

## FAREWELL

pa was six days gone  
in a coffin of pale wood  
clad in a white shroud  
with pale blue ribbons

the hands bleached and drawn  
but the form of them still beautiful  
the line retained  
the nail of each thumb fan-shaped  
with a wondrous half-moon

the eagle nose  
with its network of veins  
now translucent  
the moustache - stubble  
cheeks pumice-stoned  
with a trace of fluff  
the mouth without its teeth  
nestled in caved-in cheeks  
above a reddish forehead  
the hair almost tousled  
with two red patches at the eye and mouth  
from the final falls

a calm face  
much too old  
unknowable  
unmade

## INHERITANCE

pa had hands that  
never grew old  
they just matured –  
beautifully boned  
large hands  
the right an octave and two  
the left an octave and three  
from playing the viola

the octave and two  
gripped mine  
for the last time  
at norwich station  
the thick gold band  
of wedding ring  
caught my palm

his hands  
i did not inherit  
his ring  
my son did

instead i inherited his laugh  
but only after he was gone  
maybe i had stowed it away  
unknown to myself  
for the lean years

it erupts in mid-joke  
as it always did  
not a snort, not a whinny  
but a brief guffaw

hello pa

## RUBELLA

pa lost the hearing  
of his left ear  
to rubella  
his first enemy

he nestled his deaf ear  
against the belly  
of the violin  
and played to his sound ear  
and the world outside:  
your move rubella

german measles  
he told me  
i hate the germans  
his second enemy

his younger brother  
fought in africa and asia  
and died of pleurisy  
five years after the war  
but the germans were to blame

his younger son turned a deaf ear  
and studied german  
and came to love  
the soundness of its syntax  
the castles of its clauses –  
a deserter in the ranks

this son's son  
has a daughter  
with a german mother:  
check-mate rubella  
check-mate

## TIME FOR MUSIC

'something to show you' said pa  
opening a flattish cardboard box  
extracting a silver letter m  
with curved feet roughly five by two

pulling the right leg forward  
he formed a tripod  
the third leg topped by  
a scooped ellipse

'ah' said pa  
lifting a long letter l from the box  
with a c underneath  
a c with a howler monkey's tail  
an l with gradations  
and tapering weight  
with two metal pins  
like fangs  
sticking out from its base

'from beethoven's time –  
beauty, isn't she?'

she was, pa, she was –  
a silent metronome! –  
and perfect for you  
pa the cautious  
who'd ticktock his notes  
looking for music held within them  
instead of between them,  
for time's displacement  
its dislocation  
where laws can be broken  
and freedom gained

pa kept his beauty highly polished  
the gentle sway of the monkey's tail  
left in its wake a trail of star-dust  
mesmerised  
pa played out of time

## NON INTERLUDENS

pa got married when thirty-two  
when ma was thirty-eight  
during courtship  
she had to be home by ten

'when she wed  
she knew nothing at all  
about marriage'  
her younger sister remarked  
(unmarried at ninety-nine)

when pa heard of my plans  
to share a tent  
with my girl-friend  
on a trip to scotland  
i was called into the front room  
i was then twenty-five  
and pa sixty-two

in our conversation  
pa suddenly blurted out  
'of course, i've never seen  
your mother naked'  
two surprises in one

was i another example  
of immaculate conception  
how did i come into being –  
'were you fumbling around in the dark?'

'that's enough from you, my boy'  
which marked the end  
of the conversation  
but not the speculation

## THE ART OF PAINTING

pa donned dungarees  
and a blue beret  
painting was a serious business

brushes still supple from turps  
were taken from their jar and wiped  
all implements ranged and inspected  
with brigadier mien and drooping pipe

the assault on the window ledge  
outside the dining room  
could now begin  
after the first cup of tea

sanding and undercoating  
took the whole morning  
pa was meticulous

the topcoating  
took the whole afternoon  
pa was a professional  
bluffer

coils of smoke  
the only outward sign  
of inner convolutions of thought  
the ledge the perfect pretext

pa still guides my hand

## THE ART OF SWIMMING

pa never learned to swim  
once a year  
he stood in grey woollen trunks  
off the shore  
with swan-wing shoulders  
his unaccustomed flesh  
blinking at the light

i'm unable to swim  
pa confessed  
but able to believe  
i can  
it's a knack i have

lucky pa  
swimming in eternity

## MUSIC-MAKING

at just sixteen  
i had not encountered  
the intriguing concept  
of a song without words  
but pa's viola certainly sang  
in the duet transcription

'rich double stoppings'  
pa muttered happily  
grunting as he ground his bow  
across the strings  
swaying like his  
silent metronome

while i was playing  
the corner of my eye  
caught pa's gyrations  
in the blüthner's mahogany gloss  
as together  
we turned a  
song without words  
into  
sound without sense



## THE HENRY MOORE

the seated fluid bronze statue  
with concave upper body  
curling sideways from its base  
to broad armless shoulders  
topped by a small molten head  
with shallow incisions only  
marking its facial features  
stared out across the lawn

pa stood at a wary distance  
pipe-first  
he eyed  
this already verdigrised  
and shat-on masterpiece  
craning his neck at a similar angle  
to face the pin-head opposite  
the folds in his neck  
now matching those of his jacket

'thank goodness it's not got  
a hole for a stomach'  
pa said  
'better than twelve-tone music, pa'  
i replied  
'more like max reger'

no answer from pa but  
his bird-head cocked  
he listened as he looked

## GOOD WORKS

1.

M.B.E.

on the mantelpiece  
the photo of pa and ma  
in front of buckingham palace  
pa in full morning dress  
stretching skywards  
on giraffe-like neck  
ma in a fur-collared sensible coat  
with huge round buttons  
clutching her handbag  
the feathers of her head-hugging hat  
the only concession to frivolity  
ma proud  
but wanting the fuss to be over  
pa radiant,  
with no need of shining armour

they stand upright, apart  
but pa's hand has been at work –  
what catches the light  
outside the palace railings  
are two pairs of  
brilliantly burnished shoes

2.

## THE GLORY-HOLE

in the space beneath the stairs  
was a wedge-shaped closet  
in total darkness:  
the glory-hole.  
'glory's found in strange places'  
said pa  
'scottish dialect,  
*glaury* means muddy, pa'  
i replied

the glory-hole was ma's domain  
but on a shelf on the right-hand wall  
was a tin receptacle, olive-green,  
for shoe-cloths and brushes  
at each end pockets  
for round tins of polish -  
pa's alone

before shining  
his shoes to perfection  
pa would buff ma's -  
a labour of love

after his death  
i found in a drawer  
some notes for a sermon.  
in pa's strong copperplate hand  
twice underlined:  
***'Let your light so shine before men,  
that they may see your good works,  
and glorify your Father  
which is in heaven'***

pa began with the shoes

## LIGNUM VITAE

when pa retired he took up bowls  
'nothing between me and infinity now'  
pa said  
'why bowls?' i asked

was it the close-cropped symmetry of the green  
the flannels, blazer and peaked soft cap?  
or the asymmetry of the balls  
that described huge curves  
as they trundled towards the jack?

'they're woods, not balls'  
pa told me  
lovingly lifting them  
from their canvas bag  
'feel the weight of those -  
made of ironwood,  
lignum vitae,  
the tree of life'

pa lost most of his matches  
to lesser opponents  
who used 'woods' of man-made compounds  
reliable  
easy to use  
without maintenance  
without soul

pa polished his wayward warriors  
his capricious soul-mates  
playing till infinity  
with his woods of life

## IN PERPETUITY

### 1. THE FLIGHT PATH

*Gules an Eagle displayed Or beaked and membered Azure  
in each claw a Sword erect proper pommel and hilt Or  
on a Chief Ermine two pierced Cinquefoils Gules*

in later life  
pa's consuming interests  
were genealogy and heraldry  
'i intend to put this family  
on the map'  
said pa  
'in perpetuity'

'the name is scottish' pa remarked  
'originating from dundee'  
'look at your nose, pa' i replied  
'we're scandinavians –  
iron is their word for eagle'

pa was as good as his word  
his coat of arms not lightly won  
was fought for with persistence

'we need a motto' added pa  
*semper pugnare paratus* i replied  
'always prepared to fight'

## 2. THE SCOTTISH CONNECTION

*Crest: On a wreath of the colours  
in front of two Thistle Leaves in saltire proper  
a Cross Moline Azure fimbriated Or*

the iron bearing  
in the middle of a mill-stone  
bears it up and guides its motion:  
a mill-iron, or cross moline

'good thing the thistle's  
their national emblem  
since you're so prickly, pa'  
i said  
*semper pugnare paratus*

'one day you'll be glad of this'  
said pa  
my cross-moline  
my eagle

## THE HYMN BOOK

pa's hymn book lay  
on the blüthner piano  
i would pull it down and set it up  
every sunday evening  
when only sacred music was allowed

its binding a greyish-blue  
wafer-thin india paper  
edges of gold leaf  
its notation mostly in minims  
that slowed down your hands in respect

the book was ahead of its time  
a hyperlink paradise  
cross-referenced with numbers  
first lines  
alternative tunes  
with single or double ticks  
or Ex. in appreciation:

a spider tracery in pencil and coloured inks  
a heavenwide web  
by a man with a gold-leafed thumb

## COUNTDOWN

three weeks before he died –  
did he know  
did he sense the foreshadowing  
did he hear the inaudible ticking  
of the bomb inside his head –  
pa made a record  
'albeit mechanically reproduced'  
of his voice:  
pa's last tape

a testament  
to who he was  
what he valued  
spiced with vignettes of the past  
the odd tirade against a godless age

what most stand out  
as beacons to defy the dark  
are faith, devotion and integrity  
these three  
but the greatest of these was faith

'i am conscious  
of a deepening spiritual awareness'  
'very wonderful thing'  
'vouchsafed'

'yours for ever'

'pa'