



# ELEGIES FOR MY FATHER

DAVID SWARBRICK

THE  
CEYLON  
PRESS



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FOR JOHN ANTHONY SWAARBRICK

WRITTEN FROM 2022



# PAPER BOAT

slowly

slowly  
like a paper boat  
turning in the wind  
on a glassy pond

slowly

slowly  
like a huge ship  
spinning in a boundless sea

slowly

slowly  
like a slurred boom  
on the edge of heaven

slowly

slowly  
you are going your way

I cannot reach you.

I modulate my voice  
speak twice as loud;

I let you fall asleep  
and do not intervene

I watch you slip,  
slip



slip away  
into the infinite firmness of age

slowly  
slowly  
you are going  
and I cannot stop you;

what will be left  
will be the echo of your voice  
saying  
just give me a hug son

slowly  
slowly  
you are turning

slowly  
slowly  
you are going away

ST MARYCHURCH, DEVON. JULY 2022



# HIM

do you see him?

I do.

I see him so well,

now,  
as if cataracts have been removed,

or darkness lifted,

or Bartimaeus met in town, betraying  
the sight of men like trees, walking.

for there he is,  
down this thought  
and down that,

down every thought;

lurking inescapably,

stale as water that will not drain away,

blooming like an unkillable weed  
on my perfect spotless green-as-life wildflower lawn.

yes,  
there, there he is,  
the bastard uninvited guest,  
the foul changeling  
morphing, little by little



bit by bloody bit  
into the host.

at first, he was shockingly rare;  
a parent here,  
a distant friend,  
a wise and gentle witch;  
a clutch of gorgeous aunts.

now he comes like a commuter bus,  
like a monstrous industrial vacuum cleaner,  
like a tsunami mutilating  
with its froth of white-brown brine,  
gathering the broken limbs of far flung homes

a vortex,  
churning, sweeping far inland to claim  
a close friend here,  
another there,  
mother-in-law,  
a mad and lovely herbalist,  
another aunt.

plucked from their stops;

and others,

always others, waiting in further stops,  
huddled  
under the flimsy  
rooves of bus shelters  
as if they could ever evade this acid rain.

how do I tell him to fuck off  
to fuck off to the furthest  
bitter boundaries of the universe,



to the ends of time,  
to the black mysterious ether  
bubbling in unimagined territories,

the godless limitless lands  
no maps depict;

how do I tell him to go,  
to go, and not return;  
to fuck right off

when I hear him  
now,  
when I hear him  
now,

inside of me?

ST MARYCHURCH, DEVON. MARCH 2023



# RAVEN

those most I know  
those noises go;

and mad minds  
draw the raven

ST MARYCHURCH, DEVON. APRIL 2023



# OUR TIME

no longer do you  
worry about what next to do

you are submerged by sleep  
like the waves of Lyme Bay  
we almost hear  
a mile away,

Hope Cove, Thatcher's Rock,  
rolling, one upon another

you have lived so long,  
so bloody long  
putting one foot before the next.

I sit beside you.

a terrible rain  
beating on the windows,

feeding you chocolates  
when you wake;

playing you music –  
the old tunes of the war,  
of Calcutta,  
of Bill and Ben,  
Glenn Miller,

the ragged random paths  
through almost 100 years of life



# PAPA

you are so frail now.

your body twitches with random movements  
fingers, knees

watching sometimes

alive,  
stubbornly alive

hanging on,  
in case something  
important has been forgotten,

and needs to be done  
before you go.

ST MARYCHURCH, DEVON. APRIL 2023



# GOOD

it is not reciprocal  
this good, you know -

as if it might return  
to coat you back  
like a bee with pollen

ST MARYCHURCH, DEVON. APRIL 2023



# ALREADY

already,  
yes already

I am already saying goodbye.

you sleep much more now  
hears little  
eat less.

you cling to your bed  
like an iron sparrow  
clinging to its tree

almost,  
you are not here.

almost.

tomorrow  
or if not tomorrow,  
then someday soonish  
you will have gone,

died,  
buggered off;  
left this planet,  
left me.



and that will be it.

no amount of negotiated language  
can put us both back  
breathing the same air  
in the same room.

and that, of course,  
will also be  
when my own oxygen  
starts slowly  
to run out too.

ST MARYCHURCH, DEVON. APRIL 2023



# BUT FOR

but for your shoulder's  
    briefest  
        briefest twitch  
  
you could be dead.

beyond the half-closed curtains  
and the open window,

    parakeets call from mango trees;

    crows caw;

    an unendable burr of grasshoppers  
    summons from smooth green lawns:

                                and here, too  
                the ordinary thrill of country noises  
            hum,  
        and echo,  
    and chatter,  
and splash.

        at night,  
        foxes bark,  
        owls whoop;

and  
baa-baa bleat the sheep  
in their long sad day's lament.



oh yes, daddy,  
yes:

of course you are here and now –

here and now,  
here and now,

still as a corpse,  
deaf as a shell,  
weak as an infant;  
in pain, in fear,  
tired, tearful, fretful, finished, forgetful,  
utterly forgetful –

but here, now.

come,  
let us think  
beyond -  
beyond this quiet room,

this modest, unaffronting room  
where, just beyond your window  
any country could wait.

come, let us think  
beyond -  
beyond this kind and cautious building;

beyond the kind lanes of Devon  
and the buildings  
rooted in red earth;



beyond the ceaseless misty drizzle,

the hedgerows high as chimneys  
that box us in  
that bury us in  
this little ancient land  
we all left so long ago.

come, let us go home.

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. JULY 2023



# BRIEF 1

blue skies promise sun;  
push us to the spent margins  
of the drifting hour.

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. JULY 2023



## BRIEF 2

now the sea is calm,  
the foreshore shocked with debris;  
blue skies gift oblivion.

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. JULY 2023



# BRIEF 3

driven high on shore  
mild mocking waves now buff  
the ship that sailed.

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. JULY 2023



# HAPPINESS

save me  
from smooth music

save me  
from soft music;

and yes,  
from anniversaries too,  
and speeches,  
and little cards  
and messages that drip  
their fine curated quips  
into my mind;

save me,

when everything must be lost,  
so that nothing is lost.

St Marychurch Devon. July 2023



# TIME STOLEN

walking in,  
walking out;

first time,  
this time;

last time,  
every time.

time out, you see?

watch carefully:  
out, over, done, kaput;

and nothing finished,  
that was started too late,  
or merely lost in downy distractions  
because it never seemed serious –

there was, after all,  
always the prospect  
of turning back onto the road  
from a wrong turning here  
or a nice view there,  
that you thought  
you could include.

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. JULY 2023



# UNSTOPPABLE

it is so polite,  
    this sea,  
    blinking with gentle sunshine,  
    lapping away.

It comes, and comes  
                                and it comes -

and then, quite simply,  
    it rises up,  
        a tide dousing, drowning, ending  
        all that can be seen.

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. JULY 2023



# CARDS

shuffle shuffle  
shuffle shuffle:

all the cards in play are black.

the Queen is burnt,  
the Jack worked out,  
the King besieged;

and all the little  
numbers left

don't  
add  
up.

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. JULY 2023



# LATER

after a while,  
    and a while;  
        and after another while  
        that you never noticed  
            passed;

after all this, and more,  
it all gets stuck together,

negatives of a thousand thousand photographs  
    back to front  
        missorted  
            misaligned  
                black and white,  
                colour

(that colour with flinty flecks of gold, the land greener, blonder  
than it is now);

stiff curling cards of shiny paper  
shuffled into shape a dozen times

but still all jagged edges,  
    all wrong,  
        quite simply wrong

                                    landscape,  
                                    portrait,  
                                bits flaking off,  
                small shards of black plastic  
            bearing a head, part of a house,  
        a hand, held out,  
    amputated,



ghosting

what is already gone

and is no longer

and never goes away.

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. JULY 2023



# I HOLD YOUR HISTORY NOW

everyone else has died

or vanished,

or just failed to ever show up

and you,

like their sprinting shadow

have fallen to a slow tread

to a final bed

in house near the green sea

everything now that ever was

lies between just us.

and I am crowded out

spun across all our worlds

one last time

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. JULY 2023



# ALL THOSE YEARS

all those years

all those comings

all those goings

all that buying of beds,  
and chairs, and sweaters

and driving onto the high moor,

all those years;

and i am now adrift.

you have gone  
somewhere where I do not know.

I cannot touch your hand.

I cannot kiss your forehead

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. JULY 2023



# LAST TIME

is this it

last last last

last time i see you,

this pernicious date  
blasted, in memoriam  
like a quarry  
seared into my skull

i have said goodbye to you  
so many times now;

so many times  
have I kissed your forehead,

and walked,  
turning my back to you  
to walk out through the door  
conceived that was the last time

the last time  
the last time  
the last time

the last time that ever ends  
and will end  
so that when it comes  
I will be least be ready for it.



# TIDE

and now you go  
a falling tide  
unreachable  
in this most private  
of public moments.

we see, and hear  
though neither see nor hear.  
what worlds dim or brighten

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. SEPTEMBER 2023



# BRIEF 4

what is magnetic north  
that so beguiles the route  
from start to finish

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. SEPTEMBER 2023



# FLYING

flying into the clouds  
flying home to bury you,  
flying home,

suddenly i think  
I might see you  
here in

cool blue skies  
on a high horizon,

the green grey sea below  
whips of clouds of every shape  
scattered

like frozen breath  
all about the plane

it's quite logical  
(in a way at least)  
because, now, this is where you'd be  
somewhere between old earth  
and childhood heaven  
travelling to places  
I must believe in  
so that I can see you  
again  
and again.

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. SEPTEMBER 2023



# ALL

all the things  
I cannot do  
with you

I lie here, listing.

even the ones  
at the very end  
when you could barely  
move or hear,

even those poor pitiful moments

I would do them all  
till I too die

for then i could be with you  
breathing the same air

of the same room  
safe from every peril.

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. SEPTEMBER 2023



# FOR NOW

for now  
just put aside the caveats,  
the one that says it is not you,  
the one that says  
life is now just a series  
of small administrative details,  
  
and the execution of what you want...

even so  
I command your body now,  
not you  
I determine its next steps  
not you  
I exercise the rights that should be yours,  
not you.

and everything I know is slowly framed  
by a high moorland sky  
by a dun tor fastening the horizon

and a breeze that tastes  
of too much oxygen,  
carving up the hills  
and feeding me.

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. SEPTEMBER 2023



# IN THIS WAY

in this way  
on this day

I record a break in time

mourners standing under the beach tree  
rose petals across the grave  
the moor land dissolving  
into a haze of blue  
like the summer itself this day and that day  
all stuck together  
like broken pieces of skin  
hyphenated  
joined back  
repaired somehow.

the tired earth turns  
unremembered  
unrecorded  
except for this

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. OCTOBER 2023



# BUSY

I am busy with death

yours  
hers  
his

and those yet to come  
ripening like fat figs  
in the summer sky,  
those still maturing

and ready soon to spring themselves  
like an elastic band upon the world

I am bested by death

yours  
hers  
his  
mine,

each shallow degradation  
a new milestone  
a high tide  
or water mark  
of what can no longer be done  
what cannot be reached

I am bested by death  
and its tiny futile end.

GALAGEDERA, SRI LANKA.. DECEMBER 2023



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hermit, hotelier, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, Dubai, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe, with a joint honours at the University of Wales; and an M. Phil at the University of Stirling, prolonging an introduction to regular working hours for as long as was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for sales, marketing and various other otherwise homeless departments, and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.



# DISCOVER MORE



A small island surrounded by large oceans,  
Sri Lanka is a mystery to many: remote, hard  
to place; a well-kept secret.

The Ceylon Press seeks to make its  
complicated story more accessible.