

ASSISI

Jay Ramsay

for ARC

for Martin, and the years

preludes

i. Kelston Park

The line a plough makes, and as it turns
is all our beginning, turning, returning
out of the fast gear of all our adrenalin-given
hope-dreamt-drivenness, and fighting
to stand here framed by these pillars in the rain
and watch a tractor ploughing back a field
to bare brown earth, *tabula rasa*
the stones rattling as they catch in its blades
and all we had dominion over, our salvation
our conquest now this taming of ourselves

and the white birds that follow in its wake
become fields of men in walking meditation,
their steps measured by stillness and the sun
where the line is drawn, and we awaken as one.

ii. Assisi

At this end of our daylong pilgrimage into twilight
checking it's the next station stop, he nods (*ah, Assisi !*)
then points out of the window so we have to bend,
or even kneel—

Its lights like stars glowing on the hill
under the uplit Basilica, and the Rocca
islanded in spectral light, bone-white...

and as we climb and climb in our taxi, road after road
into its Holy Night.

introduction

Francis setting out leaving Assisi behind him as the dawn light slowly rises, needing to be alone.

Monte Frumentario: a shell of clean Cistercian stone: at various times a grain store, a cinema, and a series of classrooms... but always a dream house with its different entrances by three different streets, labarynthine

Palazzo of Possibility.

In an alcove near the Basilica on the Piazza San Francesco a man in sackcloth with bare feet is sleeping rough on a single strip of cloth the same as his tunic.

Time stands still in the holy city.

Time is not. The bells ring under the mist.

Francis climbs back to Nature.

Love waits above us, and in the wings.

BASILICA 1.

And the message today is how to die
—Bob Geldof, Live Aid, Wembley Stadium, June 1985

This crowded cave rich with its images
and side chapels flickering in the half light
as the voice breathes *Silenzio...*
even the altar is a tomb.

The moment Francis touched Sister Death
held for all time, his gesture of life
in his stone casket beneath in the sheer rock
like a chimney breast wrapped in a black grille

above the row of perfect white candles
and white satin roses covering the altar step,
while he kneels in his sackcloth robe
his glasses tilted forward on his nose
his bare feet rimed in dirt
his legs reddened with the cold

as we all file round in silence
half-meeting each other's eyes—
what are we doing ? What are we asking for ?
What are we bringing ?

We want to touch sanctity.
We want to learn how to die.

ALBA

1.

Walking in the pre-dawn streets
as if on a mission, hooded in silence
passing out of the hollow arch
of the city gate...

Nothing to say.
Brief humour returning to silence
back on our trackways—
and all the road a climbing.

Brother, save your breath.

The light is coming. Slowly, the light
the cypress trees like black flames in silhouette
at a high bend, and then

everything is being born out of the silence
the first birds' pinpricks of song
as the stars fade one by one

and the mist like a sea of cloud below
the sun will reach and thin to a veil

as we walk in his footsteps
that are also our own

the light slowly rising as we rise

and no comforting signs to say
we're almost there...

Only the pink-rimmed clouds,
only these railings protecting the rich villa
until finally *Eremo di Carceri*, 1km
(‘we’ve only walked 1km ?!’)
above it all.

Above the city
above the olive groves
above the bankers
and the MacDonald's taxis...

we stand at the threshold, and the gates magically open.

2.

He stands in green
rain oxidized bronze
in his tunic and bare feet
with his hands spread

open as the air
on a plinth of rock
all these trees around him
his face raised, awake

resurrected living man
returned to Nature
and Spirit, as one
a circle behind him

an I, returned

into the Circle of Creation.

3.

The ramp with its railing leads down
we come into the courtyard in silence.
Flowers on the edge, the trees plunging below.

A brother stirs inside the building.
Another begins tuning a guitar.
We file down into the chapel to sit.
A sister is busily attending to the pews.

Lectio Divina, if we could just breathe.
Be still and know that I am here.
The birdsong rises from among the trees.
Oh listen, only listen, and you will know.

4.

The bronze brothers gesture
at the edge of the Zona Sacra.
We try to decipher them.
One is simply lying as if asleep
his arms surrendered, stretching back.

The building rises through the curtain of the trees
on what was once anonymous rock.

The chapel without a roof.
Altar and dew-damp pews.
The priest is air and death.

You can walk on and on here.

Returning, the rock covered
in scores of tiny scratched crosses
chalk-white on the grey.

Faith, prayer, hope, magic
in the hands that made them:
pleading for intercession.

5.

At some point, you enter in
at the end of trying.

We find the back way in,
the smallest door you can imagine

its stone frame polished rock-red.
No Entry it says.

You pass inside the rock.
You squeeze inside yourself.

Here it is. Here he was.
Here is a hollow depression in the stone
where his small body slept.

Tiny windows. The valley below.

The silence within. Inside the mountain.
The still small voice. At last, you're listening.

It opens a cave inside your heart
behind, within, above, beneath everything.

And you can enter in.

MEDITATION

By this and this only, we have existed
Which is not to be found in our obituaries
—TS Eliot, *The Waste Land*, V, 405-6

The sun lifting the morning mist,
the print blurring in the evening twilight.

That each site blossoms, a green flower
of woodland and wild walkway
of churchyard alive with wild flowers and bees,
a green pilgrim sanctuary.

Clearing litter, reducing waste, conserving water
but without the heart being moved
it's still the greater desert picture—
it's your life without you.

Show us the way to purification
this tract of anywhere, remembering our passion.

VISION

Over the balcony, and into the morning air
fresh as the rising light where your eyes are flung

Cities of the future emerging out of the mist
down there on the valley plain
out of the sun-dissolved veils of cloud now
detail by detail of the white sides of buildings
and their red-tiled rooves, heralded first by the birdsong

then slowly the sounds of the first cars
the dome of the Temple of Life at the centre still swathed
its soft blue sheen reflecting the sky
the white of the buildings reflecting the cloud

then the farm vehicles, tractors, moving, ploughing
these fallow fields

as the sounds of the morning multiply
birthed into the light

cities where people are taking care
cities where people are walking along a river
that was an eight-lane highway, to work
cities where pilgrims are arriving
from their own Cities of Life

Amritsar Assisi Analborg
Calvia Etchmadiazin Feiburg Haifa
Jerusalem Kano Lou Ghan Tai
Luss Montmelian Seoul Trondheim...

reborn into the light

layer by layer, diaphanous

as the contours slowly sharpen

the sunlight glinting off the cars now
the limitless blue all-encompassing

the sky open to us

And then the crows, raucous, floating
harbingers of shadow and of truth
for where our work begins, and the sun

reveals everything in its time...

CELEBRATION

for HRH Princess Michael of Kent

Your lion's head of hair
your light presence, and open eyes
arriving in the City of Banners
into all the chaos of our coming and going
this centre that is our royalty inside
faith after faith's symbolic sign
and these animals: tiger, peacock, dolphin
the whole of Creation on the move
with ocean and wind, earthquake and volcano

Assisi touched by the hand of lightning
reaching from nave to high altar
shattering our pride in the Name of Love
that comes to bring a sword...Your Finger
reaching out to Adam, to all of us

bumping along in our crocodile
from Basilica to palazzo
where the feast is laid;
gold chairs in lines on one side
steps in shadow on the other
and all we can do together

courteous as a Cherry Blossom dance,
restless as thirty teenagers in blue
who are the future, as you proclaim

Priest in this House of Life
complete as we are, all playing our part
choir and carabinieri: servant and king.

QUESTION

We have lit our candles
we have tied our raksha threads
smiling, and fumbling, onto each other's wrists
we have heard the call of the ocean's whales
and the crying hiss of swifts
and what is that really makes the difference inside?

The cavity of your chest, your sacred place and mountain
where you went within—

having no answer but beginning
having no way but feeling
having no faith but your eyes

your heart's eyes

ILLUMINATION

between two waves of the sea

Something as intangible
as the wind through the olive trees
you say, as we breathe: it's in the small things
moving at a slower pace

so we can feel the ground
of a new universal embrace

free from the noise that clouds
our creative hearts and souls...

faith: not in governments, but ourselves
'put not your faith in kings and princes'
but in who we are, rising
as the earth is turning now

revolution
evolution

this green song in our hearts

knowing Creation is not 'for' us

but the Whole we are a part...

the armadillo
existing for itself
is not an eco-system deliverable
is not a vaccine cow for leprosy
any more than you are a milk cow for money

can we learn to be part of Nature once again ?

all seven billion of us, and rising

needing to realize how we need less
to be free to live, to be

enriched from within

but having nothing within
to still be prisoners of our greed ?

Francis takes off his clothes,
to be clothed in air with flowers and birds
free of crippling tax returns

*then we understand what the economy is for,
not just more billionaires*

Where are we going ? We barely even know
until we know we're going home

the home that is here
our creation within Creation

our heart's only mirror
our afterlife that's this life
as it is longing to be lived...

and what is within ? Listen
to his Mongolian voice chanting
(like her shadow of devotion
reflected from the podium)

and you will hear

Francis breathing inside the mountain

your breath now
your human breath
the one breath

we are all breathing...

We need to be part of a larger community that is ours

that can only be our choosing
no eco-totalitarian state (imagine !)

can breathe it for us

Noah's choice is ours: to cherish
Solomon's temple is ours
to welcome everyone

in the Oneness we are all in

And in the clear water of the river, you may glimpse it
where the fisherman stands with his rod, near Trondheim
the cathedral framed behind in the blue of the sky

The same water where Olav was baptized
his Viking clothes dissolving
naked as Francis to the day
become the red flower that bears his name

red with life

water pouring out of his grave...

Everyone wants to catch the green train !

as you laugh God's laughter
dissolving all barricades
with godly humour—hey

Allah will help us, but we have to help ourselves !

And so God help us

to live each day as if it was our first
after meeting a woman we love
who has come to tell us about the end of time
in a single word

Love

between two waves of the sea
white birds floating on the foam...

And each pilgrim city
radiating to its nation

like a green star

until that nation begins to shine
(like the whole of China)

not a theme park, but a home
to all its people in heart

not a little girl run over in the road
that sleep walkers are walking past

Our children clearing up the mess of generations

(between two waves of the sea)

'I worship the one God who created all things'
as they re-enact his tragedy

Alban Albion

the fool on the hill
who took a bridge out of his pocket to walk across

fool of the beginning
who could only see
with the eye of Creation

reaching down the corridor of time

Francis, Olav, Alban: and can we ?

*The days and nights are blissful
when I remember you...*

only in love and through it

at these edges of the holy city
where bicycle paths and deer
cross with towerblocks

Kidron Valley out of time
and in the old city where the Wall is

where swifts still nest in the gaps between

the same swifts as in Assisi
down the generations
threading their flight
weaving in the matrix

that breathes in our bodies

and so see

what Nature is already doing for us

in One World, brother and sister
prodigal in this family of Oneness

free...to return now
to an all forgiving Mother
in the bosom of the Father

he named as *Father-Mother* (in Aramaic)

sister and brother

Francesco and Chiara

by a lock of her shining hair...

dove sta memoria

and is it real ? Or are you a promotion
a slick idea and not a green one

well, we will see what seeds flourish
and which ones rot in portfolios
and power point fantasies

between two waves of the sea

we are the Judgement
that is truth and silence,
desert and greening

viriditas and vanity

in this monastery garden
where real green grows
combed in lines

and orchards echo
the love song of Eden
that was so good
we were given a place in it

and so we come to take it
in the Golden Temple of Life

where there is food for everyone
and water without plastic

a tree to take home
and a city to live in

golden as the promise of what we can be

green-gold as these pilgrim paths

green as the Hajj
as we kiss and encircle
this Stone of our alchemy

the gold of our becoming

as we listen to our dream...

METANOIA

How to turn around ?

The cities spread like ganglia, devouring
the earth flinging back wind, waves, flash floods
the experts in paid-up denial when it's plain to see

The world wants its sleep

Business as usual Money on the edge,
the whirlpool spiral sucking under
in each national debt... until we see
there is only one economy

One world.

We seal the surface and the rain has nowhere to go

You walk out of your office, and you lie on the grass.
The distance gets shorter each time.
It's a better choice than cocaine.

Stressed-out workers glued to screens...
the trees drinking in rain.
You breathe the air, tree-cleansed.

In Seoul, they're crossing the river
to walk on either side of it into the city
and this is the great water's crossing:
children skipping over stepping stones.

One giant leap? No: hundreds, thousands
millions of tiny steps

precise and discreet as the flight of swifts.

Amen: we promise.

Is it a hole busted in the city wall
so the Kaiser can enter by car

or is it the same man dismounting from a horse ?

A royal choice.

The Zohar says *go to you*,
recession spells the same.

Look, you've got time on your hands
look at your life...it was flashing by like a flood,
and now you can walk in the rain.

NO DESTINATION

At stroke of midnight
God shall win
—WB Yeats, 'Four Ages of Man'

DH Lawrence said it
Satish Kumar has walked it
(from India across Dartmoor)
Abraham lived it, unknowing...

And this is our journey now, taken in hand
out of all we think we can control.
How else would you reach Modern Man?

So cunning and intellectual
so rich, so resourceful and so sexual
how else would you show him the bankruptcy

of his post-modern autonomy?

Nature, his backdrop on a screen
maybe on holiday. Like a trip to the zoo.
A moment to remember all the animals
as much in prison as he is.

God holds the key. Freedom waits.
He sits in his cell with the door open, unable to leave
as his unknown shadow lingers outside...
waiting for him to come, calling himself pilgrim.

IN ESSENCE

If people could only be glad with what they have,
If they only knew it, they'd be happy.
—Dao De Jing, 46

So all of this is a pilgrimage,
all our lives and work now
all we're proposing to do. And it means
our resistance to the very thing we need
and want to achieve, to prove.

The Enemy Within. And it's him
our perfect counterpart in shadow
that keeps us alive to the task—
the same angel you wrestled with.

When we know we're rich within
then we can go beyond wanting;
when you know you have something inside
you're free from striving

free for another journey to begin.

Daoist-pilgrim, poet-priest
artists of our own being.

THE WAY FORWARD

haiku-koan

The way forward
is the way back
and the only way is One.

FEGINSBREKKA

When a crown prince goes on pilgrimage
and reaches the Hill of Joy: look
his rucksack and rolled mat like any other's
and the bent rhythm of his stride
eyes ahead, oblivious of the photograph,
the green spire below him, and his staff
loose, half upside down in his hand
at his journey's ending and beginning—

was there anyone there to say to him *Welcome home* ?

BASILICA 2.

The guided tour is our own
from Giotto into the depth
of a man who preached to the birds
and knew the heart of a wolf.

Take us up, bring us down,
the high altar stands above death
the shattered ceiling falling...

Cimabue's Christ in flaming gold,
Francis kneeling at his feet

Christ streaming among all the distant lights
threading the arteries of the night

Cities of the Light and of the Night
the moon rising, the sun at midnight

And so we descend into the tomb.
And this is our communion.

All we are is its substance
transmitted into our blood.

Raise us up.

We climb the stairs into the sky
emerging onto a balcony so high
it takes our breath away

Our hearts race, electric with taste
the tower's a burning candle in our eyes.

When we were here together.
Twenty five years like lightning.

Love, its fire

igniting its slow burn

where you stand in a line to pray
and he raises its durable flame.

We were only doing this for love
why else did we come ?

All the reasons fade away.

LOVE

A raucous crowded room,
a hundred of us eating.
Pilgrim Feast of Awakening. How does it come?
It wells up from under the floor like a fountain

we don't even know is there until it moves
until you get to your feet, then you follow
at the clinking of another glass for silence
and you're declaiming your poem and your speech
and the whole room is laughing.

Then there's your Bollywood song. And love
flows over the full bowl of all the plates and desserts
they can't be served fast enough, it comes
faster than words than breath the way
you cry out in your raw *duende* as it comes.

Laughter and love, poetry and song
all formalities gone.

And so we became this family
and families like this are strong.

And what we take is the love,
what we remember is the love.

What will thrive in us is greening love.

Closing prayer & valediction

*May the blessing of St. Francis be with us;
And all the saints, seen and unseen
In all faiths be with us
As we go forth from this place.
Amen.*

Reflection

I have composed these poems as a meditation and a celebration, a witness and an enquiry.

I've also written them for and from all of us who were there at Assisi, quoting some of the voices *in italics*. What we made and can make as more than the sum of our parts is what really matters here, now and in these years to come, and this is what these poems embody. At the heart of it is Assisi, and of course St Francis, whose life so reflected our own turning within and finding the ground of real inner change that is essential to our collective transformation, painfully slow as it can seem.

Finally it is a testament to what Francis embraced: not only Nature, but Love (both together)—and love as our real nature in which alone all things are possible.

—Jay Ramsay
November 2011, Stroud

