

David Wevill

*Collected Earlier Poems*

SAMPLER

ALSO BY DAVID WEVILL

*Penguin Modern Poets 4* (with David Holbrook & Christopher Middleton,  
Penguin Books, 1963)  
*Birth of a Shark* (Macmillan / St. Martin's Press, 1964)  
*A Christ of the Ice-Floes* (Macmillan / St. Martin's Press, 1966; Tavern Books, 2016)  
*Firebreak* (Macmillan / St. Martin's Press, 1971)  
*Where the Arrow Falls* (Macmillan, 1973; St. Martin's Press, 1974; Tavern Books, 2016)  
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*Other Names for the Heart: New & Selected Poems 1964–1984* (Exile Editions, 1985)  
*Figure of Eight: New Poems and Selected Translations* (Exile Editions, 1987)  
*Figure of Eight* (chapbook; Shearsman Books, 1988)  
*Child Eating Snow* (Exile Editions, 1994)  
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*Departures: Selected Poems* (Shearsman Books, 2003; 2nd edition, 2013)  
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# David Wevill

## Collected Earlier Poems

1962–1973

Shearsman Books

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Poems listed in the Contents under *A Group Anthology* and *Penguin Modern Poets 4* are those which were not republished in a subsequent full collection. Those that *were* so republished appear as part of the later volume.

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SAMPLER

*from*

A GROUP ANTHOLOGY

1963

SAMPLER

SAMPLER

## Beginning of a Movement

Blue the burnt mountains now, ash at sunset, half  
Dust and half whitening grass. This the late season for flying  
insects, beetles,  
Coleoptera, dragonflies; the nervous trespassers who will  
Mate before the grass is fired around the blind villages.  
Here, far west of Japan the dragonflies join  
Gliding across the kite and vulture waste, the tall temples of  
broad pine, the broken-backed hill  
Chasing the eye like maple-seeds. Autumn is not a season here.  
But a dry throat thirsting through dust for wine.

Yet what we see now or have seen is a mood  
Held for a moment's rest. The hunter, his eyes like  
Cartridges, quick, rambles through the undervaulted forest  
And kills because he knows what he must see.  
So the egret on his branch, carved in black iron  
Draws the fire of sunset about his quills, and nods us past as  
though trusting us,  
Two mindless walkers in the washed sea of the plain  
Beneath his horizon. To be found, a fish in this sea of eyes  
Visible, desired by that bird, would be  
To sink forever with the sun, forgetting the dragonflies.

## The Sawbwa's Doves

On the day of the festival of sons,  
The white house roused by his cousins'  
Chatter of game, escapes from the Japanese,  
The duke showed us his garden:

Fish-ponds, old with weed, inverted him;  
A smile benevolent as the autumn moon  
Beckoned retrievers, called retainers to name  
Trees he'd planted before the war and forgotten;

Snow-doves in wooden hutches, a red eye  
Beat in a square of feathers. His smile  
Winked and chuckled over this king's prize  
Of retrievers, retainers, hunters. 'They

Nest high and far into the jungle, are shy  
And difficult to catch.' White feathers pursed  
Head and beak, baulked at our fingers.

Shy,

I thought, as his sires' lives had seemed,

Who ruled these villages from the same garden,  
Commanding drums and dancers up the steep hill  
To the festivals of their sons:  
As the reverent horns now shook the garden still.

*from*

PENGUIN MODERN POETS 4

1963

SAMPLER

SAMPLER



## The Two-Colored Eagle

The last days wrenched her inward completely.  
Her beak scraped inner brain,  
Her skull turned to old rocks and the wine seeped out dry.

Under her hooded scrutiny now  
The Rhine flows on, without help; she can't stop it.  
In the perfect dead breathless quiet  
Her only sound is the blind deep drumming of barges  
Tugging her weight, tapping  
Northwards, against the current.

Snow must fall like bone-meal here,  
And success fledges no new eagles. We paw  
In the cold, towards her warm red side  
Of sunset, where the ashing black  
Grapes shiver their tinsel warnings at birds.  
On either side her wings are folded, hard.  
Her back is against the south,  
Her brackish beak is raised to the North Sea.

Now her iron-age furnace heart  
Hardens too, with October, the dead in our bones.  
It is a grim place to bring love.

## Snow

In the painkilling cold that wrapped  
A frozen skin of trousers round his shins,  
His ankles in irons, eyelids locked on the air  
Barely watching the branches of pines and wind gathering  
In shifts, snow-socketed and numb as needles,  
The sun a pale distraction but never the heart  
Of his ice-feast; walking the car-tracks  
Woven and crossed like firehoses along  
The hospital road, walking, or rather sidling  
Frontwards, and thinking, 'Here's this vast white  
Revolution, I alone am carrying sex  
In our world, something precocious which the sun  
Notices moving, of its own will, outwards,  
Blemished by motion and by its own unique  
Dirt-carrying will, intelligence of squeezed eyes  
Against the disembodied white of the land –  
Something that parcels the world by walking out here  
Under an inch of wool, upon rubber feet,  
Defying nothing, but touching the limits of cold  
Humourless as a locked brook  
Or an icicle.' 'I am not alone because I bring  
One thread of life into this weave of death,  
And each is as whole as the other: sex is warm  
In my coat but cold in my shadow, sex  
Is broken in the pines and in the bland birch-trees,  
The permafrost, of which I am no part,  
The rock-hard doormat of grass underneath, the  
Scrapping chickadees on the dotted snow, –  
All tension, teeth! I alone am above it, indifferent,  
Bestriding this difficult time, watching  
A world where everything comes out right if  
Left to its own cold course: I, knowing my tracks  
Will turn later to meet it, its death unsolved.'

# THE BIRTH OF A SHARK

1964

SAMPLER

*For Assia*

SAMPLER

## My Father Sleeps

Who brought from the snow-wrecked  
Hulk of winter his salvaged  
Purpose; who came, blind but friendly  
By these lines his mouth and his eyes  
Have fixed; and without further talk  
Taught me at last how to walk,  
Until by his power I came  
Out of innocence like the worm's flame  
Into daylight.  
What practical need  
His patience had, and anger bred  
Of disillusionment, has gone with age.  
I have this white-haired image,  
Arrogant perhaps, and too much the hero  
For our friendship's good; Lear, although  
Afraid of words as of madness,  
Of procrastination as of disease –  
A lover of plain-spokenness –  
Though not where it hurt, that he could understand.  
If I trace the scars in my right hand  
They tell me of purpose disobeyed,  
Of old and factual truths my head  
Cannot alter. And watching him thus  
Sprawled like a crooked frame of clothes  
In the sleep of sixty years, jaws firm,  
Breathing through the obstacle of his nose  
A stubborn air that is truth for him,  
I confront my plainest self. And feel  
In the slow hardening of my bones, a questioning  
Depth that his pride could never reveal;  
That in his sleep stirs its cruel beginning.

## At Rideau Falls

The tideless Ottawa is small  
Beside the rivers of old capitals;  
Is logged by nylon-shirted men,  
Match-makers. At Rideau Falls  
I watch, drunk, the thrust of a barge  
Bruising my ribs with each lurch, coils  
Of surf stampeding up the night.  
I will not come back. My time  
Outlingers cities; my warm children  
Rest surly in my head. They will own  
This germ of me that failed to grow.  
They will pick stark fables from my bones.

SAMPLER

## Spiders

Muddling up the wooden stairs one night, in my socks  
Past screens and shuttered bunting-creviced wallboards,  
My tongue dry, but a cool wind puffing thinly soft  
Up *my* torn shirt-front, the dust hot-thick in my hair,  
I crossed my sister coming that way in her slip –  
The steep way down, half-asleep; her chicken-hearted breathing  
And toes antennaed for spiders or bits of fluff  
That might jiggle and spill a mouse. I tasted my own breath  
Kekking, milkweed-sour, after the beer –  
But not to budge, or her shriek might wake the house –  
Who is it? I didn't know her face –  
Such full pails for eyes! she might have been glass;  
The roman nose, pink lips peeled white over salt  
While ten years woke up and started! ... I thought myself  
Back, a loiterer in jeans, hands spittled with oil  
From throbbing handlebars. Wind shoulders the porch,  
Flickers the close trees ... I held back then  
And jammed my buttocks hard against black wood,  
My back a prickly heat of rusty nails which  
Builders'd slapped in, and left, when the lake was young  
With all her forests open to the wind, mated conifers  
Exploding dry cones. I listened in the dark,  
And thought, this wife won't wait to be woken by me,  
But go on down, passing me, always on my left –  
Wind clacking the picture-frames through our big house –  
I wasn't going to wake her. I mightn't have seemed  
Her brother, then, but eight legs sprung on her dream,  
Something she'd sense far worse than spiders, on the stair,  
That could harm her children. Maybe it wasn't just fear,  
Or concern, that made me cringe from her.  
Two people who cross in the dark walk nearest to ghosts,

Her terror might have stuck its mouth in me,  
And sealed her against a love she could not cope with,  
Grinning under heavy sheets, with her heartbeat.

SAMPLER



# A CHRIST OF THE ICE-FLOES

1966

SAMPLER

SAMPLER

## Universe Without Deity

Know me by the nature of sand  
In its tiniest grains: the flash and glitter  
Of particles, societies, brilliant with their own light.

Each grain magnifies the sun  
By concealing itself. Each cache is on fire with what  
It hides: is crystal, the unbroken nucleus –

And turned a thousand ways  
Will show a thousand faces: sawdust  
Even, in its ground finery under a craning lamp.

When I am sleepless,  
I move among this litter of stars and faces.  
It is no dream, but that we shall all wake

Shrunk, so, and be born  
Ant-lights in the sand, sea-phosphorus, naked  
Water-drop our ocean and our world.

Fantastic you are  
In that sleep you will never achieve,  
More alive than the living, lit, yet without a centre.

## Love-Stones

The three-day blow  
Had tossed the lakeshore to its knees –

I found two stones  
Lying side by side, just  
Touching,  
White eggs the sand wouldn't hatch.

But the sun came worrying through clouds  
And poured its warmth across the sand –

Not to despair, but to explore  
Word against word  
The long distance between  
Two stones that touch

Without speech,  
And at the touching point  
A little heat

And after a thousand years  
The two stones may be joined

And the sun be forced to modify  
The new stone's shadow –

Imperceptibly; because  
Witness to witness the legend of the stones  
Dies and is reinherited,

Changed, retold  
Through no necessity, but  
That the stones existed,  
That the stone exists.

SAMPLER

## The Voice of Colonel Fawcett

I hunt, and thus they call me the hunter.  
The rain forest and the sea are one,  
The high trees leafing at their tops like kelp  
Foliage for a plankton of blow-flies.  
The bottom weeds grow lush. I fish there –  
I fish, and thus they call me the fisherman.  
My hooks, cast straight at the wildcat's jaws,  
Through the three depths, catch,  
And drag, and are one with the scream of the wound.  
I dream, and thus they call me the dreamer.  
My dream is to quit this rain forest  
And trade gills with the sea.  
My dream is to abandon the sea  
And walk, lung'd, with the wet of the rain forest.  
Through the three depths of forest and sea  
I crawl, a manhandled fish, a drowning puma...  
I die, and thus they call me the dead man.  
The explorer, lost in his mind  
In the rain forest, clawed by the shark's teeth,  
Burned in the wildcat's mouth, drowning  
Through my maps to the mapless Atlantic roots:  
A scrap, a figment: what men come to know.

FIREBREAK

1971

SAMPLER

'You have both fought well. Therefore, Ploughman,  
yours be the honour; yours, Death, the victory  
Each man owes his life to Death, his body to  
earth, his soul to Us'

No  
    my soul to myself  
to the new one  
who will come  
        or will not come

body/  
to earth, yes  
to the one who  
*has* come

mine to hers

'from the bird's quill  
I take my plough'



## Night/Day

As dream corrects  
the facts of daylight  
what cries in me

is no bird  
but some chirping nerve  
nested in fear  
scrabbling at the fly-screens –  
‘sickness unto death’  
in the black  
January night

But the good  
body returns  
unbroken  
edged like glass  
falling through years  
without air

to irrigate a desert  
make drinking water from the sea

calms itself  
by numbers  
through each of which passes the cell

of a baby's first eyes

widening  
to ask  
and find

## Steps

How being dense  
the world

sudden windows

open  
from sun  
beyond sun

the tooled wheels  
of clocks

spinning into the stars, all

in an eye

rags of cloud  
and mists with high velocities

to fear  
or give praise

a mirror beams you in

you are what  
a stone  
can't think itself

but is

which is the way

the wind  
travels

the eye

when the mind lets loose from all

SAMPLER

that is  
*not*  
it –  
a red rock  
with a green vein  
the toward and into and  
out  
away from

things,

or is it time  
the shudder of birds against the seasons  
mating  
only with the egg  
of hours

the  
bass  
string...

tell me where I should take you beyond  
this  
all things  
diminishing

for they will say  
'inhuman'  
when you mean 'I'm trying to find'

and there is law  
in what they say  
and in you  
opinion or faith  
only

and  
anguish

a minor chord  
just off the point of things

but strongly played

earth, the lover  
not God

or man  
with his fire-brain

or storms on the moon

obvious  
but what  
tomorrow might have changed

a thing  
made useful  
no longer itself

life  
compressed  
into crystals  
'I am  
the beginning and the end'

preserve  
the leaf

x-ray  
the dead

that is what life  
*looked* like

as the stars look now

and in you  
opinion or faith  
only

and  
anguish  
and wonder  
in things  
you can't scale or change

between us, and when  
the new one comes

touch its face  
to find me

SAMPLER

# WHERE THE ARROW FALLS

1973

SAMPLER

The top of your head is still open  
fragile, hearing whispers of the sun

your teeth are early and strong  
your birthmark grows  
a rose, in the small of your back

your eyes are smoky and dark  
the lashes longer than ours

your rage  
knots you so  
I can't untie you

all in all you're a fine one  
your strength in Leo but jammed between  
Aquarius and my fish

soon you'll be a year  
our trees are full of owls  
our chimney full of young swallows

fire and water and air  
and the earth is yours to grow on

meanwhile you have no friends

## 2

I buried the dead  
baby rabbit  
found under the cedars  
under the cedars

it lies in the ash-pit  
flattened by rain  
perverse blue of the flies  
has gone to haunt another wind

my daughter, blind  
to what small life  
death can happen    Here is a mind

of daybreak and sunset cliff  
and an acre of trees  
give shade in place of water  
Here I learn my time is longer than suns

that, by seeing, by  
giving I return  
through the back ways of god dragging  
my heart like a smashed placenta

sticks leaves dust  
out into the open, as  
the rabbit trailed its –

break me, I say, break me but do not  
scatter the parts  
they were a long time growing they  
learn to love, painfully, at the end



### 3

For the Sangre de Cristos  
where they appear  
fifty miles before the eye can see them

– the eye, blind  
from desk and midnight lights    I happened on Cortés  
lying under a piñon tree  
muttering ‘Land, my land’

Here

his children come  
come, before they are broken  
or come, by being broken  
to break against the sun or the long moon  
drying her vulva among the pine needles

Dark night  
her vigil  
kept by skunks

or her vigil kept

by angels  
lashing their wings to the treetops  
each tree a halo pointing to blood dawn

No    no crucifixion  
no more crucifixions  
man of blood

the mountain breasts are full of milk  
milk of black and the soul a solitary tree

for the panther, for who moves  
softly here    One among us

or us  
in the figure of One  
so the sky is once again the jay's nest  
and the worm flies in its song

SAMPLER