**Slate**

**There is no beginning. We saw Lewis**

**laid down, when there was not much but thunder**

**and volcanic fires; watched long seas plunder**

**faults; laughed as Staffa cooled. Drumlins blue as**

**bruises were grated off like nutmegs; bens,**

**and a great glen, gave a rough back we like**

**to think the ages must streak, surely strike,**

**seldom stroke, but raised and shaken, with tens**

**of thousands of rains, blizzards, sea-poundings**

**shouldered off into night and memory.**

**Memory of men! That was to come. Great**

**in their empty hunger these surroundings**

**threw walls to the sky, the sorry glory**

**of a rainbow. Their heels kicked flint, chalk, slate.**

**Hyena**

I am waiting for you.

I have been travelling all morning through the bush

and not eaten.

I am lying at the edge of the bush

on a dusty path that leads from the burnt-out kraal.

I am panting, it is midday, I found no water-hole.

I am very fierce without food and although my eyes

are screwed to slits against the sun

you must believe I am prepared to spring.

What do you think of me?

I have a rough coat like Africa.

I am crafty with dark spots

like the bush-tufted plains of Africa.

I sprawl as a shaggy bundle of gathered energy

like Africa sprawling in its waters.

I trot, I lope, I slaver, I am a ranger.

I hunch my shoulders. I eat the dead.

Do you like my song?

When the moon pours hard and cold on the veldt

I sing, and I am the slave of darkness.

Over the stone walls and the mud walls and the ruined places

and the owls, the moonlight falls.

I sniff a broken drum. I bristle. My pelt is silver.

I howl my song to the moon – up it goes.

Would you meet me there in the waste places?

It is said I am a good match

for a dead lion. I put my muzzle

at his golden flanks, and tear. He

is my golden supper, but my tastes are easy.

I have a crowd of fangs, and I use them.

Oh and my tongue – do you like me

when it comes lolling out over my jaw

very long, and I am laughing?

I am not laughing.

But I am not snarling either, only

panting in the sun, showing you

what I grip

carrion with.

I am waiting

for the foot to slide,

for the heart to seize,

for the leaping sinews to go slack,

for the fight to the death to be fought to the death,

for a glazing eye and the rumour of blood.

I am crouching in my dry shadows

till you are ready for me.

My place is to pick you clean

and leave your bones to the wind.

**In the Snack-bar**

A cup capsizes along the formica,

slithering with a dull clatter.

A few heads turn in the crowded evening snack-bar.

An old man is trying to get to his feet

from the low round stool fixed to the floor.

Slowly he levers himself up, his hands have no power.

He is up as far as he can get. The dismal hump

looming over him forces his head down.

He stands in his stained beltless gaberdine

like a monstrous animal caught in a tent

in some story. He sways slightly,

the face not seen, bent down

in shadow under his cap.

Even on his feet he is staring at the floor

or would be, if he could see.

I notice now his stick, once painted white

but scuffed and muddy, hanging from his right arm.

Long blind, hunchback born, half paralysed

he stands

fumbling with the stick

and speaks:

‘I want – to go to the – toilet.’

It is down two flights of stairs, but we go.

I take his arm. ‘Give me – your arm – it’s better,’ he says.

Inch by inch we drift towards the stairs.

A few yards of floor are like a landscape

to be negotiated, in the slow setting out

time has almost stopped. I concentrate

my life to his: crunch of spilt sugar,

slidy puddle from the night’s umbrellas,

table edges, people’s feet,

hiss of the coffee-machine, voices and laughter,

smell of a cigar, hamburgers, wet coats steaming,

and the slow dangerous inches to the stairs.

I put his right hand on the rail

and take his stick. He clings to me. The stick

is in his left hand, probing the treads.

I guide his arm and tell him the steps.

And slowly we go down. And slowly we go down.

White tiles and mirrors at last. He shambles

uncouth into the clinical gleam.

I set him in position, stand behind him

and wait with his stick.

His brooding reflection darkens the mirror

but the trickle of his water is thin and slow,

an old man’s apology for living.

Painful ages to close his trousers and coat –

I do up the last buttons for him.

He asks doubtfully, ‘Can I – wash my hands?’

I fill the basin, clasp his soft fingers round the soap.

He washes, feebly, patiently. There is no towel.

I press the pedal of the drier, draw his hands

gently into the roar of the hot air.

But he cannot rub them together,

drags out a handkerchief to finish.

He is glad to leave the contraption, and face the stairs.

He climbs, and steadily enough.

He climbs, we climb. He climbs

with many pauses but with that one

persisting patience of the undefeated

which is the nature of man when all is said.

And slowly we go up. And slowly we go up.

The faltering, unfaltering steps

take him at last to the door

across that endless, yet not endless waste of floor.

I watch him helped on a bus. It shudders off in the rain.

The conductor bends to hear where he wants to go.

Wherever he could go it would be dark

and yet he must trust men.

Without embarrassment or shame

he must announce his most pitiful needs

in a public place. No one sees his face.

Does he know how frightening he is in his strangeness

under his mountainous coat, his hands like wet leaves

stuck to the half-white stick?

His life depends on many who would evade him.

But he cannot reckon up the chances,

having one thing to do,

to haul his blind hump through these rains of August.

Dear Christ, to be born for this!

**Good Friday**

Three o’clock. The bus lurches

round into the sun. ‘D’s this go –‘

he flops beside me – 'right along Bath Street?

- Oh tha's, tha's all right, see I've

got to get some Easter eggs for the kiddies.

I’ve had a wee drink, ye understand –

ye’ll maybe think it’s a – funny day

to be celebrating – well, no, but ye see

I wasny working, and I like to celebrate

when I’m no working – I don’t say it’s right

I'm no saying it's right, ye understand - ye understand?

But anyway tha’s the way I look at it –

I’m no boring you, eh? – ye see today,

take today, I don’t know what today’s in aid of,

whether Christ was – crucified or was he –

rose fae the dead like, see what I mean?

You’re an educatit man, you can tell me –

- Aye, well. There ye are. It’s been seen

time and again, the working man

has nae education, he jist canny – jist

hasny got it, know what I mean,

he’s jist bliddy ignorant – Christ aye,

bliddy ignorant. Well –' The bus brakes violently,

he lunges for the stair, swings down – off,

into the sun for his Easter eggs,

on very

nearly

steady

legs.

**Winter (EM)**

The year goes, the woods decay, and after,

many a summer dies. The swan

on Bingham’s pond, a ghost, comes and goes.

It goes, and ice appears, it holds,

bears gulls that stand around surprised,

blinking in the heavy light, bears boys

when skates take over swan-tracks gone.

After many summer dyes, the swan-white ice

glints only crystal beyond white. Even

dearest blue’s not there, though poets would find it.

I find one stark scene

cut by evening cries, by warring air.

The muffled hiss of blades escapes into breath,

hangs with it a moment, fades off.

Fades off, goes, the scene, the voices fade,

the line of trees, the woods that fall, decay

and break, the dark comes down, the shouts

run off into it and disappear.

At last the lamps go too, when fog

drives monstrous down the dual carriageway

out to the west, and even in my room

and on this paper I do not know

about that grey dead pane

of ice that sees nothing and that nothing sees.

**Trio**

Coming up Buchanan Street, quickly, on a sharp winter evening

a young man and two girls, under the Christmas lights –

The young man carries a new guitar in his arms,

the girl on the inside carries a very young baby,

and the girl on the outside carries a chihuahua.

And the three of them are laughing, their breath rises

in a cloud of happiness, and as they pass

the boy says, ‘Wait till he sees this but!’

The chihuahua has a tiny Royal Stewart tartan coat like a teapot-

holder,

the baby in its white shawl is all bright eyes and mouth like favours

in a fresh sweet cake,

the guitar swells out under its milky plastic cover, tied at the neck

with silver tinsel tape and a brisk sprig of mistletoe.

Orphean sprig! Melting baby! Warm chihuahua!

The vale of tears is powerless before you.

Whether Christ is born, or is not born, you

put paid to fate, it abdicates

under the Christmas lights.

Monsters of the year

go blank, are scattered back,

can’t bear this march of three.

– And the three have passed, vanished in the crowd

(yet not vanished, for in their arms they wind

the life of men and beasts, and music,

laughter ringing them round like a guard)

at the end of this winter’s day.