



# Of the Hyphen

(between I and Thou)

Rogan Wolf

*The eight poems which follow were suggested by a book called "I and Thou" by the theologian Martin Buber. The book contrasts two ways of relating, I-Thou and I-It. Both ways are seen as valid but to experience Truth, I must be in "I - Thou" mode. In this way, I experience you directly and in full as having as vital and central a life as I, though different. I place myself in our being connected, your matter being my matter also, our differences vital for our connection to be real. In the I - It mode, I hold myself back in rational detachment and/or evaluation and/or ego-centrality ; in effect, I look out on you as simply the object of my attention, I at centre, you outside.*

*The poems suggest that, in a rushing world, where shapes which once seemed firm and distinct are now blurred and insubstantial, where supports which once held steady and felt containing no longer even hold together, it becomes ever more tempting to retreat into the I-It mode of operating in every circumstance, in order to distance oneself from the discomfort of uncertainty. Paradoxically and at the same time, the only true ground that remains to us is the unsafe hyphen which connects Me to Thee. We must learn to ride this hyphen. We must learn to fly it. We must learn to follow where connection leads us.*

## The Hyphen as Ground

This bridging of stale arguments

twin borrowings of stray mass  
raw and rootless  
tenants of the air

this bare scratch

so quick so featureless  
but denoting an effort that has no end  
towards connection

this hairline crack -

carries all the furies of the universe  
all the colours ever arrived at  
every sound that can be made.

Ourselves serve as shadows only  
sagging rinds.

It is here between us that all our life is -  
this hyphen our ground.

All we can be  
belongs here.

## Riding the Hyphen

Through the débris we ride our hyphen  
our kite in the hurricane  
our dry leaf on the last day

Unnameable fragments swirl about our ears  
and rage unanswerable  
and pain unhealable and unredeemable

Through the débris we ride our hyphen  
our kite in the hurricane  
our dry leaf on the last day

What would you bid for a berth on the Ark  
for a last communion in the whole aching night  
where there's warmth and trust and a roof above your head  
as the world of our failure is unmade ?

Unnameable fragments swirl about our ears  
and rage unanswerable  
and pain unhealable and unredeemable.

Through the débris we ride our hyphen  
our kite in the hurricane  
our dry leaf on the last day.

## Barring the Hyphen

In all the universe  
nowhere to stand  
bar a hyphen.

Riding the hyphen through chaos  
I know I am safe  
so long as my footing holds.

The hyphen flutters  
it bends  
it ripples through the storm

but it does not break.  
Only I shall break.  
I cling to the hyphen

for my dear life  
since nothing hangs together now  
that can break my fall.

Together we swirl  
I and this hyphen  
weightless through the storm.

In all the universe  
nowhere to stand  
barring our hyphen.

## Negotiation

Lost among glimpses  
among surfaces among scatterings  
at loose within the leaping disasters  
of an immeasurable universe

we are the makers  
of our own safe ground  
the stillness upon which we stand  
is all ours to build.

Like a climber who negotiates  
the overhang  
I carry my footholds  
the footholds which only I can construct  
are all that preserve me.  
In view of my exposure, however,  
I must also attend to the rock  
I owe it to myself  
to take care  
of the edges I hang from.

The fact of my knowledge of you  
is far more a certainty  
than the fact of me.  
While I and you are both  
dying speedily  
the fact of our knowledge  
of one another  
is eternal. Alone  
in the flood and ferment  
it stands -  
a lasting and valid  
human construction.

Let my ground be sinuous  
and easily repairable

let it cut the air without fuss  
singing like a fine blade

let my ground be roomy  
for wise and kind company

let it resonate accurately  
to music as true music happens

let it carry me with tolerance  
for my carelessness my hatreds my greed

let it uphold me for just long enough  
for me to see ground for my children

Let our ground be fit  
to carry our children.

*January 1994*

## Questions of Space

I have these questions of space,  
searching -  
where in reality do we matter ?

What quick points in the universe  
contain our preciousness ?  
Where in truth

is the ground of our being ?  
Here above my feet  
and within my one skin

here in the wonder of my singleness  
I rot, I wither, I break.  
Here where I pace my parameters

through day after day of steeled vigilance,  
I have created nothing but a circuit of fear  
hollow and fathomless ;

and I gaze out  
over the wastes that surround me  
and there too only my fear flourishes

hastening against me  
easing its way over the passes  
flickering between the leafless trees.

I have made my flesh a fixed barricade  
and my house a solitary tower  
and for years I have toyed with images



of vast actions and the world's applause ;  
I have insured myself  
against my humanity ;

I have made securing myself  
my life's work ;  
all I have made

is void.  
Then a friend passed by  
a jester sharp-eyed

and said :  
“In our presumption  
we few

have set ourselves up  
to celebrate the space  
where care is.

We wish to make precious  
the connecting air  
*between* you and I

where both are concerned with meeting.  
We can say with some confidence now  
that to make precious the space between us

is humanity's last hope.  
Our medium is diamonds  
if only we will shape them.”

So now I'll chance an answer  
to my life's questions :  
all that matters of me

resides *outside* my skin ;  
all of me that will ever count  
is what I am willing to pass on ;

I am a point of unmeaning  
filling a skin for one season ;  
it is the *meeting - points*

of my story  
that will mark my value  
and affirm my actuality.

*December 1994*

# Landsurfing

*for Oliver, who surfs*

This morning the way seemed clear  
and even the sky free from clutter  
the whole Earth briefly clean-cut

its edges and surfaces  
glistening in the weak sun  
as if only this moment

made new and entire -  
too young for ugliness,  
worth staying on for...

If I take to surfing  
I shall learn about breakers  
and slide along the coil of them

poised as a dancer  
on the pure edge of ruin.  
I wish to give glory just to survival

to the instant of pure placing  
and shimmering through.  
Show me a kite

and I'm bound to ride it  
the flimsiest hyphen  
will do for a trapeze.

The Earth is made raw  
goaded past endurance  
and none bar the surfer

will survive its onslaught  
leaping the crazed beast  
as it rages and grieves

in some ancient dance  
of despairing beauty  
for there's nothing left

to follow now  
but the wild wild blue.  
I shall learn to land-surf

to keep my feet  
all I can claim of the world  
is here to feet.

The city heaves and buckles  
squealing and trumpeting  
gathering pace

it hastens me  
it drives me forward  
it tunnels me like a curling wave.

Let me not stumble  
let me keep my feet  
let me ride it through

let my little board  
dash me  
steadily through.

## Lines which break

A skill we are bound to practice  
with pure and constant attention :  
the skill of travelling  
upon lines which break.

Irresistable force  
you ride at all costs ;  
you do not *meet* a wave breaking -  
you *slide* along it.

Let's just say there's no  
world left let's just say  
that nothing remains to us  
but the blur and frenzy of stray edges :

in the midst of disaster  
the course is simple -  
to ride with precision  
the line which breaks.

*June 1995*

## Loitering

Here I loiter, with kindly intent,  
tip-toeing from fragment to fragment,  
stray world to stray world.

I believe today I almost met someone.  
For just a few moments, possibly,  
the whirring edge of me  
disturbed some surface of attention.

Perhaps in time I'll risk being still enough  
actually to meet a whole person.  
I wonder would either of us survive  
the awe and enormity of true encounter.

I loiter here between lines of thunder  
poised for the sudden break  
the momentary opening  
my own hushed moment of interruption.

I must learn to do without lines.  
As soon as a line is drawn  
defeat there becomes possible  
and even perhaps significant.

There is no excuse for defeat  
and significance is wasted there.  
To be invincible  
you need do nothing  
but dance at all times.

I must learn to loiter  
lightly and with precision,  
poised for flight.

If I am light enough  
you cannot throw me down.  
If I laugh with sufficient joy  
you cannot shame or break me  
halt or silence me.

I loiter here in my fragility  
quick to respond to stray invitations  
to meet, just for a moment,  
in some carefully scouted side street café.  
What need of secret police  
when fear seeps  
like a poisonous cloud  
through every door ?

How can we plan the way to save ourselves  
when we cannot even place in words  
the value of our distress ?

I loiter here with healing intent  
tip-toeing from fragment to  
fragment, stray  
world to stray world.

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