



I *hyphen* Thou

Rogan Wolf

The poems that 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. In the first 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. In the second way, I hold myself back in rational detachment and/or evaluation and/or ego-centrality. I look out on you from my position of being separate and other.

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.

(i)

Grounding

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.

June 1993

(ii)

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.

August 1993

(iii)

In storm

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.

January 1994

(iv)

Foothold

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
amidst the flood
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
uphold our children.

January 1994

(v)

Questions of Space

I have questions of space
three *sly* questions -
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 miracle 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 John the worn jester
our disorderly Chair*

John 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 those sly 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

**My friend John, art therapist, social worker and family therapist, ex-Chair of the charity Hyphen-21.*

(vi)

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.

(vii)

The line which breaks

A skill we are bound to practice
with fierce and absolute attention :
the skill of hastening
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

(viii)

Loitering

In English law “Loitering with intent” can be grounds for arrest, with “intent” assumed to mean a desire to do harm.

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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