself

against a wall as her mind reels with sudden
recollection: sand grinding skin between
her toes, in crotch, under arms, anywhere

clothes rubbed against delicate skin, red now
even with protection of hat, long sleeves,
cream; her tears when skin soon peeled, when her father

admonished her mother for this one picnic,
this one solace for lack of summer thrill,
for any thrill other than Sunday School.

She remembers playing with a girl. Jenny.
They dug holes in the wet sand, made tall castles
like those summoned from dreams, driftwood drawbridges

and buttresses, seaweed for flags, shell windows,
a sprig of blade grass for the magic tree
set in the middle of the inner ward.

She sniffles as he hands her a green bottle.
'Do you remember what the message said?'
She shakes her head as she takes out a scrap

of newspaper with crayon scrawl: 'My father
will kill my mother and me. I'm trapped. Please
help us. Miss Jessica D Willis. Please.'

But where is the other note? It was Jenny's
idea when they found the bottle in seaweed,
to scribble secret messages behind

bushes so Jessie's mother would not see.
Was she the same friend at the riding club
years later? Why had Jenny disappeared?

She wipes her eyes, glances around the room,
but no one seems to have noticed her anguish,
or are leaving it to their host to handle.

She turns to him, is momentarily
disarmed by the clear, firm gaze he gives her,
his lambent eyes almost all pupil, iris

a fine ring of vibrant green. 'Who are you?'
He bows slightly. 'Simple enough, young Jessie.
I am an answerer of messages.

I find them on the shoreline where I rummage
for supplies, and whenever one tells me
of need, I open the bottle, and help.

You do need help, don't you?' She turns on him,
rage rupturing her features, her mouth working
but no words coming for some seconds, till

she squeezes her temples, and takes a breath.
'I needed it back then. Where was your help?
My father yelled at us, beat us, drove us

into silence and despair, never stopped.'
Her words spew out, her hands beat at the air.
'I was trapped.' She crumples against the wall.

Azra's lustrous eyes fill with moisture. 'Not
totally. You sent a message.' She stares
at him in shock. 'Out of sheer desperation.'

He dips his head, as in partial agreement,
then adds, 'More out of hope. And it was answered.
You do remember who helped you write it?'

She gapes at him. 'No, not me. I am never that young, that gender. Not my path, my role. But you'll recognise her. If not already.'

Remesh coughs. 'What is he talking about?' Jessie throws down the bottle, stares at it when it bounces but does not break, and rushes

outside. Zane makes to go after her, but Azra holds him back. 'Let her go. This world is not easy even for those from here

or from Ghajat, which is closer to Thexlan than her world. We all need time to adjust. Thankfully, we have plenty of it here.'

He turns his attention to Remesh. 'Now, tell me about my daughter.' The man squirms, then points to Zane, who is sniffing the air.

'What's wrong?' Azra asks him. The Dremaan drifts around the room, his head at a slight angle, his eyes narrowed. 'I feel great power here.'

Azra gestures outside his home. 'The storm. It means a darkness drawing near its peak. Which is why we came back here. When it fades,

we can be on our way.' Zane sniffs again. 'Not that. Something much closer. In this room.' Azra nods. 'I wasn't sure you were ready.'

He ransacks a corner filled with tea-chests, broken furniture, sailcloth, coils of rope, lanterns and spars. He extracts a long object

wrapped in waterproof cloth and tied with hemp.
He hands it to the Dremaan. 'This is yours.'
Zane receives it with both hands, and a look

between recoil and hope, then holds it high,
a votive offering of last resort.
With one sharp tug the bindings fall away.

He unfolds the crinkled material
to reveal a matt black metallic scabbard
inscribed with silver runes, sigils and signs

Jessie would identify as belonging
to traditions distant in time and place,
though the sword hilt is fashioned like a creature

no traditions would have seen, eagle wings,
bull head, leonine body, pommel ring—
set between the bull's curvaceous horns—empty.

'This can't be mine. I don't recall such metal,
such symbols, such workmanship, in Ghajat.'
'You won't know unless you look,' Azra says.

As Zane grasps the hilt his countenance brightens
with anticipation. The sword emerges
smoothly, then his elegant action falters:

the bottom third of the weapon is missing,
broken slantwise across the crystal blade,
which is etched with similar scripts, and which

reflects firelight into bursts of spark-gleams.
Zane's shoulders slump. 'I was hoping this time...'
Azra gestures for him to sheath the weapon.

‘That task awaits you. Why else are you here?’
 Zane straps the scabbard to his back. ‘To master
 everything.’ The man squeezes Zane’s right arm.

‘That is always your mistake. Now, Remesh,’
 he returns to the tea, ‘I hope you’re done
 with distracting me. Zane, please bring in Jessie.’

Jessie does not answer when Zane calls her.
 He widens his sight and sees a dim form
 sitting at the base of a cypress tree.

He walks over and sits beside her. ‘Nothing’s
 the same here,’ she says. ‘This tree is not like
 those I climbed or hugged when I was upset,

not like the ones I saved against the merchants
 who did not care that the forest took decades
 to recover, who only cared for money.

I hugged this tree and felt nothing. No judder
 of recognition. No aura of life
 flowing from crown to tap-root, back again.’

She slams her palm against the wood. ‘This tree
 is dead, even though there are leaves and catkins.
 I want to go back to my world. I want

to feel living bark against my cheek, see
 a caterpillar make its certain way
 to a kink in the wood where it can weave

its ribbed cocoon and await change to wings.
 This place has no soul. I...I have no soul.’
 She drops her head to her clasped bony knees.

Zane rests a hand on her back, strokes her lightly in clockwise spirals, more for the distraction than giving comfort. He doesn't know how.

'I don't understand this place,' Jessie says, still bent over. 'Maybe we're not meant to,' Zane replies, then wonders if his words are

a commentary on his own ambitions.

For an instant he thinks the sword vibrates in response to his words, to his own doubts,

but when he focuses on the sensation that is more like a tremor in the blood than the din of imminent storm, it withers.

Though her muscles are still tense, he stops rubbing. 'Let's go inside. Apparently Remesh has a story for us.' Her head droops lower.

'I'm tired of these stories. They don't lead us anywhere. I want answers.' Zane finds himself nodding to her words. 'I agree.'

But maybe each tale holds a hint for each of us, especially if we believe its own truth.' He stands up, offers a hand.

'Besides'—he laughs—'what else is there to do?' She wriggles her back a little, ignores his hand and stands. 'I suppose you're right. Thanks.'

They wander back inside. Azra hands them an engraved china cup of steaming broth. Everyone sits down and waits for Remesh.

18. The Ice Temple

'When quite young, I had a recurring dream
of long wood-nails spewing out of my mouth.
There was no pain. I opened my mouth further,

spat-pulled them, anything to help the flow,
for I felt a desperation to speak.

By the time the nails made a pile as big

as I was, my mouth empty, I'd forgotten
the grand truth that needed to be revealed.

So then, I pushed a nail into my arm,

watched my flesh swallow it like a rock dropped
into a pool. Then another. Each nail
left behind a bruise, and I found myself

making patterns on my skin, knowing that
one day the nails would again fill my mouth,
and I was bound to do it all again,

until my body was all bruise, all nail.

I awoke with the urge to make those patterns
come alive, hoping the dream would then vanish.

I was an orphan sent to a new home
in a small country town where prejudice
was a blood transfusion given at birth.

My olive skin, dark hair and eyes, my status,
worked against me, through my schooling and after.

I was always in trouble. Then I met

Balis, the town's artist-savant, of sorts.

I followed him around and pestered him
till he began to teach me all he knew,

most of it laborious but essential:
how to draw from life, with life, how to shade,
how to size a raw canvas with at least

four layers of gesso, how to stretch it,
what oils and acrylics have what effects,
varnish depth, colour illusions and mix.

Finally, he gave me a brush, told me
to paint what it was I felt the whole world
should know, the one thing that was mine to say,

the one thing I would shout from a high rooftop
with everyone assembled before me.

The picture took me days and was quite crude,

a corpse with hundreds of nails sticking out,
point first, drenched in blood and gore, garish colours,
anatomy wrong, perspective askew,

but I was proud of the open eyes glazed,
not with death, but with some sort of dark longing
I felt deep within me. Balis was sickened.

He refused to teach me anything more.
He claimed the eyes were his. Maybe they were.
Maybe I had been studying his eyes,

as well as his brush work, all through my training,
brief though it was, for some clue to how one
conveys that insistent churning within.

I packed my gear and left. A few days later
he hanged himself. A strange pleasure filled me,
glee of irony, when I was informed

he hammered nails into his wrists to let
blood drain on a canvas spread on the floor
as he swung from the roof. That painting sold

to a collector who hung it beside
the preserved eviscerated remains
of a musician who had knifed herself.

For some reason I never found out, Balis
made me his heir, so the painting gave me
enough money to buy a city home.

I painted all day, partied all night, sought
inspiration in all illicit pleasures,
whatever could trigger that hidden dark.

The best place for parties was The Ice Temple,
owned by Nikolina. We became lovers
after I first went there, but never once

did I find out what I was searching for,
because I didn't know that I was searching,
until too late. All I wanted to do

was shock my peers and my buyers with more
and more depravity, debauchery.
My exploits fuelled the excesses on canvas,

bought by those in neat homes, who sought confinement
of their own murky chasms in a style
where cure is a prudent trophy of pain.

My taste was much purer. The only painting
I could allow into my living space
was a splurge of colour that formed a flower

from one angle, simple, delicate brushstrokes,
hidden heart in its corolla, a thing
with wings from another angle, mere clouds

when you looked at it from the front. I always
wanted to know where Balis found that one—
He was too rigid to ever paint it.’

As Remesh rubs his forehead, his sleeves fall
from his arms. Jessie notes again the network
of pale scars she’d seen when massaging him.

Rynobar too notices the scar tissue,
wonders why man and society could
inflict such self-disfigurement, and doubts

that such a world could ever survive long
under rampant elevation of self
that is in truth a denial of self.

Zane is too busy stirring his cup while
striving to judge the truth or otherwise
of Remesh’s tale, to notice the scars.

A crack of thunder overhead, and all
realize the roof is not made of glass,
but wooden shingles, from flotsam and jetsam.

Zane can sense the cloud turbulence above,
and squirms a moment, distant intuition,
as if the coming storm and he were one,

as if he and the storm’s focus were one,
as if the roiling in his belly were
always smouldering there, so deep, so patient.

His being seeks some still point above him,
within him, two savage eddies, one link,
one pinpoint of rest that contains another

much deeper yet much wider, like one looking
at the surface of a lake from the bottom,
watching a bubble rise, widen, then burst

as it reaches the surface. Zane's absorption
bursts at the same time and he finds himself
watching Remesh drop his hands and continue.

'Nikolina was dark, lissom, petite,
yet so strong a presence that none who entered
The Ice Temple dared stray outside her guidelines.

Not that she left much. All manner of vice
was allowed in the back, except the use
of children. She even had her own brood,

those belonging to clients who had died,
their own hands or others', deliberate
or accidental, didn't really matter,

with authorities too corrupt themselves
to worry. She lavished gifts and attention
beyond that of a doting mother. All

else was allowed between those who consented.
The stale public danced and whispered amongst
themselves about what they imagined happened

behind the saloon mirrors, all the time
never seeing their true images in
those mirrors. What went on was always worse

than they imagined. Nikolina, dressed
in shimmering white every night, her black
hair flowing like an outpouring of grief,

a long cigarette holder in her hand
that the audience never saw her use
but imagined uses for anything

but smoking. It was a prop, a prompt only.
She knew how to play her public. The dancing
never stopped, the intoxicating potions

never stopped, the whispering never stopped.
Now and then a lucky reveller saw
what went on behind the glass. Now and then

one would never return and no one asked
about them again. Now and then we moved
amongst our patrons and they touched our hems.

I loved her. The more I loved her, the less
I painted. The more I loved her, the less
she saw me. The less I painted, the more

degenerate my acts inside the club,
the mutilations, the humiliations,
multiple partners, the licking of lesions

caused by lash, cane and rack, the proud decline
to less than beast, the succour of submersion
into blind thrust and scream. Yet always part

of me wanted to know why she cared only
for the lost children. I didn't need to
know the reasons for her depravity.

They were mine also. The longing to say
to life there are no rules for happiness,
no punishments in an age where the ruling

gods were power and money. Death was always
an ending of all amusements, so make
fun while breath lasted. Yet I could not fathom

her concern for these children. The more questions
I put to her, the more she turned away.
With flesh and drugs I brought her back, for both

of us were addicted to that denial
of self-care the world instilled in us all,
all the better for material greed.

But always, though with increased subtlety,
I came back to my questions, of her childhood,
of her needs, of those children, of our needs.

Not one thing would she tell me, except that
The Ice Temple was so called for her heart,
cold, dead. Finally she discarded me.

I retreated to my loft and lost months
in stupor. I saw no one, barely ate,
did not paint. One day I pulled a nail out

of a wall and began to scrape my flesh.
The pain distracted me, yet also showed
how despair feeds itself, a rabid dog

chewing its own leg. The more I gouged flesh,
the more guilty I felt, yet could not stop.
Focus and release. Distraction and blame.'

He reaches into his pocket, then others,
 becomes frantic. Zane goes over to him,
 shows him the gift he received from the monk.

‘Is this what you’re looking for?’ Remesh nods,
 then asks: ‘Where did you find it?’ Zane just shrugs.
 ‘On my travels. Thexlan has many wonders.’

As Remesh turns the nail over and over,
 he wonders how he could have carried it
 through death anyway. He looks up again.

‘Then one day I saw my brushes, decided
 on a self-portrait. I thought of that first
 surreal corpse, shuddered. I painted a tulip

in a halo of smoky dusk, called it
Nikolina. Then a chrysanthemum,
 also suffused with smoky light. And others,

all titled *Nikolina*. Nine days later
 I heard The Ice Temple had been burnt down,
 and *Nikolina* and her children killed.

The fire happened the day I started painting.
 There were rumours she lit the flames herself.
 I’m certain she would not have harmed her children,

unless to save them from the world. Each painting
 after I called *Nikolina and Child*.
 No one bought any, but I didn’t care.’

He looks at the nail one last time, puts it
 in his pocket, then gives a hearty laugh
 that draws a thunder-echo from above.

19. Above the Abyss

Remesh sees Azra staring back at him.
 ‘So how can Nikolina be your daughter
 when I invented her for this performance?’

The old wizard waves his hand in dismissal.
 ‘We both know the answer to that, my friend.
 You have the story you must tell yourself.’

The painter leans towards him. ‘What’s your story?
 Why this house of bottles? How is she more
 than a character in a mad man’s tale?’

Azra gives a wry grin. ‘Another time.’
 He turns to Zane. ‘This would be a good chance
 to hear the story of the broken sword.’

The Dremaan smiles. ‘Maybe another time,
 after I tell of my apprenticeship
 to Shultar.’ Jessie stares in disbelief.

‘The sorceress who had your sister killed?’
 He nods, gathers his breath, then looks around.
 ‘After my brothers let me go, the stench

of roasted flesh settling over the village
 like mud and detritus after lake flood,
 I gathered my fisher’s tools: knife, spear, rope,

the net that tangles gills, and sailed across
 the lake, not caring that the night was bright,
 that star-demons exist, that my wake was

phosphorescence arrowing shore to shore.
 I reached the landing of her keep. No one
 was there, no person, no spirit, no shadow.

I kicked open the door, announced my presence.
Laughter greeted me. Unseen hands threw me
against a wall, stretched me as on a rack,

disarmed me. Then she came into the room.

“You have the stupidity of your kinsmen,
yet I have always felt a rage that can

be channelled.” She put her face up to mine.

“What is it you wish?” Though her breath was sweet,
something underneath it reminded me

of the stench at the village, or a smell
one might expect within an ancient grave.

“Your death,” I answered. She sighed. “As I said,

just like the others. So predictable.”

She peered into my eyes. “We all die someday.

You will have it then. What else?” I stared back.

“My sister. She did not deserve to die.”

“We all deserve death, for why are we living?

You have much to learn.” She stood back and cocked

her head as she surveyed me for some time.

I was certain she could see my deep thoughts,
including those that come only in dreams.

“Yes,” she whispered, like a priestess who sways
before the swaying snake, then kisses it.

She slid beside me, leg entwining mine.

She placed her head on my chest and looked up,
eyes full of mischief I could barely fathom,
though my body knew much more than I did.

This seemed to please her as she trailed her fingers
up my inner thigh. So began my training.
Each day I would seek ways to murder her;

each day unseen servants would hinder me.
Weeks later I realized each defence
was handled with restraint—I felt the spirits

had been ordered not to harm me, though some
were gentle no matter how much I fought.
Not long after, I could tell each one by

their touch, though none could ever speak to me.
Each day, when I wasn't planning my next
attack, or executing it, or bearing

her punishments, Shultar was showing me
how to use imagination to harness
the energies of Es Xayim, the tree

of power that connects Ghajat to Thexlan
and forms the underbelly of Ghajat.
Each night she would visit me, restrain me,

show me the moist secrets woman entrusts
to man, which ennoble him to the point
he wishes no injury to his pleasure

except when it is her pleasure. Each day
I strove to kill her, each night, pleasure her.
Then came the day I tried to kill myself.

Shultar's castle was suspended above
the world's edge. Upon the outer rear wall
was a dead yew tree whose branches stretched over

the mist swirling from the abyss. I tied
a rope to a branch, climbed the battlements,
looked down through mist, shifting segments of black.

I thought of Kerrilea, failed revenge,
wondered if Shultar's servants would stop me,
would warn her. As I adjusted the noose

and stepped into space, softness brushed my face,
gentle like the caress a mother makes
when a child leaves home for renown and fortune.

I swung for an eternity. At times,
I choked as weight dragged me into the heaving
dark. But other times there was no sensation,

as though the abyss were light lifting me
to light, like a note of music ascending
from a bird's throat and joining every note

sung or played or imagined within speech.
Soon these moments wove in-out of each other
and I began to fade, as if the world

were a sand painting I was brushing clear.
Suddenly through the mist I saw a face—
Zane gapes at Jessie, pupils wide with shock.

'Your face. Scarlet-puffy from tears and effort.
Eyes that flashed happiness and hidden grief
as you looked at your swaddled newborn child.

Then you turned to me and said, "Only you
can save our daughter. Follow your song-spark
to the core of its fate and save us all."

Somehow I swung back to the battlements,
found myself lying on the ground, the rope
loose around my neck. I was lifted by

those unseen hands, whose voices I could hear
for the first time, and taken to my room.
As I lay there, the vision fading quickly,

I vowed I would no longer be a slave
to anyone, would be master of all.
And now I had a plan for my revenge.'

Remesh starts clapping. 'Splendid tale. Nice touch
with the vision, though we can disprove it.
Jessie, have you ever seen Zane before?'

She paces the other side of the room
and throws her hands about, like one debating
with herself. 'I can't remember. I feel

there is subtle life in his words, a trace
of truth, but I can hardly grasp its end.
How can I know him? My world is not his.'

'Yes, but every world is a part of Thexlan,'
Zane says. 'And links can be forged between them.
To you, my dying may have been a dream,

just as your face and your words were a vision
to me. You saved my life, you set me on
my true path. Never again would I let

any world determine my fate. Suspended
above that void I saw nothing and knew
the only thing was what I made myself.'

Jessie gives a blank look. 'But I have never been pregnant. You've imagined the whole thing.'
Zane shakes his head. 'I saw you and the child.'

Maybe the scene was a dream you were having.'
Rynobar laughs. 'Or an event that will happen.' They turn to her. 'What do you mean?'

The *hoya* leans forward. 'If time does not really exist, then both tales can be true.
For Zane, his death attempt is in his past.'

For Jessie, the child may be in her future.'
The pale woman's gestures of puzzlement are more frantic. 'I can't avoid the view

there is truth in Zane's depiction.' The *hoya* nods several times. 'Your intuition, then, that sense of patterns underlying all.'

But Jessie isn't listening. She hunches in her chair and stares at the fire. Zane takes a step towards her and she huddles further

into herself. He stands back and stares also at the flames, which, in their constant sway-flicker, their flare and furrow, their sliding fuse-colours,

like storm clouds erupting through one another, remind him of the billowing effusions in the shapeless void beneath Shultar's castle.

A rattle of windows and Azra's ravens appear. Their cawing is so loud, each bottle begins vibrating in response, the pieces

of paper within them contorting wildly.
Azra leaps from his chair, listens intently,
then urges everyone to run outside.

‘The storm has become a much darker thing,
a peril we’re not yet ready to meet.’
Soon Phaox is taking them down a lane

as Azra directs the creature to follow
the direction of the ravens, which is
away from their path earlier that day.

Jessie looks back, is stunned to see a dark
swirling mass near the distant road—the thing
widens as it moves, and slows as it widens.

Its smoky tentacles search every hollow
of the landscape, and then the roiling darkness
reaches Azra’s house. It heaves itself into

a towering mass of flickering lightning.
It stiffens, and Jessie holds her breath as
a tendril pokes the grounds about the house.

Then the dark mass hunches briefly before
launching itself along their trail. Its speed
increases as its bulk contracts and surges.

Hearing Azra’s calm commands to their steed,
Jessie squints against the wind of their flight
and glimpses a change in the landscape colour.

She sniffs and realizes they are heading
towards the sea. As Phaox charges round
a large hill, she makes out a ragged island

a little offshore. Azra nods to her.

‘If we reach that island we should be safe.’

His voice falters. ‘Though I would not go there

by choice. The endless Scylarii live there.

Let’s trust they are still sleeping, which they have since before they fashioned time, so some say.’

Jessie wants to say that she thought no one slept in Thexlan, but is distracted by a sound behind her. She thinks for a moment

the beast is baying as it gains on them, sees Zane standing near Phaox’s hindquarters. He is swinging the crystal sword in circles,

broken blade roaring like an angry bull and flare-pulsing with vivid energies. She wonders if the Dremaan’s exaltation

is feeding his sword, with it goading him in turn. She hears him chanting the same phrase over and over: ‘Time to fight for death.’

Phaox lurches abruptly and tilts forward. Grabbing the back of a seat, Jessie fears for Zane, but quickly notes how steady is

his battle stance, legs astride, knees and hips fluid poise to each lurch, tilt, heave and roll. She glances to the side and realizes

they are scrambling down a long, loose sand dune. Then Phaox stagger-slows. The shadow’s tendrils has snaked ahead of the body and latched

onto Phaox's tail. Zane chops at it
with his sword, while chanting another song.
His left hand is shaped like a tiger's claw

and it begins to glow with dazzling spikes
of scarlet energy. He casts his hand
forward and a ball of light speeds to where

the tendril joins the body. At the same
time the energy ball strikes, he chops downwards
with all his strength and the tendril breaks off.

Phaox lurches forward, front legs already
in the ocean. A second tendril slithers
towards them, but Zane is ready this time.

The tendril dodges his lightning spell, but
the delay gives Azra time to urge Phaox
across the channel and up a rock slope

to where it can settle on a wide ledge.
Then a huge wave slides sideways from the sea
and mounts the beach towards the pulsing shadow,

which shrieks, shrinks away, slithers to the base
of the dunes, settles like a massive watchdog,
with its heaving-pulsations, steady panting,

its crimson flickerings, hypnotic gaze.
Though the creature makes no sound, all of them
can feel a fierce howling inside their heads.

20. To Meddle

Jessie turns to Azra. 'What is that thing?'
The wizard climbs down from the pannier
to inspect Phaox's wounds. He is worried.

The mount is panting and shivering wildly.
Its skin colour, too, has faded, the tendrils
having drained some spirit as well as blood.

He strokes Phaox between its eyes and whispers
a spell of healing. The mount's eyelids droop
and the body sags into a deep sleep.

'We are stuck here until Phaox recovers.'
Zane pokes his shoulder. 'What about that thing?'
Azra shrugs. 'I have seen nothing like it

during all my travels, though I have heard
of a thing called Abzzu, which is the shadow
of all shadows, if that is possible,

which I suppose it is, given that Thexlan
is the place where anything can exist.
Maybe pain summoned it to change through pain.'

Seconds later his ravens land near him.
He bends towards them, nods, looks at the others,
takes out a small parcel tied with silk scarf.

He unwraps a deck of cards, shuffles it,
turns over the top card, which shows a dragon
fanning its wings of flame into a cave.

He grimaces, returns it to the deck,
which he wraps and places back in his coat.
'So you know what thing has been hounding you.'

Zane surveys the faces of his companions
and takes charge. 'We have had hints, vague encounters,
but nothing certain. We don't know as yet

if that thing is what we saw in our visions,
nor why anything would be chasing us.'
He pats his sword. 'But we can handle it.'

Azra sighs and points at the pulsing mass.
'That thing is both more than can ever be
known and as simple as false memories.'

For the first time since they began their flight,
Rynobar makes her presence known. 'So why
flee a shadow we never knew we had?'

Jessie remembers the blankness that smothered
her near the gate into the cemetery.
'We can only embrace what we are able

to suffer with understanding. We flee
because we fear.' Remesh looks to where Zane
is now crouching on the rock ledge, gaze locked

with the flame-torn creature. 'Maybe because
we only find bliss in conflict, the quest
for mastery of all that's around us.'

Jessie follows the painter's look and has
to admit Zane's aura is glowing more
than it has since the clash within the maze.

Who else is impulsive enough to summon
such a monster? Then she recalls what Azra
had said earlier. 'Who are the Scylarii?'

His face pales. 'Their progeny are what our nightmares experience when they have nightmares. They were, will be, before us, after us.'

Thexlan is home to other destinies than the human. The Scylarii are best met in sleep, for we can always awaken.'

Jessie sits down. 'Why do they sleep? I thought nothing slept here.' The old man pats his steed. 'Because it's not their time.' He checks its wounds.

'Some say their dreams are what we live in Thexlan. Should they waken, we may vanish. Not something I would like to test.' Jessie nods agreement.

'We can't stay here forever,' Remesh says. 'I know,' Azra answers, 'but I can't see a way to escape.' The painter slaps Phaox

and queries with lifted eyebrow. 'The ocean is too deep for it to swim. Maybe one or all of us will have to face that shadow.'

No one hears Zane climb back on board. 'There is another way. I know of the Scylarii. They have wings.' Azra stares in disbelief:

'We'd be mad to wake even one of them.' Zane turns his palms. 'I don't intend to wake anything. All creatures move during sleep:

the dog, with its twitching legs, chases cats. We need only feed the beast the right dream and it will fly us far away from Abzzu.'

‘That thing needs to be faced,’ Azra declares.
‘Instead, you meddle in matters with cosmic
consequences.’ Zane shrugs. ‘Not the first time.’

All through their argument, and after, Jessie
is studying the shadow mass. She notes
how a ripple travels from end to end,

regular intervals, how ligatures
of lightning play about it in a rhythm
faster than each ripple, yet tuned to it.

She notes the colour is never consistent,
but varies with each pulse, much like a fish
changing colour when it fins along or

when wavelets change angle and depth of viewing.
The creature seems a huge, smoky snake crackling
with hidden energies and blazing skin.

Jessie remembers sitting in the crook
of her tree and glimpsing a black snake settle
in a coil where she climbed the trunk each day.

She watched it for hours, as sun dropped behind
cloudbank and surrounding peaks. Soon she started
to shake with cold as well as fear, but knew

the cold would affect the snake even more
than it would her. When it was almost dark
she inched down the trunk towards it. She held

a cluster of seed-pods she meant to use
for distraction if the creature awoke.
When only a few feet away, she saw

the snake open its eyes and regard her.
There was no malevolence in those slits,
just curiosity. She threw the pods.

The snake raised its pale brown snout, made loud hisses
in short bursts, flattened its neck and forebody
towards the ground in slow, sinuous waves,

then settled back. She waited a few minutes
then threw the rest of her pods. This time, nothing.
She scrambled along a branch opposite

the snake. She swung herself down, almost screeched
when the branch dipped, held, dipped more. As she swayed,
the snake uncoiled itself and rippled through

the grass, its path directly beneath her.
The branch creaked again and dropped a few inches.
There was a crack. The branch dropped even more.

Then her hands could no longer hold. She couldn't
see if the snake had gone or not. She let
go and jumped sideways once her bare feet touched

the uneven ground. Landing on her belly,
she looked up to see the tail of the snake
twitch once and disappear into the bush.