



Poems
for the Campaign

by Rogan Wolf

Spring/Summer 2017

Introduction

The UK General Election of 2017 was called by the Prime Minister Theresa May straight after a walking holiday in the mountains. Away she had strode, wielding her sticks, and there was no election in sight. Days passed. Then down from the mountain mists she hove into our ken again and, suddenly, there it was.

She caught everyone by surprise with that decision and of course she intended and assumed that an election now would increase the Tory (and Brexit) majority. But she was wrong. The Tory majority was severely reduced, with Labour under Corbyn doing unexpectedly well.

Under the national headline of that result, a more local event took place which was almost as dramatic. In the constituency of Bristol West, the sitting Labour MP Thangam Debbonaire vastly increased her already large majority to 37,336.

As a constituent, I offered Thangam Debbonaire and her team a poem for each day of the election campaign, delivered by email. To encourage eager hearts and foot-soles. Poems for the campaign. Did the poems help ? Maybe a bit, in some fashion that cannot and should not be measured.

Afterwards, informally, Thangam appointed me a team member. Poetry belongs in politics, doesn't it ?

If I am already broken

If I am already broken
then I can
be infinitely *light*
and need not fear
the loss of carapace,
or ties, or mooring rope.

If I am already broken
I can travel far, untraceable,
and I'm almost impossible to stop.

If I am already broken
I am almost unbreakable
and like a dandelion seed
almost impossible to stop.

May 2011

Words

What are words for ?
If to connect us
they have to be pristine
carriageways for truth-telling.
We have to tend and train our words
to be as sound and life-giving
as the Earth.

For like God
words stand at our mercy.
They can be twisted
to the vicious will,
turned
into mirrors of the corrupted self.

And those who would smash Creation
and burn and dismember our children
speak words
of terrible skill.

Summer 2015

The Magpie

People dying
learn suddenly to sing
rhapsodies steeped
in grief.

But dying is what
all of us are doing
all our lives and the rhapsodies I mean
seem to come in the last days
of dying, as if only then
do we finally wake up. So is life
mostly for sleeping? I look out
at bare trees this morning, the wet
on them shining, caught aslant
by the sun. A magpie flaps
busily across the open green
scattering water.

This is the magpie's moment.
So is the next.
It is early and still quiet.

January 2016

Dorset in view

From above, this region is a quilt
of all colours, covering a vast
and restless sleeper ; each week
the colours have shifted, wrapped
in season. No rest here. No pause.
The tractor driver spends all the daylight hours
and more, lonely in his cab, changing
a field's colour inch by inch, precisely
row by row. A young deer, ears up and pointed,
grazes watchfully nearby, safest
at centre, sharply in view.

October 2016

Sitting Out Riverside

A small bird holds
forth in the yard
this evening

clear in that bare tree,
thrush, I think. Early March -
not quite warm enough

for sitting out. The thrush is pouring
all it's ever been
into the sound it's making

now. The notes linger
in this place. And may
take passage home with me.

March 2006

Hawk at Shoulder

I'm perch for a hawk.
I conduct my business
at high speed
gripped at shoulder.
Hawk is fighting for balance
eyes aflame.
Anything might happen
if I pause.

October 2004

from Reflections upon Stone

(i)

The beach is all stones.
None of them know
their neighbour. Each one
is different. Some
I find beautiful. None
of them know it. None of them
know what is happening
around them.

(ii)

What if stones dream ?

Would they dream

in colour ?

Would their dreams reach

into memory ?

Do stones remember

the Creation ?

Was the Creation

colourful ?

(iii)

I have heard a stone sing.
Its song tore at me
like a vulture's beak
breaking me down
replacing me
with eternity.

(iv)

Stone has no conscience.
Through millions of years
of light and dark
stone has done nothing
of which to feel ashamed.

(v)

You kick stone
you spurn it
you skim it across flat water
like a speed boat.
Stone suffers
all your maltreatment.
It knows beyond doubt
no stone no you.
We are all made
from one dust.

(VI)

Stone lives without hope.

It lives with nothing
except slow wearing -
infinitely slow.

Stone has
no need of hope
but let its wearing
always be
infinitely slow.

(vii)

Consider the options :
strike down
the tribal demon
for at least a generation ;
travel a few feet
down the beach ;
or settle a millimetre
further into the sand.

(viii)

I have seen stone
grow smooth.
I am so old
it is unbearable.

Rogan Wolf
2005

from The Hyphen between I and Thou

(i)

Lost among glimpses
among surfaces
among scatterings,
at loose within the leaping bewilderments
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 footholds I hang from.

The fact of my knowledge of you
is far more a certainty
than the fact of me....

(ii)

...All that matters of me
resides *outside* my skin.

Here I am gossamer
an eye-lid's flicker

but where we meet
and what we make there

shall never leave the Earth.
We have to make precious

the space between us.
It is humanity's last hope.

Our medium is diamonds
if only we will shape them...

(iii)

All of me that will ever count
is what you make

of my surrender.
I am a space of unmeaning

filling a skin
for one shrill season ;

it is the *meeting - points*
of my story

that will mark my value
and affirm my actuality.

(iv)

...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...

(v)

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.

(vi)

...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.
For 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...

(vii)

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.

(viii)

...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...

Rogan Wolf
1995

Keeping Station

The late “Red Bishop” of Durham
proposed to several congregations
a new and active strategy for hope
and creation in the 3rd millennium.
He called it “Communities of Endurance.”
He meant that people who keep hearts open
in times of frenzy
are likely to find themselves outcasts -
a debilitating experience
the human race can ill afford.
The keeping station
the holding on
go better when you’re not alone.

1998 (revised 2016)

This is David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham during the Thatcher years. He was a vocal and eloquent critic of Thatcher’s politics and philosophy and was often derided as the “Red Bishop” in consequence.

Donald Reeves of St James's Piccadilly

From the pulpit of St James' Piccadilly
he harried old images back to life.
Families drove for miles from the suburbs
to place themselves in his communion.

Why blame God
for things that go wrong for us ?
he asked one Christmas.
See it the other way round - day and night
God is hanging from wrought nails
for our sakes.

When we succeed at last in destroying Creation
we shall relieve God of His suffering.

And Reeves called on us that Christmas –
don't look to the main squares
the established landmarks
the rush of functionaries under the lights.
The hope of the world wanders fugitive and fragile
in shadow
somewhere off.

Go there.
Give to it
all that is true in you.

February 2009

After his years as vicar of St James', Donald Reeves did mediation work in the Balkans.

The Red Kite

The motorway north stoops
on Oxford.

At 80 we plummet into the soft vale
of Middle Earth.

Precisely here above the streaming lanes
the red kite

forks and glories.

Perhaps it is watching us.

It does not know the precarious majesty
of its stalking of the hill.

We in our lanes
know well

our haste and high-powered littleness.

Beware the red kite

its steady eye.

It hovers with bewildering grace.

It bides its time.

May/June 05

Centaur

We laid him on his side
shining in the dim light

his vast head tipped
towards the crown of the slope

the curved fury of his thighs
flattening the rough gorse of the combe.

And we left him there as a memory
of the glory of it all

the thunder and joy
of the mornings on the downs

when the rhythm was all one
and my eyes saw only what his eyes saw

and our ears heard nothing
but the onward extacy of his hooves.

September 2011

The Blue Field

The swifts calmed me this evening
shrieking their ecstasy far up against the blue

and then some chugging insect passed
low across the same blue field

and then Flight 140
thundered overhead, heading for Heathrow

and I wondered
do any of these vibrant entities

these passing dots
against the blue

register
on the eye of their Creator ?

August 2009

Tawny

I ran the round of Richmond Park
one night - a seven mile circuit
of unlit grassland

set in South West 14.

There were trees as lonely as I
and deer which suddenly challenged

my blind way forward.

And then there were tawny owls
conversing from boundary to boundary

making this acreage their parlour
and filling it with the ecstasy
of their deathly sound.

They packed me home -
my ears filled with tawny
my eyes with a million stars.

March 2006

Red Squirrels on the Isle of Wight

The American grey squirrel was introduced into Britain in the nineteenth century. Since then, it has driven Britain's native red squirrel from much of England. However, the grey has not yet crossed the short distance from the mainland to the Isle of Wight...

Their “redness” is actually pale fox
their ears taller, more pointed than the grey.
“Greys don’t feature on this island,”
he said, with a meaningful look,
the young man serving in the fine foods shop
with local rabbit and pheasant for sale
(though remember “beware of shot”).

After the first scutter off the path
their silent game got the better of them
and they let me watch
them sprinting up and down the various sides
of trees just metres away. I shall soon be 60
60 and these the first I’d ever seen.
Praise be for their beauty and their play
secured by the chance of a ring of tides.

Autumn 2006

A place of calm waters

“Teach us to sit still” (T.S. Eliot)

We may yet learn to sit still
and the ferment fall back
and this frantic thunder of the blood
quieten and slow

and the landscape widen
and the walls stand away
and this place of calm waters
yield an echo.

October 2011

Siren Sounds

When no one can be trusted
or believed,

when language becomes
just siren sounds

of ill intent,
the word “honour”

rises from the dust
and from the pools of blood

and an honourable fool
staggers

through the empty forum.

July 2016

Word Play

May words work.
May mine
look you in the eye
and having found you out
work on you right there.

Fraud and felon play
with words, seeking
only to deceive and buy
and force you to their will.

I must work a cleaner way
my words releasing you
to where you belong.

Words must truth-tell
sound the soul
make us well.

September 2013

Reaching for words

Reaching for words
is like searching the Earth
for stones
and then shaping them
one after another
into a path.

September 2016

The Billionaire and the Hooligan

For years we've been in thrall
to the worshippers of "Me and Mine"
the billionaire and the hooligan
the lost and the malign.

And we have allowed
their lies and their betrayal
of the poor and frail.

And each day we've let them
feed and stir
our hatreds and our fear
and shrink us and divide us
and corrupt our language
of trust and truth
and steal all hope and future
from our youth.

Let's make a new start.
Brexit, avaunt.
Let's take back control.
Let's heal our nation' heart
Let's restore our nation's soul.

Rogan Wolf
Spring Summer 2017