The Alchemist

‘When all else fails,’ the alchemist reflected,
   ‘I have achieved
    A happy feat.
Few others, setting out, would have connected
   What I conceived.
   Though incomplete,
    My labours start to see
   Celestial geometry.’

He paused to sigh as ripples from the fountain
   Expanded through
    The scallop pool.
Far off, a shepherd on the fiery mountain
   Had work to do,
    Lambs to keep cool,
   But could have sworn he saw
   Light flicker on the valley floor.

‘I wonder,’ said the alchemist, ‘if God
   Might have designed
    The universe
With other building blocks. It seems so odd
   Each year to find
    These fields rehearse
   Equations with the same
   Few constants, each familiar name.’

As evening fell, he tried to shift inside,
   Dropping the dish
    Of reddish ash,
Yet still he stalled. Reluctant to decide,
   He made a wish
    And heard a splash.
   And stared: a phoenix stood
   Serenely on the cedarwood.
Imprints

I notice four wing-imprints on the ceiling,
   Curved from the window at
Widening intervals. It is appealing
   To contemplate the pitter-pat
      Of dusty feather on
         That blank and flat
         Paintwork. Though gone,
The bird has left a residue
   That marks the wan
Expanse with its kinetic strew.
It makes this mid-December room
   Rustle, as though it grew
Organic with a burst like April bloom.

Later, pursuing memories in the park,
   Observing backlit trees
And ramblers rendezvousing under dark
   Resilient Scots pine canopies,
      The paw-prints of a hare:
         Spaced by degrees
         Expanding where
It must have dashed, accelerating,
   Until, just there,
It ducked away, to lie in waiting,
Secure for winter, snug and warm
   Inside— I blank, locating
The word. Not ‘burrow’. Hares. Is it a ‘form’?
The Rowboat

I'm in two minds about the whole affair.
   I like the forward-wading dip
Of oar descending through expectant air.
   I like the way that wavelets tip
      Across the prow,
      Which rises now,
Then drops before the rippling waterline
   Like pilgrims at a shrine.

   But then I catch the sky
Meandering immeasurably over
   The windy land
   That trembles by
While ecstasy, a supernova
Discovered best when stumbled on unplanned,
   Electrifies it with a pang
Of thrill and thought like an interrobang.

Truly, there needn't be a choice between
   The gentle boat and tingling sky.
The one’s a stand from which the other’s seen,
   And yet this restive wish to fly
      Would have me sail
      Above the pale
Well-gardened houses on the riverside
   To where the swallows glide.

   Impossible to break
The up-and-downing nowness of the boat.
   Not on the cards
   To lose the wake
That fans behind the place we float.
Right here, right now, is life: for all its shards
   And jostling imperfections, who
Would care to speed like flung neutrinos do?
The Pristine and the Torn

To speak first causes and enduring things
  Is an emotional ordeal.
Some days we float on angel wings.
Some days, freewheeling, fired by sheer ideal,
  We catch new breezes
And soar, uncentred, thistledown,
  Like jesters on trapezes.
The height-defying harlequin, the roaring clown.

But tremblings, trenches, rust, and dark recriminations
  Pile up like sins.
A milk-jug chips, a jacket thins,
And dust-mites lurk in sotto-keyboard gunk.
Yes, it’s the way of Death to walk among the nations
  Spreading his violent creed,
More often drunk
Than not, entreating us to raid and not to read.

But, Dio mio—there are marvels here:
  A newly-curable condition,
Ententes that put an end to fear,
And lossless electricity transmission.
  There is, in truth,
A world of yet-unchartered joy,
And it is ours to sleuth.
It holds the Holy Grail. It stores the towers of Troy.

Still, as we know by now, there are no panaceas.
  Life takes its tithe.
The bother is remaining blithe,
Afflicted by so many wretched twists.
Yes, almost everything we care for disappears—
  Except, I guess, for this:
The alchemist’s
Unlooked-for crux, a process-faith, our journey’s bliss.