

# THE HARP'S TOP STRING

MERLE'S OCCASIONAL POEMS: 1972-2006



Merle Lamprecht

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# DEDICATION

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To our children,  
Sharon, Jonathan, Deborah  
and their families  
Christians all

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

1 Peter 1:3,4,5 NKJV



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# FIRE LILIES BLOOM ON DEVIL'S PEAK

---

Fire Lilies

crimson as the fire  
which last week  
scarred the mountain  
charred the green  
and after  
so brief a visit  
left ash and soot  
to blacken cloud and city

Fire Lilies

thrusting strong  
green stems  
crimson crocus flowers  
bloom bright and big  
above the black  
recalling rainbow  
rebirth resurrection

Fire Lilies

bloom only after fire



# BY THE SEA 1969

---

I get off the bus  
and gaze  
at what remains  
of Capernaum  
a few piles of pale rock  
a reconstructed pillar or two  
this was the synagogue  
they say

I walk down the road  
Galilee is calm  
the hill on which you stood is there  
the air is sweet  
I can imagine you  
with the wind in your hair  
I can hear those phrases  
which are quoted, misquoted  
understood, misunderstood  
yet which sing down the ages

but here  
beside Galilee  
I am still  
I see  
the soft slope of the hill  
and hear you speak  
explaining your sermon  
not in terms of the meek  
or of those who mourn  
but of here

in the bus

or of where

I shall walk next week

# THE HARP'S TOP STRING

---

a tiny coil of gut  
taken from a belly  
cut  
threaded  
through a pin's eye  
pegged  
and slowly pulled  
as the screw turns

the first stretch  
tautens  
it wriggles  
into place  
straight but slack

at the second turn  
it shrieks  
wheel and rack!  
wheel and rack!

at the third  
it twists  
violently  
forcing the peg  
to spin in the wood  
until it slips  
crazily  
through the eye  
and collapses  
on the sounding-board

but  
it's picked up  
threaded again  
turn!  
it shrieks  
more pain  
turn the  
big brass-bound  
bass strings  
they can stand it!

at the fifth turn  
it gasps  
I'll crack  
God help me!  
and something  
holds it back

turn!  
turn!  
turn!  
until suddenly

where there was no voice  
there is voice  
where it croaked  
it vibrates  
where it was off-key  
it sings  
perfectly pitched

# BEHOLD THE MAN

---

behold the man  
not clad for crucifixion  
with cross and crown

but as an urchin  
at my door  
a piece of bread  
some water please  
she says

I explore her face  
she's about four-  
her mother's crouched  
behind the fence-  
and I find her  
beautiful

wait here  
I answer  
for I will not  
let her in  
with warts on her feet  
and lice-ridden hair

but she's beautiful  
for it's the eyes  
beneath the crown  
that scan me  
with transcendent dignity

and when she's gone  
closing the gate carefully  
in case I shout  
I am glad  
I was here  
in this dull town  
when  
he needed bread

it's the cup  
I should have given him  
at Calvary

# SELF ESTIMATE

---

few

lay out

large landscapes

thousands

sow seeds

sweep paths

mow lawns

rake leaves

you

put a broom

not a pen

in my hand

lest I forget

clean corners

create

livable land

# ON HEARING ST MATTHEW'S PASSION IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

---

I sat in King's College Chapel  
under the foliage of fans  
cream colored stone  
set with crowns  
tracery of choir  
work of genius  
work of hands

I saw the Ruben's altarpiece  
sumptuous in that setting  
Christ centrally placed  
adoration traced  
in forward line of Magi-  
a work of inspiration  
their worship will not cease

I heard St Matthew's Passion  
the pathos of choral cry  
circling soaring  
gathering high  
hearer's devotion  
Lord is it I?  
Lord is it I?

what works of art are these  
when set beside  
the splendor of the evening sky?



but afterwards I went outside  
and found people pushing  
students pedaling  
lights on every level  
clouding that sky

and I was glad  
some men had mirrored God

# AFTER CHRISTMAS

---

the holly and the ivy

turkey

cranberry

so sorry

another trolley

don't touch!

the holly and the ivy

can I have it, Mummy?

ham

cherries

cake

Christmas crackers

the holly and the ivy

more cards

jelly

chocolate chip cookies

DON'T TOUCH!

where's Santa Claus?

I want Skipper

not Barbie

sage or rosemary?

onions

breadcrumbs

the holly and the ivy

the holly and the ivy

THE HOLLY AND THE IVY

neither shall

I meet you

under the mistletoe

around the  
red-ribboned wreath  
in the candles' glow  
nor in church  
the slow oven  
twenty for dinner

perhaps  
I can greet you  
after Christmas  
Christ

# IF

---

if Satan  
had taken  
that first  
vile thought  
and rung its neck

if Eve  
had faced  
Satan and said  
God says

if Judas  
had hung  
that first  
sinful thought

if Hitler  
had lasered  
Jew-hate  
from his heart

and so on  
even me...

an atom  
can create  
chaos

Christ cleanse me!

# TIMES SQUARE 1976

---

the crowd slowly shuffles  
around Times Square  
the air bites  
the people pause, stare  
stare at the sign  
six live nude girls  
tourists, perverts, children  
the swindler sells his wares  
police sirens blare  
wail in the distance  
and food everywhere  
steaks, clams, ice-cream  
the people stuff themselves  
but their despair  
bleak as the bitter air  
lingers  
and faces void  
they cannot hear  
the shrieks of the mad  
old woman  
the preacher on the bin  
above the crowd  
shouts salvation  
but the air  
bitter  
snatches his words  
and the glare  
hides his form  
and the people who stare  
do not see him

do not hear

and hope is gone

# NORFOLK BROADS

---

the land lay  
unmarred and unremarkable  
flat with an  
occasional curve

men came  
and cut  
millions of bags  
of peat  
carting them  
to cold cottages  
leaving great  
scarred craters

water flowed  
craters turned to lakes  
rushes and wild  
poppies grew  
ducks  
from far flew  
windmills spun

swans sail  
on still nights  
and misty mornings  
yachts at moorings  
laughter

the Broads  
resplendent and serene

unmarred  
better after-  
like your hand  
on scarred lives



# PATCHWORK

---

each patch  
means  
precision  
and decision  
for the transition  
between  
mess and masterpiece  
is measured  
in minute stitches

and Lord  
not only in patchwork

# LATE START

---

I crawled on my belly  
for twenty years  
straining my head upwards  
bumping my nose on the floor  
perverse I feared  
I dared not walk  
it seemed that I should die  
that God was oblivious to my cry  
for he only said  
get up and walk, my child

in the end there was nothing  
else for me to do  
but lift my belly off the floor  
and sway on my knees  
and then  
but I could not  
I would not stand  
look up, my child  
I am here, he said

I stood  
I staggered  
I was a reeling ship  
the sky turned and tipped  
I stretched my hands  
I took a step  
swaying  
and then another  
and the reeling sky stilled

and I laughed for joy  
to be free of the floor and my belly

and I wished  
I had walked  
long ago

# PERFECT IN WEAKNESS

---

if you look  
at this body  
you see  
three eyes  
one sound  
one squint  
one blind  
one arm amputated  
a hand  
of thumbs  
a heart  
like a run-down  
metronome  
the head  
of a defective

yet despite  
the malformed  
the malfunctioning  
despite  
the assault  
of those  
who would  
lock it up  
ethanize it  
fight it

it moves  
irresistibly  
using

these frail parts  
to better display  
the glory of him  
who loved it  
and gave himself  
for it

# MAPS

---

in London  
I left Victoria  
passed Buckingham Palace  
and crossed  
St James's Park  
where the ducks-  
it was early  
and crisply clear-  
fluffed feathers  
then on to  
Trafalgar Square  
where I waited  
for the Sainsbury Wing  
to open  
so I could see  
once again  
its collection  
of medieval Christian art-  
Christ on the cross  
or in the garden  
with a hoe

long ago  
your map for me  
seemed just as plain  
but many times  
I found myself  
in a warren of a maze  
or off the beaten track  
or in a dark deserted place

yet looking back  
gave courage to continue  
I was amazed  
your grace sufficient Lord  
you made the crooked places straight  
you held my hand  
you lit the way

one day  
I shall see you  
Lord  
face to face

# IN THE HOTEL LOUNGE

---

she was toddling off  
to watch TV  
there was a program  
about the price of funerals  
it's scandalous, she said  
I want to know  
what I'm in for

it seemed funny to me  
merely middle-aged  
and she seventy  
that she could be  
so practical  
about the price of death  
and so  
unconcerned with the fact

I had little tact  
and said my piece  
and so the  
conversation collapsed  
and we started on  
the price of coffee  
which was also scandalous  
after staring at  
our cups in silence

I wondered if everything  
has a price  
so that even death's



awesomeness becomes mundane  
death after all  
can't be equated  
with the cost of coffee  
there's more to it than that

she couldn't do it  
with her mind clicking  
like a cash register  
but imagine her meeting  
God  
for the first time  
especially when cash-  
which has occupied her mind  
for the best part of a century-  
collapses

what will she say?  
she can't talk  
of coffee then  
and she won't just be  
disintegrating comfortably  
in her lead-lined  
bargain box

# LODDEN IN ENGLAND

---

a stone church  
stands in Lodden  
a town on the  
River Chet  
where we moored  
for a night

and yet  
I have never forgotten  
that church  
for the churchyard  
blooming with meadow flowers  
is filled with tombstones  
of forbears  
and of those whose  
families still  
place posies or pray

and I have  
never forgotten  
for all those tombstones  
face the church  
like a great congregation  
waiting the day  
when those who have sat in it  
and those who forgot  
when all will say  
those who have said  
and those who have not  
Jesus Christ is Lord!

# DROUGHT

---

our land is dead  
where grass grew  
desert reigns  
a few cows  
survive  
stare at us  
huge humps of bone  
brown as desert stone

the blood filled  
ticks are gone  
the milk filled  
cows are gone  
the grass filled  
fields are gone

our land lies raped  
the stripped sky  
draped high and hazy  
grips  
until blood runs sand

I read about  
rain on just and unjust  
about Nineveh  
our cattle cry  
our people crave  
living water  
rain on our land Lord!

reign over us!

# SONG

---

there is a song  
somewhere  
I hear it distant  
beyond recall  
unlike the memory  
of sand and shore  
this song sang  
and disappeared  
beyond recall

I hear it  
now and then  
when blossom springs  
or boughs are bent  
I meant to sing it  
but it went  
beyond recall

too often  
violent voices  
drown this song  
or indolent  
I do not sing  
bring back your song  
your new new song  
of praise and awe

more than anything  
I would adore

# THE TOUR

---

the tour  
elderly, affluent  
traipse into  
church after church

every village  
in Austria  
green with forests  
and flowered meadows  
has one  
rising above  
wooden roofs  
calling the community  
to worship

the tour  
wanders in and out  
admires the graves  
bright with tulips  
and spring flowers  
stares at paintings  
marble, gold-leaf  
Passion Week carvings  
the cross

some  
talk of trinkets  
others mind-boggled  
stay outside in the sun  
under the maypole

one or two pray

centuries ago

could those people

have dreamt

that in future generations

in secular cities

their toil and sacrifice

would still witness

sow the seed

in some tourist's heart

proclaim

the glory of God?

# THE CARPENTER

---

in Nazareth  
there were houses  
with doors  
made by him  
people sat  
at tables  
made by him  
and perhaps stacked  
pots on shelves  
made by him

he was a carpenter  
an artisan  
not an artist  
not for him  
the carved statue  
the painted pomegranate  
the frieze  
above the lintel

he who made  
the lilies of the field  
the sea, the gulls  
the might of mountains  
humbled himself  
became flesh  
and lived with us –  
a carpenter

I am the door



he said  
and died for us

# FIRST WORLD INDUSTRY

---

comfortable church  
in comfortable country  
collects  
clothes  
corn  
cholera cures

did you see  
the corpses in Rwanda?  
the killing?  
the kids?

tons and tons jet off  
see CNN  
feel comfortable now  
the closet's empty

comfortable country  
contributes aid  
sells arms, aircraft  
grows rich on war

before we sold  
the people would pillage  
a village  
would be burnt

now thousands  
tramp death's march  
skeletons drag

to stench  
of Cholera Camp

shout!  
SHOUT!

the silent church  
a sleek contented  
fireside cat  
turns its head  
to Satan's profit  
grossly fat

Christ  
condemns that

# MY FATHER IN CENTRAL PARK

---

so you sat  
in Central Park  
like these men  
staring at their feet  
or glazed  
beyond the people  
on the paths  
among the rose-beds  
cameras slung

you faced retrenchment  
of another kind  
you did not want  
promotion to the top  
you'd sat atop  
the ladder far too long

and so they put  
you out to graze  
gave you a splendid  
empty office  
silent phone and fax

and so you sat  
in Central Park  
waited, wondered  
as the world went by  
I am sure you prayed

and when those

six sad silent  
months had passed  
you set off  
on the last lap  
of your three-score  
years and ten

you built a church  
you preached the Word  
the corporate world had gone  
and those last years  
so threatened by despair  
were best of all  
crowning a proud career

# WALKING ALONE

---

walking alone

I see

other women

walking alone

out for exercise

she's eighty

she stops, stares

takes my arm

says

what a lovely day!

what a lovely day

Lord!

I saw

pastel primulas

in the park

children at play

guinea-fowl

chucking

under the trees

if I had

stayed indoors

I would have seen

none of these

I've been walking alone

but never alone

talking to you, Lord

# BARREN SURFACES

---

earth was skinless  
cattle had consumed  
leaf and root  
leaving it destitute

plastic bags proclaimed  
stores near villages  
that sat still  
on arid African earth

we rode it  
for ten years  
in our cool Mercedes

then it rained  
the kind of rain  
other places receive

a month later  
the skin-graft was complete  
endless flowers grew  
yellow, blue

pray for rain –  
seeds cover our  
barren surfaces too

# IN A CAGE

---

I am a bird  
blue in a cage  
swinging on a  
smooth machined stick  
I have run a circle  
countless times  
like some insane thing  
on the swing  
ring the bell  
kiss the mirror  
grip the tail  
of a plastic mate  
stretch my wings  
but never fly  
protected by bars  
until I die

what if the bottom  
of my cage fell out?  
would I die  
that day  
killed by a butcher-bird  
hunting the sky?  
but I would give  
the next five years  
for such a day  
to stretch my wings  
to fly  
free in the sunbeams  
to feel the grass



see a pond  
sway in a tree  
eat a seed  
soft and fresh  
sniff a weed  
find a friend

thank God  
we  
are not  
pretty playthings!

# HEAR MY PRAYER

---

large brown eyes stare helpless  
pleading dull and tired  
hot hot hands flesh-fevered  
apple-cheeked and dry

my son, sick again!  
helpless as the weakest plant  
in the garden bed droops beneath the sun  
droops and the day has long to go  
the unknown wind may blow  
hot breath across you yet

little plant, I have done all I can  
you are sheltered watered staked to a twig  
God must guard you now  
remove the wind and bring the mist

Lord hear my prayer!

# POND

---

I saw a larva  
on a reed deep  
in a clear green pond  
slowly creeping up  
but as it crept  
it spread and split  
until a whole new part  
hung upon the old  
it clung until  
bedraggled wings  
began to fill  
turning crumpled rags  
to sparkling gauze  
and then a pause

suddenly  
a swift spring  
shattered the water  
a dragonfly  
shimmered the surface

God can change us too  
like that

# CHOICE

---

it's a beautiful world

Lord

it's yours

and everything in it

here's a posy

Lord

it's yours

I cannot give it

if I could

pluck a star

it's yours

Lord

I could not give it

take my will

Lord

it's all

that I can give

you do not own

yet giving it

I am your own

# MARATHON

---

athletes all  
flags flutter  
clubs chatter  
t-shirts  
running shoes  
first aid stall

I sprint  
in early morning light  
crisp crystal air  
joyous in rising sun

at noon  
high sun sears  
I run  
dogged  
wet

sunset  
stagger  
foot  
after  
foot

last hill looms  
sheer rock face  
night  
but light  
laurel leaves  
crown

my race  
but  
your grace –  
sufficient

# RAIN

---

rain clatters on tin  
insistently  
closing conversation

we sit listening  
yet all this din  
is just so many  
lightly touching drops

justice too  
is just as many  
quiet stands  
which all together  
make a nation  
like tiny drops  
verdant lands

laws of nature  
laws of justice  
both our  
God demands

# MR CHAPATI IN CAPE TOWN

---

I call him  
Mr Chapati  
the surgeon said  
fine set of teeth  
must have eaten  
many curries  
the skull sat  
unconcerned  
on the sofa

I stared at my skull  
so white so shiny  
suffocated  
I woke  
rushed from the room

in church  
the 12th century hymn  
still sung  
the old, the young  
comforted me

but  
heart is not enough  
tradition  
is not enough

it made me  
think  
and think



I thought of Christ

then truth convinced

then heart and head

held hands

then I was sure

that though

my white and shiny skull

may end

in far-off land

with these eyes

I shall see God

# WALL STREET

---

call the bank!

Wall Street slumps

panic in houses

worse than 1929

will it

or won't it?

miles of faceless folk

brokers in business dress

worshippers in Money Hall

running

running

running

what will we do

without money?

walk in the park

consider the lilies

the sparrow's fall

and when it recovers

it's a temporary

correction after all

remember the lilies

the sparrow's fall

# MERCIES

---

Lord, give them  
journeying mercies  
I prayed

they were delayed  
arriving later  
than anticipated  
but unscathed

years after  
they said  
they were stuck  
in their car  
crouched with crowbar  
on that dark  
thug-ridden road

and I thought  
of your mercies  
of which I know not

# UNAWARE

---

the grass seemed still  
not a blade stirred  
until  
I looked at it  
and saw  
concatenated networks  
high level roads  
monorails  
on which ants sped  
I saw them pull  
a dead  
cricket by its legs  
carry food  
touch and talk  
while overhead  
the butterfly  
and locust  
circle down to land  
earthworks  
shift the sand  
and earthworms  
mining mud  
pass it through  
their bellies  
  
they can't envisage  
our vast view  
  
yet you  
looked down

in mercy  
and visited  
us

# QUESTION

---

does it matter  
this form in the gutter?

fragile as porcelain  
or puny fledgling  
flung from the nest  
or fetus curled  
in the womb

drunk or dying?

I wish I could be sure  
he was drunk

look down  
and keep on going

but my son  
would need a Samaritan

# JUST A SCRAP

---

just a scrap  
a small wee scrap  
of humanity

gone  
gone before she saw the light of day  
or breathed  
or sucked  
what more to say?

stillborn  
it's nothing –  
she did not live  
she was not here

and yet of all things  
she most dear  
had twined herself  
inside my womb  
around my heart  
she still lives on  
though lying under grassy sod  
among children loved by others

forgive my thoughts, God

# WHAT IS MAN?

---

what is man  
with Jupiter lightning lashed  
and Io volcanic  
and the possibility  
of infinite galaxies  
must we panic?

but never mind man  
what am I  
crawling on a  
quarter acre of earth?  
less than an atom  
I am nothing  
the creating force  
can't orbit me  
except on a drawing-board  
to reflect his ingenuity

but once more  
what is man  
having discovered diatoms  
twenty-nine thousand  
varieties counted so far  
and all as different  
as snowflakes, fingerprints  
Faberge, flying saucers  
Le Corbusier, Brancusi –  
all crawling in the mud  
or concentrated  
in cities on the sea –



and what of the smaller things  
as yet unseen?

of course  
minute things  
make man monumental  
reducing computer statistics  
to simple sums  
so I believe  
in a personal orbit

all of which makes me forget  
my original question  
and consider rather  
the chasmatic  
immensity behind it

our Father

# GOING HOME

---

I'll go to hell  
if this tips  
we swayed  
up the hill  
an odd lot  
jammed along  
the sides  
the back open  
I hung on to my  
parcels and prayed  
it's one way  
of getting home  
and those who  
can't afford better  
are grateful

I don't go to church  
she said above  
the flapping breeze  
or read the Bible  
I'll go to hell

her dress was spotted  
her hands red and raw  
her rent clutched  
in a paper packet

the three old women  
looked at each other  
uncertain yet knowing

the large black man  
sat impassive  
the girls giggled

I was out of place  
with my rings  
and shopping  
you can go to church  
and read the Bible  
it's never too late  
I said slowly, clearly

they all stared  
and she smiled  
she was not only poor  
and simple  
but kind  
if she had not  
been there  
we would not have  
reached the top  
of the hill  
laughing, friendly  
even the man smiled  
said goodbye

our Father  
I pray for your child

# THIS CHRISTMAS

---

I am sad  
I think  
of others too  
sad  
at this  
glad Christmas time

bells chime  
I smile  
grief mustn't  
darken  
children's days  
bury grief  
deep within  
sing praise

and there is  
much to praise  
a Christian  
mother's ways  
how you kept her  
to the end  
sing praise

you came  
you wept  
you understand

and I am glad  
this sad Christmas

you came

surely you have  
borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows

sing praise!

# ROSE

---

a room full of roses  
was my desire  
red as rubies  
warm as fire  
and sweet as summer's  
country briar

but the rose  
bore a single bloom  
for it struggled in clay  
water was scarce  
dew never washed its face  
the sun was fierce

yet I picked it  
pale pink  
to bloom in my room  
and loved it  
for life was there  
where it stood  
in a small glass jar  
not as good  
as a room full of roses  
but far better than none  
pale pink and being

even God can use one

# FOR MRS GREEN

---

once there was an orchard  
blossom and bent boughs  
sunlight and laughter  
and little girls cuddling rabbits  
and an old manse  
and Sunday lunch  
and love to spare  
and now we have a  
parking lot there

once there was a church  
with steeple and  
stained glass cross  
with peace  
and the presence of Jesus  
with us  
and the choir  
and Harvest Festival  
bringing the country to town  
and now it's being  
knocked down

once there was a man  
to whom children  
listened with upturned faces  
from whom  
adults took courage  
and who gave grandparents peace  
and now he has gone  
where his spirit has long been

but time cannot remove  
a vision once seen



# SPOILT

---

God said  
this is my gift to you

and she grabbed the parcel  
and took out  
life  
beauty  
position  
intellect  
wealth  
love  
scarcely giving them a glance

then she shook the wrappings  
turned the box upside down  
feverishly looking  
for something  
which was not there  
how could he!

and she died of despair

# PASSING FACES

---

a living book  
faces passing  
in the street  
some I would  
not like to  
meet  
in an alley  
but here  
in the avenue  
dappled, green  
with tourists  
children  
I pass  
serene

but I cannot  
forget  
what I have  
seen  
where have these  
people been  
furtively trudging  
on quiet, quiet  
feet?

I slot them  
into categories  
and walk  
at ease  
a 20th century

Pharisee

but you  
have been there  
in those  
streets of sludge  
you have seen  
you have borne

you shall judge

# HOGSBACK

---

on Sunday we walked  
in the forest  
and saw  
berries  
red, orange  
plump plum colored ones  
we saw  
redwoods  
from America  
here  
in the middle of Africa  
straight  
amid twisted jungle

we saw  
the church  
on the hill  
and the child  
on the horse  
and the hikers  
huddled in tents  
and we walked  
and talked  
and did you?  
I did  
I thought  
of a hill and a man and a tree

# SMALL TALK

---

the eminent lawyer  
turned to me  
at dinner  
and said  
I believe in  
the essential goodness  
of man

and I  
housewife  
among distinguished guests  
said  
I believe in  
the essential badness  
of man

it did not  
encourage conversation  
over crystal and lace

it's wrong to steal  
I think, don't you?  
sighed the elegant widow  
idly toying  
with a golden coffee cup  
of course, I replied  
amazed  
she did not  
seem too sure

the good-looking blonde  
concerned  
about Aids  
had read a book –  
just out –  
and recommended it

life's a party!  
interjected  
the octogenarian  
cheerfully chomping pavlova

the others discussed  
last night's play  
had I read the review?  
the concert before  
the embassy do –  
a bore –  
next week's fun

I went home wondering

next time  
I would place  
my candle  
prominently  
among crystal and lace

let your light so shine

# ONE OF THOSE

---

God –  
a perfectly acceptable  
topic of conversation  
I can even say  
I pray  
it won't  
disturb the tea party  
discomfort neighbors

but whose God?  
my God?  
Muhammad's God?  
Jews' God?

mention Christ  
people start to stare  
I am religious  
one of those

but better be  
one of those  
better offend them  
than him  
who gave himself  
for me

and who knows?  
my tactless talk  
might touch  
one of those

taking tea



# IN MEMORY OF MARY MAGDALENE

---

nothing disturbed the still  
drab firs that stood  
heads bent in the  
grey-walled cemetery  
on the hill  
although the motorway whizzed  
and a shrill siren screamed  
somewhere  
but the cemetery  
had always been there  
with the dingy signs  
and ancient coffee shop –  
brush strokes on the screen  
not marked nor seen

only on the odd occasion  
when walking into town  
I saw it there  
I saw it there  
and thought of sod  
on me and God  
I even read the epitaphs  
of those long dead  
and was surprised  
at how few years they spent  
in these old houses  
round this plot  
that we are tarding up  
with paint and pot plants

quaint old lamps  
pale pink shutters  
shiny gutters

I read and liked  
loved wife and mother  
although I did not care  
for rest in peace  
some epitaphs are trite some true  
but when I think of you  
what you could say of her  
long dead but living in her deeds  
I pray that when I die  
it may be said of me  
she did her best for you

# ALONE

---

it's not  
leaving antiques  
lovingly collected  
or etchings  
carefully selected  
or our home  
dressed at last  
like a bride

my barns are full  
I do not crave  
to build another  
or hold them fast

it's those companions  
on the way  
I cannot leave  
my love  
and little loves  
and little little loves  
that you have given  
to walk with me

yet if I strive  
to keep them  
I must know  
that in the end  
I stand alone

and yet, dear God

I pray  
above all else  
that when  
on that great day  
I stand alone  
they may be there  
  
though each alone

# A SOWER

---

it's not  
a head-turning house  
the traveler  
hurtling down the highway  
across the fields  
would pass it  
unheeded  
save for the garden  
filled each year  
with flowers  
of several sorts and shades  
set around a sign  
JESUS SAVES

the house is there  
the fields are there  
but now  
the flowers have gone

the sign  
in black and white  
stands out  
from grass and scrub  
yet one day  
it too  
will disappear

circumstances change  
but truth remains  
Jesus saves

and those  
who sow  
flowers of faith  
pass the fragrance on

# HEADLINES SEPTEMBER 2002

---

floods in Cape Town  
worst in forty years  
World Conference  
Against Racism  
in Durban

imprisoned by water  
she said  
I am an old  
black woman  
eighty-three  
bedridden  
in a shack  
it was  
awash with water  
my bed was soaked  
my coat too  
I was hungry  
very very cold  
and all alone

how much longer  
must I endure  
this life?  
I asked myself

Mama  
can I come in?  
she sat and  
held my hand

we talked under  
the dripping roof  
then she brought  
blankets, hot food  
swept the water  
from the shack

she isn't black  
how could  
a white woman  
dare to come  
where murder happens  
night and day?

my name is Linda  
this is how  
I serve the Lord  
was all she said

getting back to the headlines  
the problem of race  
is a problem  
in the conference hall  
but not in the hearts  
and deeds  
of simple Samaritans



# SEARCH

---

Satan  
has taken  
men's minds  
said  
search for God

so Druids dance  
under the moon  
others sit  
contemplate  
ancient wisdoms  
hang crystals  
round their necks

a mother  
circles stones  
lights a candle  
under  
cancer bed

their minds are full  
of the search for God  
a God who helps  
a God who heals  
the New Age  
has dawned

devilishly deceived  
they do not see  
the Son of God

has come

to search for them

# SOUNDS

---

I think of sounds  
that I love  
of great chords  
crashing on the shore  
of wind threading  
through reeds  
of the percussive crack  
of lightning  
and the drum roll  
beaten on black clouds  
of crickets and frogs  
serenading  
in the dark spring garden  
of the swift soothing  
song of the stream  
and I dream  
of the silence  
in the heart of the forest  
between  
the woodpecker's rap

I think of sounds  
that I love  
the songs of praise  
Psalms  
and I know  
that you hear  
the lone voice  
on the hill  
as clear

and as dear  
as a mighty massed choir

and I thank you  
Lord  
that I too  
can sing

# SEAGULLS

---

I have watched gulls  
beside many shores  
and found them all the same  
unchanged by  
circumstance or situation

calm and content  
as retired executives  
they strut across the sand  
or stand like statues  
admired on the wall  
or float like languid  
vacationers  
lazily on the breeze  
before an idle flap  
a turn  
a gentle run to land

yet watch them  
when the water grays  
when the whipped white foam  
jabs and swirls  
when they call  
sweep wheel whirl  
without fear  
riding the cold current  
as if danger brings them near  
to him who watches  
each one fall

for then they fly!

# PALM TREE

---

the woman on the ground floor  
stared at a trunk  
it's pointless, she wailed

the man on the second floor  
contemplated curved fronds  
it's pointless, he wept

the woman on the top floor  
gazed down on dates  
it's pointless, she whined

the man across the street  
saw a stately palm  
what a design! he exclaimed

God  
does not always grant  
an all-embracing view

# CANDIES

---

candies dash  
down shoots  
spill on conveyors  
fast as  
leaves in flood  
or commuters  
cast from  
rush-hour rail-road

eyes watch  
hands wait  
dart  
eradicate scrap  
unwrapped  
sort

only one chance  
or quality control  
forever past  
as flawed candies  
cascade into bins

like little sins  
unrepented  
unremoved  
denude a Christian's life



# INSIGHT IN THE STORE

---

I'm cross  
I need  
another gold bangle  
but this morning  
he said  
wait for our  
next pay check

so here I am  
in the store  
tossing  
croissants  
bagels  
buns  
round milk loaves  
rye  
rolls  
pumpernickel  
poppy seeded  
French loaves  
country style –  
three each –  
into the trolley

an unutterable  
bore

but while  
I pack then  
I suddenly see

her  
reaching  
hopeless hands  
for bread

my attitude  
jets  
to gratitude  
my kids  
are fed

Lord  
have mercy on her –  
and more  
on me

# A DAY IN TOWN

---

she was odd –  
I had heard –  
a missionary  
retired

I met her  
with trepidation  
being somewhat  
restrained

on the escalator  
at lunch  
in the tree-lined  
mall  
at the travel agent's

praise God!  
I pray for  
these street children!  
for all  
lunching here!

in the store  
I see your  
name is  
John –  
gift of God –  
are you?

dancing  
she sang

Jewish songs  
for handicapped  
Jews

introduced  
the travel agent  
to God  
as if  
he stood beside her

it was a flood  
that could not  
be contained

I saw suspicion  
turn to gladness  
strangers listen

and I do not think  
God  
thought her odd

# CHRYSANTHEMUMS

---

on a rosewood table  
from a mustard pot  
chrysanthemums  
morning beauty spills  
golden white and purple

more beautiful here  
than the bright beds  
where so many  
with such a throng  
of bees and butterflies  
were  
so bright  
so beautiful  
but were  
so many

it is here  
in the still room  
now darkened  
in late afternoon  
that they shine  
spilling  
ever opening buds  
if they were  
in the garden now  
I could not say  
glorious God!

# WITCHES

---

innocence has fled  
witches are no longer  
confined to fairy stories  
or to dancing round  
Shakespeare's cauldron  
or among the heathen  
in distant distant lands  
witchcraft's shroud  
is shaken off  
it stands barefaced  
in the final assault  
of its master  
for the soul of modern man

it is not remote  
it is not the  
esoteric practice  
of a few lost souls  
on lonely English moors

adultery, uncleanness, lasciviousness  
witchcraft, hatred, strife  
envying, murders, drunkenness  
it sits comfortably  
in Paul's long list  
of things that confront us  
so frequently today  
they fail to affront us

thank God for the protection  
of the blood of his Son

against this most awful activity!

# ON THE BENCH

---

a little  
makes no difference!

we need  
billions –  
politicians?  
glitzy glamorous galas  
at \$500 a head

half-blind, lame  
good morning  
good morning  
he said  
in summer's heat  
and winter's rain  
while eyes downcast  
we scurried past

frail bent as a  
withering flower  
she said  
good morning  
put an apple  
bread and butter  
beside him  
on the bench

this winter  
the bench is bare  
is he dead?



but she  
did it to you  
gave him bread

# YACHT

---

to pray  
to know my mayday  
call received

and then to wait

patiently  
prayerfully  
with praise

not cast adrift  
by fate  
to wreck on reef

but as a yacht  
gale battered  
enters bay  
in full sail  
and sunlight  
I shall land

covered, kept  
in Almighty hand

# AS A ROARING LION

---

silent, deserted  
placid beneath  
the setting sun  
the scene is set

the muddy water-hole  
waits  
along the well-worn  
ways  
wend countless hooves  
bushes quiver, part  
bucks exposed shiver  
nose towards the river  
expecting explosions  
some ever watchful sip  
others stand taut  
the roar  
shatters silence  
arrow-shot  
they stampede  
stretching leaping  
flanked by lionesses

a buck is cut off  
proud in his prime  
the lion's stride lengthens  
the buck leaps  
twists  
exquisite in terror  
a mighty paw

unerringly lashes  
gashes glistening hindquarters  
the buck crashes  
mute

an aged lion  
magnificent mane mottled  
fur worn  
patched black  
scorn of the pride  
preys on the unprotected  
the young, the old, the weak  
the wasted, stricken  
by drought and disease  
no state is spared

insatiable  
the devil stalks

but I will not cringe  
I will not run numb  
dumb with dread  
I will seize  
shield and sword  
I will stand steadfast  
I will see  
that lion flee

for I am Christ's

# 3653 DAYS TO FREEDOM

---

Solzhenitsyn wrote  
of a single day  
in a Siberian  
labor camp  
how one man  
Ivan Denisovich  
spent it  
how he savored a crust  
endured such deprivation  
waited to be free

how he observed  
a fellow prisoner –  
a Baptist –  
secretly the Gospels  
in a crack  
reading  
praying

nibbling his crust  
turning it  
this way and that  
sipping black  
cabbage soup  
Ivan could see  
he was happy  
he was not waiting  
he was free

for where

the Spirit of the Lord is  
there is freedom –

even there

# SUNDAY AT THE SEA

---

early morning  
a perfect day –  
thank God  
for Sundays –  
sea mist  
shades the rising sun  
we pass them  
as we drive  
to church  
along Beach Road

runners  
already red and wet  
walkers  
twisting torsos  
octogenarians  
tottering  
on new knees  
oh! the foam  
on our shoulders  
when we were young!

all Sunday  
fitness fanatics  
run run run

and souls  
are tucked in bed  
asleep

# AMARYLLIS IN A POT

---

a single stem  
four red flowers  
it took  
my breath away

two more bloomed  
delighting us  
then died

our son was sick  
so sick  
we prayed  
unceasingly

I found the amaryllis  
forgotten in a corner  
sending up a  
strong new stem

and thought of  
flowers in fields  
for which you care

of resurrection  
answered prayer



# MY WORLD

---

in my world

I wash windows

bake cakes

make home

home

from these windows

the city, well-known

oak avenue

Parliament

ocean

known too

other cities

yet so few

when I consider

all the cities

of the world

past comprehension

I can't conceive

the universe

my universe

revolves

within these walls

beyond conception

I could even

cut Creator

but

he walked our world –  
came knocking  
at my door

# AMSTERDAM 1976

---

such contrast  
the calm canal  
guarded by lamplights  
trees sprouting spring  
pavements without people  
night kissing all

into this scene  
stepped our daughter  
she was scarcely thirteen  
yet wonder awakened  
in her look  
she shook her hair  
she spread her arms  
she spun –  
night and she were one!

she did not see the glare  
the harsh headlights hurtling  
nor hear the hooter's blast  
I thought her dead  
gone  
such contrast beside still water

thank you  
Father  
for sparing our daughter

# SECOND CHANCE

---

speaking on tv  
cured of cancer  
he said  
I'm grateful to God  
for a second chance

and I thought  
there are so many  
second chances  
thank God –  
not only cures

every morning  
brings new mercies  
every spring  
brings promise  
every hurt healed  
brings hope

and Christmas –  
ring the bells!  
tell the world –  
brings a second chance  
for all

# WHO?

---

few are famous  
more infamous  
yet they  
influence us  
what we wear  
what we do  
what we think  
of rain forests

a young man  
walked each day  
to college  
for five long years  
under cherry blossom  
for five long years  
in bitter snow

he listened  
as theologians talked  
what did they say?  
what didn't they say?  
could they  
have molded clay?

only God  
and Joseph Stalin know

who sits  
in my class  
today?

# LABEL

---

a label  
on a wrapper  
for a little  
chocolate

I must  
choose colors  
combinations  
contrasts  
consider costs

so it  
stands out  
is distinctive  
bold  
makes the brand

like me –  
labeled  
Christian

I must  
choose  
consider  
be distinctive  
bold  
take my stand

there's not  
much difference

Lord  
forgive me  
when  
I count the cost

# ON TURNING EIGHTEEN

---

my baby  
born eighteen  
years ago  
leaves girlhood  
laughing  
an opening flower  
virgin snow  
singing  
a new chapter  
a new look  
dancing  
the open cage  
distant land

Lord  
let her not be  
cut  
crushed  
caught  
but cradled  
in your hand



# I WALK IN THE STEPS

---

I walk in the steps  
of three wise men  
carrying gifts  
to Bethlehem

I walk to worship  
the babe in the stall  
whose birth reveals  
the Lord of all

the gifts I bring  
are those he gave me  
life, purpose  
liberty

my gift to him  
will be to use  
those gifts as  
he himself will choose

# POOR APPAREL

---

come, my child  
a long journey lies ahead  
see what I've made for you

here is a dress of fine cotton  
cool in summer's heat  
for the sun that has loved you  
will beat you and burn

here is a coat –  
well may you gasp –  
made from the finest furs  
to warm you in winter  
when winds are cruel  
for breezes have only  
kissed your curls  
but winter is cruel

and here is a scarf  
spun by silkworms in Eden  
bright gold to remind you of glory  
and here are some shoes  
for your feet that have trod  
on velvet moss  
will tramp on thorn and thistle

now go, my child  
I see your eyes aglow  
but these clothes  
though made with my own hands

are poor apparel  
for lost Eden's queen

# CORONET

---

it almost  
went down  
the refuse chute  
with the other leaves  
but I stuck it  
by chance  
in a potted palm

nothing happened  
it stayed there  
for months  
and often  
I almost  
tossed it away

finally  
one small leaf  
appeared  
then another  
I planted it  
in a plastic pot  
more leaves appeared  
I replanted it  
in a costly cup

now  
in mid winter  
when all is  
wet and sear  
here

in my sitting room  
the violet  
presents  
a purple coronet  
on green velvet

and this being  
of rare beauty  
almost  
went down the chute

mute  
as an aborted babe  
made  
in your image

# NIGHT FALLS

---

night falls

suddenly

I am alone

electric light

chills

I fear footfalls

under the window

doorknobs twisting

furtively

silence

I turn on the tv

then switch it off

it deadens danger

I listen

I am always

listening

I hear

the old house

complaining

the bougainvillea

banging on the roof

the mouse

scurrying

I listen

and hear my heart

suddenly

I revolt

switch off the light

go to bed –

for I remember

you count

each hair

on my head

# PRINCESS

---

Papa's Princess  
just four

Papa! Papa!  
I fell  
I'm sore!

Papa kisses  
Princess better  
the sun  
comes out again

and then  
what fun!  
a real chateau  
a real chateau  
in France  
all for  
themselves  
for one whole month  
such fun  
such fun  
in store!

on a hill  
with forests  
all around  
and a river  
right at  
their front door!



we'll wear crowns!

we'll dance!

oh Papa! Papa!

I couldn't

love you more!

and I thought

I too

a true Princess

daughter of

the King!

# EASTER 2004

---

standing on the  
terrace  
I watched the  
moon  
white and weaving  
between  
grey clouds on  
black sky

imagine  
making the moon!

sitting on the  
terrace  
eating eggs and toast  
I watched the  
mist  
drift gauze-like  
from the sea

imagine  
making mist!

or a mouse  
a tiny twitching  
nose  
hiding in the hedge

or a man  
imagine making a

man  
making him in  
your image!

no  
I can't imagine

but  
I can see  
I can read  
and so I know  
of how you brought  
us back to you –

of love beyond  
all thought

# LIGHTS CHRISTMAS 2003

---

is that the star  
shining high  
in Bethlehem's  
holy silent sky?

why no!  
it's Father Christmas  
an obscene  
red balloon  
bobbing  
bobbing  
beneath  
a wintry moon

merry Christmas folks!  
ho! ho! ho!  
reindeer tripping  
in the snow

hung with lights  
tall trees tower  
strung with lights  
malls aglow  
sung with carols  
shoppers choose  
umpteenth bottles  
of Christmas booze

if Christ came  
walking

down the mall  
and saw these  
celebrations  
of the coming  
of the Light  
would he weep  
be meek and mild?

remember  
the merchants  
he drove from  
the Temple  
remember his words  
of dread warning

oh! oh! oh!  
can you hear  
cries of woe  
horses neighing  
in the sky?

can you see  
him coming  
as the Judge  
as King?  
glory to God  
in the highest  
myriad angels  
sing

remember  
remember  
we are witnesses  
lights  
in a dark  
dark world  
a world that has  
long forgotten  
and is dancing  
blindly  
to doom

# 6.11.04

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6.11.04

BBC news

Arafat

critically ill

his last wish

to be laid to rest

in Jerusalem

an Israeli spokesman

that can never be

Jerusalem

is the burial place

of the kings of the Jews

not of

Palestinian terrorists!

allow me to correct you, sir

Jerusalem

was

the burial place

of the

King of the Jews!

# I AM

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they stoned Stephen  
first  
of many martyrs

preaching  
he heard their  
violence rumble  
like a vast volcano  
about to spew  
he stood and spoke  
undaunted

and now  
each year  
one hundred  
sixty thousand  
Christians die

four girls  
beheaded  
in dark forests  
lie

a nun  
forgive them Lord!  
her cry

read their witness  
on the web –  
and more



of whom  
we hardly hear  
in far-flung places  
round the world  
who dare  
to stand undaunted  
say when asked  
are you a Christian?  
I am  
and die

martyrs are not mad  
but made  
it is a simple  
state of mind  
as clear to them  
as burning bush  
Damascus road

they hear the Word  
and deep inside  
light flares  
so blinding  
that some have burnt  
and others will  
for faith not sight

the constant  
I AM  
crowns  
convinces

still

# REFERENCES

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All King James Version, except Dedication which is New King James version

POEM: On hearing St Matthew's Passion

QUOTE: "is it I?" Mt 26:24 KJV: Judas...said, "Master, is it I?"

POEM: Perfect in weakness

QUOTE: "gave himself for it". Eph 5:25 KJV (...even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it)

POEM: Maps

QUOTE: "grace sufficient". 2 Cor 12:9 KJV (my grace is sufficient for thee)

QUOTE: "made the crooked places straight". Is 45:2 KJV (and make the crooked places straight)

POEM: Lodden in England

QUOTE: "Jesus Christ is Lord!" Phil 2:11 KJV (and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!)

POEM: Drought

QUOTE: "rain on just and unjust". Mt 5:45 KJV (and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust)

POEM: The carpenter

QUOTE: "humbled himself". Phil 2:8 KJV (...he humbled himself)

QUOTE: "I am the door" Jn 10:9 KJV

POEM: Marathon

QUOTE: "grace sufficient". 2 Cor 12:9 KJV (My grace is sufficient for thee)

POEM: Mr Chapati in Cape Town

QUOTE: “with these eyes I shall see God”. Job 19:26, 27 KJV (...in my flesh shall I see God, whom ...my eyes shall behold)

POEM: Wall Street

QUOTE: “consider the lilies”. Mt 6:28 KJV. See also Mt 10:29-31 in connection with “the sparrow’s fall”.

POEM: Small talk

QUOTE: “let your light so shine”. Mt 5:16 KJV

POEM: Witches

QUOTE: “adultery, uncleanness, lasciviousness, witchcraft, hatred, strife, envyings, murders, drunkenness”. Gal 5:19-21 KJV 9. This is abbreviated in the poem).

POEM: 3653 Days to Freedom

Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich” translated by Gillon Aitken, The Bodley Head Ltd, 1971.

POEM: Lights Christmas 2003

See: Rev 8:13 KJV for “cries of woe”

See Rev 9:17-21 KJV “for horses”

QUOTE: “glory to God in the highest” Lk 2:14 KJV

POEM: 6.11.84

QUOTE: “King of the Jews”. Mt 27:37

POEM: I AM

QUOTE: “I AM”. Ex 3:14 KJV “I AM THAT I AM, and he said, say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you”.