

ELEGIES FOR MY FATHER

DAVID SWARBRICK



THE
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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

ST MARYCHURCH, DEVON. APRIL 2023

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 chimney
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.

ST MARYCHURCH DEVON. JULY 2023

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, hotelier, hermit, broadcaster and writer. He was born in Colombo and lives in Sri Lanka and the UK by way of India, Singapore, the Middle East, Wales, Scotland and Sweden.