

# leap of faith



twentyninefreefalling  
February poems  
by Stephen Hancock



PIG AND INK  
MMXXIV

in loving memory of

Nicky Chambers

(1966 – 2024)

## leap of faith

On 1<sup>st</sup> February I posted a poem on Facebook, promising to write and post a new poem a day for the whole of the month. I don't think I knew what a creative task that would be. But I'm so glad I did it. The following twenty-nine poems are the fruit of my promise.

Some nights I'd go to bed with a poem almost ready. Some mornings I'd wake up, stare at a blank page, fill my pen and write. As a couple of the poems mention, I burned my porridge on several occasions.

I realised about a week into the project that, in many ways, I was giving the longest poetry performance of my life – sort of slow motion freestyling each and every day. Most of the poems are pretty rough and ready, but it was a rough and ready show, and I really gave it my all. I'm proper chuffed with what I achieved, and will always remember this experience. Thanks for being such an encouraging audience. I hope you find at least one or two that really touch (or perhaps even tickle) you.

In the middle of the month my lovely friend Nicky died, so this collection is dedicated to her. Nicky's daughter got to read "For Nicky" to Nicky on the morning of her death. Both Nicky's presence and absence will be strongly felt by many. Although, please, no more friends dying in the middle of any of my performances.

Here's to the precious jewel of loving friendship,

One Love

Stephen

Beer

March 1<sup>st</sup> 2024



[www.pigandink.com](http://www.pigandink.com)

## February

perhaps  
a poem a day  
will keep the doctors away  
with the faeries  
and pixies and elves  
and the spider librarians  
who guard our bookshelves?

## Brigid's Mantle

Draped my old blue *kikoi*  
upon a hedge last night  
to be blessed by the dew  
and the return of your light

this morning it smelled as earthy and  
and as sweet as clothes gathered fresh  
from the first washing line of spring

draped it over my shoulders  
and wore it all day long  
like a lingering smile  
like a pilgrim's song

Oh fertile Brigid, oh faithful Bride  
you who wash away the flotsam  
and the jetsam  
of winter's high tide

## Here Be Dragons

on the whole  
the larger the dragon  
the slower its sense of time

there are hillside dragons who  
take a year to blink  
a sleepy eye

there are mountain dragons who  
take a century to yawn and stretch their wintered wings<sup>5</sup>

some can slumber for millennia  
some – so it is told – for aeons

Greenwich Mean Time means nothing to them

but they always know  
when we humans are unwell  
for they can smell our sickness within the waters  
within the air  
within the land  
within their dreams

oh little human  
strip off your civilised shoes and socks  
and take a hammer to that  
buzzing phone and that ticking clock  
and let your soles stand naked  
and silent  
upon this sacred, timeless ground

can you feel that sound?

can you feel that sound?

That's the sound of myriad dragons waking

## Sea-worn brick

There used to be a brick factory  
in nearby Seaton town  
and every now and then  
upon the ever-shifting, billion-pebbled shore  
I'll chance upon a piece of sea-worn brick  
as bright and thrilling as treasure to my well-tuned eyes

most pieces have been weathered into  
brick-orange pebbles or red-brick stones  
smooth to touch, light to hold

but twice I've found an old, intact engineering brick  
washed up on the beach

each a heavy and rounded oblong  
sea-shorn of its sharp corners and edges  
sea pebbles jammed tight into its strengthening holes

but whether pebble or whole brick  
or half-brick or stone  
I always pick them up  
and bring them back home

not only are they to me  
objects of simple and elemental beauty  
but they have also  
over the years  
become reminders  
of my own elemental journeying with grief

how the unbearably sharp corners and edges of loss  
somehow get ground down  
by the faithful storms and tides of time

how absence slowly  
makes room for presence also

how each broken piece  
of any broken heart  
harbours the colour and the clay  
and the love and the beauty of the whole

## Whatever the weather

Sometimes I love the sea for its vast  
and magnificent indifference  
to my very existence  
as if I were  
a mere speck of sand

me and my hard-won problems and dramas  
so sublimely insignificant as to  
vanish into an amused and gentle smile

And sometimes I love the sea for its utter  
and exquisite intimacy  
playing and flirting and dancing with me  
as if I were

its only lover  
its waves enfolding me so thoroughly  
its salty tongue probing simultaneous pleasures and places  
no human lover ever could  
oh my

But always  
always  
I love the sea's company

whatever the weather  
and whatever our respective moods

## Holy ground

if ever you're feeling lonely  
and no one is around  
you can always lie down supine  
upon the holy ground

mother, father, sister, brother  
son, daughter, friend, lover

the earth will catch you  
if you're falling  
will protect you if under attack  
will cherish and replenish you  
and will always have your back

the earth will always have your back

## A Morning Prayer

May we all be full of loving kindness  
May we all be well in body, mind, heart and soul  
May we all know the deep peace  
that dwells at the heart  
of all beings  
And may Life move through us all  
with beauty and grace and joy

## Beyond words

Sometimes all I can do  
is go down to the sea  
to some rocks out of view  
raise my face to the sky  
fill the bellows of my lungs  
open my throat and my gob  
and howl

[insert howl of your choice here]

I fucking love howling

There's a whole hairy barbarian symphony of howls inside me  
longing to batter down the clean-shaven gates of civilisation  
and set me free, oh unkempt and faithful comrades, set me free!

You can't argue with a howl  
You can't go "You said this" – "But you said that" to a howl  
It's my howl – it says nothing about you, dude  
But your howl is welcome too

Howls are honest  
like animals  
and babies  
and trees  
and rocks

Howls obviously lend themselves well to grief and yearning  
and frustration and heart-break  
and excitement too  
but, with practice and attention, you might also come to notice  
confusion and rage and kindness and hatred and loneliness and self-pity and amusement and  
regret and exhaustion and lust and despair and madness and joy and power and even  
worldless desires that you never knew existed  
all howling from and through your being

Howling is a form of prayer  
Howling is a form of emotional hygiene  
Howling is cheaper than therapy  
Howling is very good for getting rid of shit which ain't your shit  
Howling is closely related to growling  
Howling can make you laugh

Oh, to stand under a full moon bursting and beaming with fertile light  
and to open your body wide to this elemental moment



and from the depths of your lungs and your heart  
and your belly and your soul to...

[insert howl of your choice here]

A good howl is its own reward

[insert howl of your choice here]

## whispers of spring

of all the early flowers of spring  
it's the blackthorn that really tickles my thing

seeing your first blossoms this morning  
made my heart gasp  
with such tender delight

this  
whispered each flower  
only this

## Lazy Saturday

ah  
me and my muse  
freefalling and freestyling  
right now  
to hustle a poem a day

she's in her element  
I'm remembering mine

it's been a long time  
since we had so much fun  
or spent so much time  
together

feels like she's waking me up  
from a long and heavy spell  
that sometimes felt like a curse

breakfast mug of coffee steaming in the hazy  
low and lazy Saturday morning sunshine  
shadowing the nib  
of my faithful pen  
always at her service

freestyling and freefalling  
through this moment  
as vast as any coastal sky fuck  
I can smell  
the porridge burning

PS it actually tastes really good

### Sunday morning communion

this pregnant time  
half way between  
winter's true depth  
and the establishment of spring

snowdrops and primroses  
a family of early daisies  
the rose's vibrant, promising, exquisite new leaves

the sleeping belly of this hill  
upon which I live  
warming and stirring and waking beneath me

the deliciously slow but sure lengthening and brightening  
of these cross-quarter days

## Four kettles and a woodburner

four kettles and a woodburner  
have seen me through the winter  
kept me alive and snug and warm

fire metal water wood

wood seasoned and wood gathered  
from hedge and copse and shore

fire metal water wood

the faithful embers of every night  
inspiring the flames of every dawn

fire metal water wood

the generous belly of the stove  
radiating an elemental form of love

## The holy land

(i)

I once went on a walk for peace and justice  
through the fractured, holy land  
in the company of a motley  
international pacifist band

we all hoped  
that we could really make a difference

we met with Christians and with atheists  
and with Muslims and with Jews  
but our conversations and arguments and laughter  
never made the daily news

who truly knows what difference  
any of our actions ever make?

but precious little  
is always more precious than nothing done

(ii)

some wounded people become healers  
some wounded people become killers  
some wounded people decide to break the chain  
some pass the wounding on

some wounded people don't even get to see  
tomorrow's break of dawn

yet still the sun rises  
as the sun always must

and still the rain falls  
on both the unjust and the just

Oh Sarah, Oh Abraham  
mother and father of all  
may the salt at the heart of your tears  
help heal the wounds at the heart of this war

## Love is in the air

love is in the air  
in the breath  
and in the breeze

in the centre of the raging storm  
that brings us to our knees

love is in the water  
in the rivers  
and the rain

in the sea and sweat and tears  
that wash away our pain

love is in the fire  
in the hearth  
and in the sun

in the embers of desire fulfilled  
in the flames of songs unsung

love is in the earth  
in the cliffs  
and in the dales

at the tip of every mountain peak  
in the depth of every vale

as above  
then so below

as below  
then so above

fundamental, non-judgmental  
elemental love

Oi!

Most mornings  
lost in my poetic musings  
I forget my basic duty  
to the vocal, local birds

It's usually the robin or blackbird  
that grabs my attention

*Oi! Breakfast Man! Less Poetry! More Prose!*

It's such a simple task  
to scatter a handful of sunflower seeds  
upon the slate of the bird table  
but oh the almost instant rewards

My avian crew  
more entertaining than Facebook ever could be

Back in January  
there were three robins scrapping for domination  
but I knew the plump one would win through  
– it's not called a pecking order for nothing

Robin, blackbirds, great tits, blue tits, chaffinches, tree sparrows,  
the occasional mighty rook or resplendent magpie  
(who will scarper if I so much as blink)

For a couple of weeks a charm of seven goldfinches  
charmed me

And once a raven. A raven! They're effin' huge

There are even a couple of blue tits from the bottom of the paddock  
who, with fluttering and pulsing swoops, make the long journey  
across the open field of my view  
to return home with just a solitary seed within their beaks

Fancy that!  
A hundred yards powered by a single sunflower seed  
with fuel to spare

Sunflowers transmuted into flight before my very eyes

If I could fly for a hundred yards on a single sunflower seed  
I'd be the happiest man alive

As it is, vicarious flight  
is its own delight  
and – lucky me – my daily, morning joy

Thank God for each and every one  
of my feathered neighbours  
and especially for the boids that go

*Oi!*

ink

a bottle of  
pure poetry  
held  
in liquid form

a nib  
dipped in

a poem  
is born

## the first housefly of spring

some say it's the first snowdrops  
some wait for the daffs  
before they celebrate spring's arrival  
and consign winter to the past

but I say it's the housefly  
currently scuttling about my desk  
coz  
if you're gonna celebrate them pretty flowers  
you've also got  
to give at least a nod  
to all them pesky little pests

[half way through the month I put out a shout out for suggested themes and phrases – the following is a cut-up poem made up from the cacophony of responses]

## The distracting view in the rear mirror

Sitting in the GP's waiting room  
I've really liked your poems when they get a little bit sexy  
Mists above the river sucked out to sea

Beautiful human  
lush and relatable  
the scented molecules of a cup of tea

Body movement  
You've still got it  
dancing hedgehogs  
Cider please

mud and oceans  
Jungle fever  
sitting in the Saturnian field of in-  
between

rose porn and blackthorn  
Mushrooms and mycelia  
the heart emoji  
gasping tenderly

Change could be a good theme

One about bookshops please  
the taste of wild garlic  
Theophany

Pixies in purple shirts  
snowdrops and bluebells  
All things nature  
delightedly

Celebrating friendship  
A bionic spring in the step  
The curtain rises

*Neti Neti*

## Cydershire

Some say the finest apples  
are to be found in the heart of Kent

Some say the hills of Herefordshire  
Some say Somerset

but I've tasted every apple  
of every orchard of these isles  
and the ones from fair Cydershire win  
by miles and miles and miles

So, ferry me across to Cydershire  
when the tide is calm and low  
to where the lasses are ripe and rosy  
and the lads are in the know

Where every cider apple is squeezed  
between strong and generous thighs  
and every cider barrel is full  
of groans and moans and sighs

Yes, ferry me across to Cydershire  
upon a gentle summer breeze  
and I'll while away my remaining days  
in semi-drunken ease

Yes, I'll while away my remaining daze  
in semi-drunken ease



## Message in a bottle

(i)

Every time I open a new bottle of whisky  
whatever the weather  
I go outside and  
holding the bottle aloft  
pour out the first dram  
into the welcoming earth below

“For the ancestors!”

Dad used to baulk at this alcoholic ceremony of mine  
“That’s a waste of good whisky, Stevie boy,” he’d say

Nowadays I sometimes pour him an extra, gratuitous glug  
just to make a point

“Bet you appreciate it now, dad!”

But I was never convinced the dead can hear us  
let alone answer back

(ii)

On the tenth anniversary of mum’s death  
I went down to the sea for  
a memorial ponder  
and found myself saying out loud  
“Mum, if you can hear me, then send me a sign”

I wasn’t sure if you’re allowed to ask such things  
and I sure wasn’t expecting anything fancy

A few minutes later I spied a bottle washed up on the shore  
half full of liquid amber

I just shook my head  
and smiled out loud  
at how funny and mysterious Life can sometimes be  
and  
having held the bottle aloft to the evening sky  
and having poured a generous and grateful dram  
into the pebbled beach below  
I plonked myself upon the ground  
and watched both the sun

and the seabourn bottle  
sink down and  
down and  
down

Quite how she coordinated that one, I couldn't even guess

but I meandered home  
in sea-whisky-fuelled wonder  
feeling well and truly blessed

### Gordon's Way

Several hundred times I've made my way down  
the steep coastal path to Seaton Hole  
and often have I wondered about the sweet sign  
at the top of the final flight of steps  
which proudly announces  
GORDON'S WAY

Was Gordon someone who particularly loved this place?  
Must have been  
Was Gordon loved and respected by others?  
Must have been, too

But the other day  
I got chatting to a local artist  
who turned out to be Gordon's son  
and he proudly told me the full story

See, once upon a coastal time, a chunk of the land above Seaton Hole  
decided to slip and tumble down to the sea  
destroying the original path  
and requiring walkers  
to re-route inland

but Gordon  
being Gordon  
decided to build a new way down  
and so set to work  
carefully building a solid flight of steps  
step by step  
by step

Of course, the fine ladies and gentlemen of East Devon District Council weren't particularly impressed by this bypassing of the usual, established democratic procedures

It's anarchy in action!

Think of the example he might be setting!

But not for Gordon letters humbly requesting that ye do generously and honourably apportion some of your precious budget to the rebuilding of the path down to Seaton Hole thus restoring the pedestrian enjoyment of your grateful forelock tugging humble servant...

No pleading, no requesting, no waiting, no wrangling

No "Yours et cetera"  
et cetera

No No!, even  
Just an obvious Yes!

step by step  
by step

Ignoring the Council's letters of desistance  
was his chosen form of resistance  
in fact  
Gordon wasn't resisting anything at all  
- he was just being  
and creating  
the change he wanted to see  
vision and strategy and tactics woven seamlessly  
step by step  
by step

Not the whining tones of protest  
for Gordon

just the confident hum of willing labour and healthy sweat  
step by step by step

News travelled, his son explained, and a local nature trust gave him a special reward and when the steps were finished there was quite a celebratory launch what with family and aforementioned nature trust and local press and oh guess!  
district councillors in attendance too

who all trooped down to Seaton Hole

step by step  
by step

So, if ever you're feeling powerless in this world  
and protest ain't providing no satisfaction  
Just remember Gordon's Way  
and take some direct action

### Never a dull day

It's a proper, stormy February day today  
and through my window speckled and streaming with rain  
and through the low coastal cloud of sea-mist grey  
I can make out a vast army of white horses  
attacking and churning the defenceless bay

or  
perhaps  
this is how the sea's wild white horses  
love to dance and play?

### For Nicky

when the river meets the sea  
she surrenders so lovingly  
and all the love  
she's ever known  
fills her heart  
and fills her home

## Old School

Fuck A.I.  
I've got the sky

## RSVP

The older I become  
the more I begin to empathise with older people's  
nostalgia  
for  
those golden days  
when  
beatniks forged dusty, haiku-strewn trails  
and hippies followed their Eastern dreams  
funneling through the Kyber Pass

for the revolutionary optimism  
of the squats and peace camps and tunnels and trees  
Greenham Common, Molesworth, Upper Heyford, Faslane,  
Twyford Down, Newbury, Wanstonia

for the star-schmangled free parties  
the early raves  
where wide-eyed strangers were your instant friends  
and sometimes we even glimpsed God in everyone  
including ourselves

those times before the arrests or  
the laws or the conflicts or the  
betrayals or  
the depression or  
the rents or the mortgages or  
the children or  
the jobs or the bills  
or the booze  
or the drugs  
really kicked in

those shimmering times before the leaden Machine  
stole our sheen

and ground us down  
with its relentless march towards already-crumbling cliffs

But it wasn't just that youthful sense of  
ever-expanding horizons  
or the sheer freedom of being in a foreign land  
thumb outstretched  
not worrying where you'll sleep tonight

It was when hope was in our bones  
and revolution was in the air  
when giving your all was its own reward  
and Life seemed to rise up and meet you

A time when we felt  
we really could  
turn this shit show around  
and build something better  
more true, more just, more beautiful  
in its place

those fires  
in our bodies and hearts and minds  
now reduced to  
uncomfortably  
comforting  
nostalgic  
embers?

But that invitation to give my all to Life  
and to contribute the best I can  
to the health of the whole?

It never went away

It's an open invitation  
ever-present

including right now

but not once has it ever  
lived in  
or dwelt upon  
the past

## Befriending loneliness

It's a rain-drenched Sunday afternoon  
the sea and sky visually indivisible  
the earth soaked through to its bones  
and although it's snug and warm  
inside my seaside-hillside-fireside cabin  
when I finally allow myself to  
sit still  
at this desk  
I can feel a familiar and quiet loneliness  
stretched across my chest

it's bearable but  
uncomfortable too  
this loneliness that often  
(for me, at least)  
accompanies solitude

it's one of those awkward feelings you could probably chase away  
with some chocolate or a couple of slices of toast  
or a ciggie or a one-skinner or some  
predictably-unsatisfying-internet-guzzling  
or perhaps even a comfortably numbing glass  
of Sunday afternoon wine

instead  
I place a palm over the middle of my chest  
and allow both hand and chest  
to rise and fall as one

the rain keeps lashing the window like an argument it just can't put down  
and I realise it's coming from the east for a change  
head on

breathing in, my chest rises  
breathing out, my chest falls

the challenge as always not to approach  
visitors such as these as challenges

breathing in, my chest rises  
breathing out, my chest falls

but as I would an honoured guest

or, perhaps  
a soggy stray dog?

the thought of welcoming loneliness  
as I would a soggy stray dog sitting outside my door  
makes me smile

breathing in, my chest rises  
breathing out, my chest falls

Ah, welcome, my sweet and lonely and beautiful and bedraggled and rather soggy friend  
pray, come inside  
and rest those muddy paws of yours  
warm and dry yourself by the Sunday fire  
and curl and snooze a while  
if need be stay  
for as long as you want  
my heart and home are yours

it's way too wet and bleak out there  
to be wandering around on your own  
come share your loneliness with me  
and we'll both feel less alone

## Moonlight dancing

the sunlight enters the moon  
the moonlight enters the sea  
the seelight dances across the water  
and thereby enters me

the sunlight touches my heart  
the moonlight warms my soul  
the seelight dances within my veins  
like liquid jazz  
and blues  
and rock and roll

for light is a form of music  
and music a form of light  
and the stars they keep on spinning them tunes  
deep into  
the vinyl  
night



## The ink's faithful flow

"The soul does nothing if you do nothing,  
but if you light a fire, it chops wood;  
if you make a boat, it becomes the ocean."

Robert Bly

I used to think my muse was fickle  
but now it's clear to me  
that I've been the fickle one

demanding her attendance  
before I dare to fill my pen

for she loves to meet me  
in the ink's faithful flow  
long before the type is set

my middle finger  
stained purple  
is pure poetry to her

the porridge burning  
(yet again)  
makes her smile  
and love me all the more

bottle, pen, ink  
in service  
of the human heart  
and of my craft  
is all that she requires  
desires  
requests

and all the rest  
(she whispers)  
and all the rest  
will surely  
follow

## Leap Day

“Leap, and the net shall appear”  
they said  
so I went ahead and leapt

but through my tearful, fearful eyes  
I ain’t seen  
no net  
yet

even the  
seagulls are looking at me  
strangely

“Always read the small print”  
my dad advised  
so I’m reading as I fall  
“There are no guarantees in Life”  
it says  
“No guarantees at all”

So here I am  
in mid-air  
free-falling like a fool  
praying desperately  
there’s no ground below

now, wouldn’t that be cool?

