

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 the first day of 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 really knew what I was letting myself in for. It was quite an intense ride – and once I entered the imaginative poetic realm, I was rarely out of it. Thank goodness for the reliably grounding effects of root vegetables

The following twenty-nine poems are the fruit of that 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 with ink and just let it flow. 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. 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. One of her family members read "For Nicky" to Nicky on the morning of her death. Both Nicky's presence and her absence will be strongly felt by many.

Here's to the precious jewel of loving friendship,

One Love

Stephen

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www.pigandink.com

February

perhaps
a poem a day
will keep the doctor away
with the faeries
and pixies
and elves
and the spider librarians
and assorted contrarians
who faithfully guard
our dusty bookshelves?

Brighid'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 sweet and earthy
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 Brighid, Oh faithful Bride
you 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 whole year just to
blink
a sleepy eye

there are mountain dragons who
take a century to yawn and stretch their wintered wings

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 sick
for they can smell our sickness permeating the land
the rivers
the air
their dreams

oh little human being
strip off your civilised shoes and socks
and take a blacksmith's hammer to that
buzzing phone and that ticking clock
and let the soles of your feet 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 once 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, over the years
they have also 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 as well

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 merely
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

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 far cheaper than therapy
Howling is very good for getting rid of shit which ain't your shit

Sometimes, a howl is the sound your soul makes when you're spending too much time in
your mind

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 delicate, sturdy 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 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

fire metal water wood

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

(iii)

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 flames of strong desire
in the embers 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 the 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 scarpers if I even think about blinking)

For a couple of weeks a charm of seven goldfinches
utterly 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 my feathered neighbours
and especially for the ones that go

O!

ink

a bottle of
pure poetry
suspended
in liquid form

I dip my
nib

and 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 scoff 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 crumble 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 servants...

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 co-dependent whining tones of protest
for Gordon

just the confident, governmental hum
of leadership and 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 any 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

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 our all to Life
and to contribute the best we 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

Old School

Fuck A.I.
I've got the sky

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

and if need be
stay with me
for my heart and hearth 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 sealight dances across the water
and thereby enters me

the sunlight touches my heart
the moonlight warms my soul
the sealight 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, 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 this month it's become clear to me
that it's me who's been the fickle one

demanding her presence
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 with ink
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, windswept 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?