

# POEMS

IAIN BANKS  
AND  
KEN MACCLEOD



Little, Brown

LITTLE, BROWN

First published in Great Britain in 2015 by Little, Brown

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-4087-0587-2

Typeset in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Papers used by Little, Brown are from well-managed forests and other responsible sources.



MIX  
Little, Brown  
An imprint of  
Little, Brown Book Group  
100 Victoria Embankment  
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette UK Company  
www.hachette.co.uk  
www.littlebrown.co.uk

## Goddess on Our Side

Her nerves are cables, roads her veins;  
we are her cells, our cities flexed  
knots of muscle, wars her pains,  
voyaging probes her fingertips.

Her breath is whisper, clamour, text.  
Her dreams are shining silver ships.

Her thoughts are aeroplanes.

(1993)

## The Morlock's Arms

The wasps are big this year, the meteors  
green in the summer night. Our land  
ironclads are far away, our flying-machines  
visit atrocity on innocence. We do not care.  
This is the World State. We're a planet now.

Our empire was the sun,  
famine or fusillade its worst extreme,  
its best a world that turned  
on a war we fought, in the air.

And we're still here, in the light,  
we Morlocks, we whose corpses  
rotted conveniently in the cosy catastrophe,  
we feckless, toothless proles, feral cattle  
for whom entropy was never cool.

No Empire now, nor New Jerusalem,  
no Modern Utopia. Only the streets  
of Earth and England

and a sense of something about to happen.  
Because we never went away  
we will think of something  
in our own time, gentlemen. Please.

(2000)

## After Burns: 11 September 2002

An empty threat can empty skies:  
no contrail-crayon crosses  
that pale blue dome. But come on, guys!  
We can do better. Losses

are not made less but multiplied  
and fear's increased by flinches.  
We but dishonour those who died  
in dying ourselves by inches.

When in the daylight laws are made  
in halls that all may enter,  
there's light at night, a world of trade,  
a world where Man's the centre.

There is no God, and we must get  
our comfort where we find it:  
in the rising yell of a laden jet  
and a bright contrail behind it.

(2002)

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## One for the Carpenter

Happy birthday to you,  
Josh Davidson! Who-  
ever you were, you  
could never be nailed,  
planed, sanded, dove-tailed  
to cross or crib.  
Joiner, leader, agitator, king;  
teller and told in contrary  
stories; healer with a sword –  
here's a word in your ear:  
I wish you Merry Christmas  
and a Happy New Year.

Two thousand and three  
candles and counting:  
we can stop holding our breath:  
you're not coming back.  
But you're still here, walking  
in writing on water,  
in vexed texts talking  
at cross purposes.

Against the rough  
places, still not smooth,  
the high places, still not low  
still Mary's hand lights a candle: blow.

(2003)

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## Scots Poet, Not

I cannae write in Scots. It's no my tongue  
nor Gaelic neither. That option was foreclosed.  
My parents spake the Beurla in the hame  
tae break that chain while I wis young.

Alienation was a consequence  
and felt injustice an early rage.  
The sex, the sect, the colour of the skin  
in the licht of sin ground-in irrelevance.

Famine and eviction were an unsettled score.  
Eat up your food or you'll lick where it lay.  
Martyr and murderer, rebel and traitor  
were one in the Covenant, so ho whiggamore!

Tae see oorsels as wicked frae the start  
is greater gift than by the maist supposed.  
What was done to us, and what we did  
is worse by far than aught we proposed.

Thanks be to Knox and Calvin, we were rid  
of any hesitation of the heart.  
MacDiarmid and Maclean spake weel of Lenin.  
Them I cannae blame. It was a startt.

It stops wi me, like sae muckle else:  
the Gaelic and the Lallans and the name tae help,  
the wicked frae the start tae see oorsels,  
the Shorter Catechism and the skelp.

(2005)

Beurla (pronounced approximately *barr-la*): the English  
language  
whiggamore: Covenanter of 1648, reputedly from their cry  
while spurring their horses towards Edinburgh; hence also  
Whig.  
maist: most, majority  
muckle: much  
Lallans: Lowland Scots dialect  
skelp: slap

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## A Fertile Sea

*for Iain Banks  
who walked by sight*

### I. Waste Disposal

It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank  
clothed with many plants of many kinds  
birds singing in the bushes  
insects flitting about  
and to reflect  
that six separate safety checks  
were deliberately overridden  
we may look with some confidence  
to a secure future of great length.

We sat, you and I, and talked to her half the night  
drinking export and whisky and wine  
The smokes came like dogs, in packs, and were  
gone  
(but her hair was still there, curling around her  
face)  
She listened amused, unbelieving not what we said  
but that we said it. Orbital factories, asteroid  
mining,  
Apollo Soyuz, shuttles weaving  
emptiness into webs of electric speech

a Soviet America: take it either way, or both  
– freedom of choice, *da?* ‘You’re crazy, guys.’

The engineer, one of Zhukov’s men,  
was there when they took the camp.  
He told me what they found:  
conveyor belts  
powered by treadmills, rocket engines  
dragged along on sleds.  
Hurrying to the office, Herr von Braun  
didn’t see the hanged men every day.

We kissed her goodbye with the meter ticking

Stop the nuclear train  
It isn’t rain it’s fallout  
Nuclear waste fades your genes  
clear was our gen

from so simple a beginning, endless forms  
have been endowed by their creator with certain  
inalienable rights, among them  
Lakenheath, Tripoli, Benghazi  
what lies under the rubble, baby?  
OK THAT’S ENOUGH CUT  
ten seconds of tendril fingers clutching  
air shows lack of balance, lady.

‘I’m too old to die,’ she grinned  
as she powdered white her face (her hair  
would do as it was) and took her place  
carefully selecting a dry spot on the platform  
to lie down on, covered with a bin-sack

while I zipped into a rad-suit. A lovely girl  
Friend of the Earth smiled and gave me a bunch  
of leaflets. I waited nervously  
as the dark gathered. The crowds came in boxes of  
light  
spilling out on the platform, stepping carefully  
over the old comrades, the dead on leave  
while we sinister hooded figures  
stepped up and asked for their signatures.

## II. Arcadia Games

She swung in her Highbury hammock  
and brushed her metre-long red flag  
of hair as if it was an enemy. This is a rich room  
that makes no concessions  
to interior decorators. Polish embroideries,  
Russian scarves, posters from two decades,  
three continents. African masks, a low gas-fire,  
Lenin on the hearth, Marx  
and Madhur Jaffrey on the shelves.

'We stayed nine years in Prague.  
The first three  
were great, peace and socialism, yeah!  
The next three we began to see some problems  
and he'd come home in a sweat as if  
drenched with rain. It isn't that there's queues,  
just shortages.' She laughs. 'But then, for the last  
three  
we learned also what there's plenty of,  
and, let me tell you, it's damn scarce here.'

Yes, but will you take your card for another year?  
We went down to the pub to talk about it.  
She sank pints and smashed me  
at Asteroids, Pac-Man and Missile Command.

Turn off the aiming computer. Look.  
Here  
behind the irony curtain  
where everything has happened  
and nothing has changed.

Free to choose. Labour isn't working.  
Trust the Force. We are not listening,  
merely recording. Remain in your seats.  
The stars are your destiny, not your destination.  
The post-modern Prince has criticized  
the architecture of the Finland Station.  
Peace through mutual . . . let us here pause  
and consider the various (if ultimately  
harmonious, convergent, reinforcing)  
conclusions that succeeding  
idealists whose sincerity we do not for one  
moment  
impugn, would provide  
and (returning the debate to a serious level)  
proceed to . . . assured destruction.

From Plato to Nato, from Albert Speer to  
Albert Square, we have ways of keeping you quiet.  
Have you a bad memory? Let us help you forget.  
Don't die of ignorance. Why be alone?  
Have your Tarot read over the phone!  
(Interlude: white noise.)

We remind you to turn off your set.

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### III. Writing in Water

Firth, neither sea nor river,  
oh my Clyde you carry such a weight.  
The coracles are gone, the fishing-smacks, the  
merchant-  
ships, the rigs. Only the yachts and canoes,  
the tankers and the base remain;  
the heavy water and the hot metal.  
I feel that throw-weight on my back  
under the surface, of Cumberae.  
Refracted by water, air and glass  
the sunlight radiates, its centre everywhere  
my eyes can rest, its rim beyond  
where I can see. The snorkel stops  
my breath to save me -  
to gasp under water, and not to drown!  
Will you see any clearer from a glass shore?

I shrug on futures like old clothes,  
the uniforms of long-disbanded corps.  
Uninstructed, we defended  
our dishonoured republics. Our eyes stung  
to tear-gas in Baltic ports; we measured  
progress in yards. Naked, you outstrip me;  
scratch the surface: under the veneer  
of barbarism I'm a decadent sophisticate.  
You come with open eyes, I turn aside  
because behind those eyes a brain

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live



goes on working while my mind leaves  
like a flock of birds from a tree.

I saw you strong and free, like the future.

You saw  
what Althusser saw: the structures  
replicate across time like molecules in a cheap  
graphic.

You heard  
the silences, like Luria walking his wards  
of shattered veterans piecing worlds together.

You felt  
the strain of Maclean's grasp on the dock  
saying, 'I have squared my conduct with my  
intellect,'

or Gramsci and Galileo: '*E pur si muove*.'  
So for your weakness I have no aid, though from  
your strength

I've taken more than you'll ever know,  
or I can tell. As dawn displays  
the flag above the factory  
the world is back where it always was.

The day came when the soldiers went away.

The discotheque became a crèche.

Mrs Campbell had a lovely daughter,  
lost a son on San Carlos water.

Her daddy owned an aluminium smelter  
a Swiss account and a fallout shelter.

We fall back  
to the harder task  
of building love  
vaster than Internationals and more slow  
and with an engineer's exactitude  
an adequate instrument, ourselves.

#### IV. Challenger

Remember Komarov  
Remember Grisson, White, Chaffee  
Remember Dobrovolsky, Volkov, Patsayev  
Remember Resnick, Scobee, Smith, McNair,  
McAuliffe, Jarvis, Onizuka  
when you walk the sea beds of the moon  
when you hang-glide  
the valley of the Mariners  
when you turn  
slow cartwheels in the solar meadows  
remember Nordhausen

#### V. What the Lightning Showed

As if the Lewisian gneiss was split  
straight down, then hauled a quarter mile apart  
– some thought it was, at the Passion  
when the rocks rent.  
It was cut by the quiet burn  
that still shifts pebbles along its floor.  
It held the sunlit air like an echoing shout  
the day I climbed one side and, looking down  
thought I was afraid of the height, then thought  
I was afraid of the light and the silence  
and then was unafraid of the light and the silence  
and then was unafraid. In other glens,  
on other cliffs the sense became familiar,  
the panic returning like a friend  
who startles then reveals  
who it was, all the time.

Like white sticks the headlamp beams  
probed the fog as we inched towards the border.  
Crossing under watchful muzzles, we found  
ourselves in another order: history frozen  
into geography – a mountain-building episode  
that segregates varieties into species  
and thence to genus, family, order, class, division,  
kingdom.  
Barbed wire mutates from barricades, heresiarchs  
emblazon graffiti into heraldry.  
The haunted continent reflects

and makes its own hair stand on end.  
Expecting tanks and sullen people  
I found monuments and snug-wrapped children.  
We made our dead-letter drops and fled.

The helicopters came in low, towards Halabja.  
Blind Cretaceous tanks  
struggled in mud. The dead lay  
unmarked, the children  
like dolls that children had not put away.

One man had put his body between his child  
and the expected (allowed for, discounted) blast  
but could not stop the breath that stopped the  
breath.

Don't talk to me, you slaughtering saints –  
I know these people, possessed  
of every human attribute but one: the State;  
and for this lack you compensate, provide  
the solicitude of more than one, supplied  
in an impressive range of delivery systems  
from I G Farben to Ilyushin.

Fom space you can see no borders;  
only the Iran-Iraq border, drawn in fire.  
What look like shadows are only corpses.  
The third man circled overhead.  
On that waterless rock I remember joy  
– to fall, and rise unhurt, like children  
where dust and dirt  
for once are not the same as earth.  
You can blot it out with your thumb.

We have a problem here.  
V<sub>2</sub>, SDI.

Obviously a major malfunction.  
Ulan-Bator, do you read?  
Data: what is to be done?

Sparks from a fierce far forge, the particles  
penetrate helmet, hair and bone  
and passing through the brain leave  
a flash behind the eyes.  
As much as anyone can see, I've seen  
a greater death than mine will be,  
or birth. There is still no agreement.

Data: what are we given?  
A manipulated nucleus of time  
where our fortunes and our futures recombine.  
We are not born to trouble, we can make  
the sparks fly downward.  
We can send the cities skyward, stone by stone  
and call them new: New Jerusalem,  
New Cairo, New Berlin, New London,  
New Moscow, New New York.

Under white hoods they crossed the ice  
already melting. The gulf took some, the sleeting  
particles  
took others who fought to contain  
a reaction's red glare.  
Those who knew themselves  
already dead stood by the living.

For so much less than this  
for so much less  
for so much

new lands no prophet promised  
are there for you  
oh turn your back  
you who could fall for borders  
for inches of mud, for acres of rock  
for tons of sand  
oh turn your back  
on controlling hands, on lands and orders  
rank and waste  
rack and ruin

Take you the sky, and give them their deserts:  
no peace, no shelter, no surrender.

### Notes on 'A Fertile Sea'

The poem is in more senses than one a *reaction* to T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. The allusions are scientific and political, the perspective is secular and humanist, the poem is comparatively short, and the notes are explanatory. (Actually, they were even more tedious, needless and pretentious than Eliot's, and have been dropped.)

I wrote this poem in the late 1980s. I've sometimes tried to revise it since, but it's so much a product of its time that revising it would have lost its directness. The allusions to (and suggested connections between) the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the US air raid on Libya, the Iran-Iraq War, the decline and internal disintegration of the communist parties, the failed renewal of the socialist bloc, the experiences of astronauts and cosmonauts in lunar and orbital expeditions, the military origins of the space programme, and the suppression of the Kronstadt uprising are too obvious to need elucidation.