

Julia Kusum Ravassat Cumberlege

daughter of Mick and Tixie

came into the world

on 7th August 2010

(a lioness princess!)

and since that auspicious day

has captured many hearts

including her Belgian Opa's,

as you will see inside.



CHRISTMAS
WITH JULIA

A WORD IN ADVANCE

This little poetic offering was written by her Anglo-Belgian Opa for Julia Ravassat Cumberlege in the two months before Christmas 2012, which we will spend with Oma in Saint-Mammès, and it is lovingly dedicated to her parents Mick and Tixie.

Six copies have been printed: one for Julia, one for Mick&tix, one for Oma and Opa, one for Isabel Walgraeve the cover artist, one for John Meyfroodt the publisher and one to be shared between other family and friends.

Special thanks to Jeremy Cooper for posting all the information on my website www.marcuscumberlege.com, and to Martin Burke for publishing an extract in The Green Door.

Bruges, Honen's Celebration,

Full Moon in Gemini, 28.11.12.

TABLE DE MATIERES

A Word in Advance

Family Background

From Madrid to Bruges

From Bruges to Madrid

From Down Under

Mars in Capricorn

Promenade à Bruges

Christmas with Julia

La Fête des Morts

Hello Someone

After Lunch Saturday

Chicken Soup

For Pieter

Memory

Two E-mails

Venus and Neptune

The Week that Was

Dark Autumn Day

My Soul has Chosen

Finishing Touches

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Thank God for little girls.

Lying back comfortably in bed a few hours before dawn I wonder how my own grandfather Claude (1878-1963) and my father Mike (1905-1939) would have welcomed you into the family. What joy!

These were the carefree sailors of the thirties (a century before you) when Britannia still ruled the waves. Both of them wrote poetry and both, like me and Mick, were carried by beautiful waves/wives.

Music was in my father's blood. Gone to the war in the early forties, he left me dozens of old 78's to listen to while he was away – Mozart and Beethoven, but also the very best of French chanson and cabaret.

Hunched on the floor aged five, I'd listen to Tino Rossi warbling *“Il existe une blonde qui doit me donner tout son coeur”*, already thinking about the girl I'd marry ... It's too soon to ask the “mystery planets” what life has in store for you, my dear. You're no more than a wee bundle of mischief learning to talk – French! The language of Rimbaud and Verlaine. I hope you'll inherit some of Mama's sense of economics and Papa's gentle humour. Life is what you make of it, or what it makes of you, if you don't watch out. I've lived long enough to know it's of paramount importance to feel good in your skin.

FROM MADRID TO BRUGES

CONGRATULATIONS!!

It's just so wonderful to hear about beautiful Julia!!

You must all feel so happy, you must be so much looking forward to seeing her and hugging her, oh, and Tixie and Mick are surely in the Seventh Heaven!!

Do send me a picture when you can, dear dear Marcus, I feel just so happy for you I could cry joyful tears, and so I will.

Maria too surely feels happy and is already knitting her beautiful patchwork for Julia!

All my love to you all, and you'd better be getting ready for your beautiful

Leo granddaughter, a lady of character she's going to be, and she'll have you around her finger, and she'll do whatever she wants with you.

Many many joys await you because of her and many many wonderful poems will come out of your brain and heart because of her – oh, am I waiting for that!!

All my love, and congratulations again, from the bottom of my heart.

Diana Avial, Wednesday 25 July 2012.

FROM BRUGES TO MADRID

Thank you for the nicest and most beautiful and tender and loving e-mail I have had for years. Yes, you have completely captured the feeling of what it is to be the grandfather of the adorable Julia, a tigress and a lioness rolled into one, with huge mischievous black eyes and curly black hair, sitting there like a proud princess in old Tixie's arms (yes, at one stroke, my precious little girl Tixie suddenly became twenty years older!!). Apart from the endless fun Julia and I will have together (correct! I have begun to write for her!) there is the interesting thought that now there is a person to inherit all my books and, who knows, make me famous a hundred years from now. We shouldn't forget that aspect of the story. I've just heard that Mickétix want to bring her to Bruges for two days on 15 August, which is quite soon. Young Katie Wooler my Canadian niece and her boyfriend will be here then for a week and drive down to France afterwards with them. It's all very exciting. Keep your fingers crossed that everything works out. Thank you for your much appreciated e-mail. All my love to you and yours.

Marcus, Friday 27 July 2012.

FROM DOWN UNDER

Friday 9 November (our anniversary!).

Hello darling

Indeed I do read your poetry, and NO, I do not have a copy of your last book! From the poem you sent I can sense hugely your excitement at the prospect of reunion with Julia (and of course MickéTix)!

It is entirely appropriate that she will be the best birthday present ever.

Whoopeee, I can see you dancing down the platform!

I am sure you lead her into delicious naughtiness, which is the prerogative of a grandparent, after all.

I think she will be entrancing, and she has certainly captivated YOU!

It is such a privilege to see a small person's life unfold, it all seems to happen so quickly, you will see a big change even in the short time since you were last together. I enjoyed this poem hugely, because I could relate visually to so much of it, and your grey Peruvian sweater ... it reminds me of the lama wool goodies you sent from Peru when I was of an 'incorrigible' age, or so I remember you describing me. I had to look the word up in the dictionary. Be sure to send me some photos.

Lots of love, Bro, Finola

MARS IN CAPRICORN

24 November 12. Six o'clock in the morning. Poet Marcus Cumberlege, desk lamp shining, darkness outside, stands perplexed in the middle of his living-room, Maria asleep overhead, his day's work done, and a whole winter weekend in front of him. What next? he wonders, automatically reaching for his faithful pen.

He has already prostrated on the kitchen floor and uttered more than 150 nembutsus since getting up, well slept, at 2. Books, full of far-out philosophy, Buddhist and otherwise, line his shelves or stand in piles beside him at his desk. But he has no appetite or need for the esoteric right now. All his window-sill lacks is a framed photograph of Julia – but that won't be long in coming. He sits back and admires the written page.

What is the glue that holds this man together in one piece and prevents him from falling asunder into a billion microscopic parts? Love, I suppose, the universal cosmic force, the irresistible magnet, the power of attraction – if we're to believe the school of Rhonda Byrne with her *Secret* and her *Power*. I realize I'm busy writing myself into non-existence.

Julia might master English well enough by fifteen to understand my words, even if still unable to guess what undiscovered Land I come from. I like her a lot already and look forward to spending a bit more time with her soon, sharing many moments of fun and laughter.

It is difficult and unnecessary to imagine what changes will have taken place in the world by the time Julia is my age (nearly 74). The motor car will have been replaced (thank God!) by handy little private "helicopters" and man will have come a long way towards making himself invisible (not just a hidden persuader). This will help him a lot in carrying out his nasty little deeds.

A grandmother herself, Julia's life will appear to her as a dream: she will look back upon countless happy relationships, the basis of which was forged down there in France with her wonderful parents. Let's hope she will go with the flow and always manage to keep her head above water. Except when diving in the Philippines with her mother and listening in amazement to her father on the guitar.

PROMENADE A BRUGES

Guatemala es sólo igual a ella misma. -

Miguel Angel Asturias, Nobel Prize 1967.

Assuming you to be above the age of ten
when reading this, my little song of praise
for who you are and what you mean for me,
I'll let you for a moment share my vagrant life
in one of Europe's most attractive cities
where, without knowing it, you have already been!

The climate's not as hot as sultry Bangalore -
Oma and I escape from time to time each year,
she to Provence, the pair of us to Scotland,
and now and then to places like Bolivia and Peru
to see your Latin aunts and uncles by the score.
What's more, we visit Kortrijk and the Belgian coast
which boast a host of relatives on Oma's side:
one day I hope to be your willing guide.

It may be that our destinies are linked with Bruges,
since Eekhout Forty-two is more than just a house -

a hallowed shrine of patchwork, love and poetry
where you may also flourish, by the grace of God.

With measured steps and mind released from care
(my publisher John Meyfrodth joins me for a chat
and listens to me as I read these lines to him)

I tread the tourist track that leads me to the Burg
with its almost leafless sycamores and chestnuts
facing the Gothic hall where Oma married me
nearly forty years ago. This is my usual walk.

Here, all summer, old fogeys play pétanque,
waving and smiling at the poet as he passes.

Thank God, I'm not quite old enough for that.

Thank God, I'm young enough to be a grandpapa
you'll have some laughs with in your teenage years.

The Weapon Makers' street. The veggie restaurant.

The flower shop, the clued-up skateboard kids

I always say 'hello' to, sometimes popping in.

Sint Jansplein, with its disused lion fountain,

the sweet-shop on the corner selling Mentos,

the green dustbin which serves me as a writing-desk,

the medieval Art School tower and the trees
peeping over an orange roof, and then *Familiezorg*.
But our promenade would not be complete without
the chocolate museum I'll take you to one day.
These are the landmarks of my habitual way.

And now, although it may not be the place for *you*,
a playful ball of fun of little more than two,
a wicker armchair and a welcome glass of water
next to the giant window where I read and write
and talk to Anabel, so kind and terribly polite
and humorous and friendly that I sometimes quite
become unconscious of the hours. Fresh flowers
stand on every table, picked from the nearby garden.
In summer, sunshine warms us through the glass,
autumn, in turn, reflects contented visitors
our hostess tends to with her lovely Latin smile
and perfect Christian courtesy. Rose and Laura,
the directors, two sweet and unassuming ladies
who know me well, drop in for a cosy chat
with anyone who happens to be sitting in the room

and I have made a score of other casual friends.
Here speech is soft and caring, time goes slow,
here quietness itself is music in the making
and the absence of alcohol favours sober thought.

Heading homewards in the dark I have to dodge
determined passers-by wielding big umbrellas,
two bicycles racing past the post office corner
and a horse-drawn coach swerving into the Dijkver -
all the glamour and glitter of a hurryful city
at nightfall. You would be amazed by the lighting
of the brilliant snowy trees around the ice-rink.
You'd gaze wide-eyed at chocolate, lace and toys.
By now I think you'd recognize the Eekhoutstraat,
where my key slides like magic into the front door.
Maria is in the kitchen. Dinner is well under control.



CHRISTMAS WITH JULIA

for Tixie and Mick

Come in we're open

reads the notice on the door

visible from here.

Zina la divina

queen of the cantina

and a belly-dancing star

stands behind the bar

of boyfriend Rida

who works hard to feed her,

polishing her nails

and dreaming of the sales.

I drink my plastic water

and think of Tixie's daughter.

I'm in the Travel Agency

at last, I'm here to buy

our tickets down to Paris

on December twenty-three.

Seven women fill the room,

four of them behind their desks

staring at computers, making

clicking noises with their hands.

I'm here to see Kathleen,

Maria's credit card

tucked safely in my wallet

with the number just in case.

A coach trots past outside

and I recall my little girl

nearly forty years ago

sitting up in front with Georges

doing the rounds of Bruges.

You cannot know we're coming.

I'm tired – or otherwise

why would I winch and grinch

at having to wait so long

while two women talk and talk

to get my hands on our ticket.

Christmas is two months away!

It's in my bag at last with stops

in Brussels that work out well.
While sitting half asleep and
watching that woman click away
I saw us cruising into France.
One hour later I am out and
walking gaily down the street
past Mo-Mo whom I chance
to meet, smoking a cigarette.

Anabel is glad to hear about it.
We chatter gaily for an hour
of Piti, poetry, basketball,
domestic life and Higher Power.
My apple juice and strawberry
is greatly to my liking. It's good
to be the only customer at times.

To the Provincial Library
I now go, to give a book,
Bey's Elegy, as Martin asked.
A friendly bloke accepts it
and listens to my explanation,

every copy a donation,
the boss will write and thank me.

The man I planned to visit
in the Hospital of the Black
Sisters was discharged last week.
A good excuse to push on home
picking up some travelling money
from the bank. The market square
will look completely different
in December, with a skating rink
and booths where you can get a drink.
Right now, with darkness coming on
and nobody I know it's desolate
and windy. Julia, stay indoors.

2. Onderdelen van Indra's net,
met medeleven als drijvende kracht.
What is essential in my life?
That I make Maria happy?
Leave a substantial oeuvre
for Julia to feast upon?

(I'll leave the first glass untouched,
get to that meeting if I can).

Up in the attic of our house
you may one day inherit
there's a computer waiting
midst piles of manuscripts and books
for this old fuddy-duddy
nineteenth century gentleman
to get his sticky paws on
and type this Christmas poem
for darling Mickétix to read.
(Also attach five hundred
haikus to my bud in Deinze
for the book we are preparing
in the thirteenth year of Grace).

Sweet black blood oozes from my pen
wondering how my wee granddaughter
landed in this world of men -
and when – or how! - we'll meet again.

Daylight drips into the garden.
Maria gets ready for work ..
Autumn is here. You are two.
There's light, but not enough of it.
The dishwasher has been emptied.
Breakfast is on the table.
Radio voices bark on and on
in Flemish Dutch – a language
you may one day decide to learn,
as a middle-class landlady
of this desirable property
in the beating heart of Bruges.

3. I suppose the best way
to make Maria happy
is to be happy myself.
One trick that always seems to work
is uttering my nembutsu
over a pile of washing-up -
preferably before our lunch.
Jota in the background also helps.

I don't care if there's washing-up
in the Pure Land, I'll do it
while the ginko bilobas quiver
in the sutra-murmuring breeze.

I've got to see you Juia
the kids in the street are no good
and they're on holiday this week.
I'm getting hyper-manic
by the minute – this freaking dump
is driving me up the wall
and I've had no sex at all.
Shall we dress dolls – or play ball?

Jesus of the stinking breath:
I take the trouble to explain
the story of our statue to a French
photographer who's much amused.
Maria holds Jesus at arm's length
and turns her pretty face away
from her smelly alcoholic son
by whom the victory was won.

Zina, j'ai de bonnes nouvelles:
Nous allons à Paris en train
pour voir notre petite petite-fille
le jour de mon anniversaire.

Quel beau cadeau, mon Dieu!
Je t'offre le café, dit elle. Merci.

Toute seule derrière le comptoir
de la nouvelle Place de Bruges
où père Mo-Mo fait ses peintures
et le beau monde fête le nouvel an
el regarde de son ordinateur l'écran.

Je suis venu pour le portrait
d'une femme que seul Mo-Mo connaît:
embellissement de mon grenier.

Je reviendrai cet aprem
pour continuer ma vie de bohème.
La pauvre Zina, je l'aime bien
même si elle me traite comme son chien.

IF something happens to me

and it can happen to anybody
any time of day or night
(I say this to you Maria
as I'm well into my seventies)
remember that my birth is sure
in Lord Amida's Land of Bliss.
That is the home from which I come.
That is the home to which I go.
That's where our loving spirits meet
so dry your lonely tears my sweet.
The patchwork of our life and dreams
is less laborious than it seems.

The painting's pretty much OK
but the green apples won't stick
on the young model's naked chest
and Mo-Mo's in Paris for the day
taking a badly needed rest.
Suddenly there is nothing to say.

4. Hoy será un día lindo,
todo me va a salir bien.

Anabel practises Coque's words.

Maria went to the library
and came home with a picture
taken from Tixie's e-mail
of Julia with her teddy bear -
she looking fondly in its eyes.
I was taken by surprise.

“We'll put it on the fridge,” she said,
and that's exactly what we did.

Now Julie sees us every day
and we bump into her on our way
to breakfast, lunch and dinner.
She's so cute! She's a winner!
(Maria is a champion too).

She goes to quilt this afternoon
while Marcus without hesitation
does scintillating translation
from Jan Dewitte's SNIZZLY SNOUTS
he's good enough for two short bouts:
the Badger and the Monkey. More

anon – the afternoon is getting on.

I dedicate the book to *you*,
even though you're only two).

To Kopje Troost two women come

I much appreciate and like -
mutual, if I'm not mistaken.

Both of them are Facebook friends
students of many years ago

when the Governor was in my class.

Viviane the gentle Guru who laughs
and makes us laugh until we cry;

Nicole, for whom a man would die.

Hasta mañana, corazón. Las
hojas en la plaza me sonrien.

This really is a lovely day.

Even the sunshine wants to play

while I feel better and better

in my grey Peruvian sweater

braving the cold of ten degrees

under the almost leafless trees.

Grandfathers spread sandwiches

of unremitting joy – do not

ever get into gloomy moods

or lose their affability.

That's one advantage of senility.

Grandfathers are sticky toffee

pudding, laced with ice-cream.

They hug you till you want to scream.

Thank you my funny little friend

for turning my life into a story

with a happy end. Thank you too

for awakening the inner child

in a sensitive poet's soul,

with your eyes of warm black coal.

It was a shame to come inside

but there was nowhere to hide

so here I am in Senah's place,

different time, same old space

where we launched the book for Bey

with cousin Jorge the other day.

Foaming hot milk with honey,
a good run for my money.

*Live like each day is your first
and your last.* My very own words
face me across the wooden table
where I'm doing what I'm able.
Thinking of Mike and Corinth
and how *his* mission failed
and all the torture it entailed.
(One hundred and seven last week,
assassinated at his peak).

We talk. She says she's Taurus.
De maan zit in de Stier
en ik (toevallig) ben hier.
All this makes me feel queer,
and I'm about to shed a tear.
Platon's book is quite gripping,
all that Greek and German shipping.
The natural naturalness of Senah,
the totally unmythified

way she talks and moves and smiles,
her self-contained Moroccan mood,
her Muslim magic in a word.

Now I hear Martín – pronounced
the Flemish way – socking it out
to Els who only seems to drink
evenings: how he slipped back
for 4 destructive downhill years
worse than he'd ever known before,
keeping the chickens company,
dishonest in a thousand ways.
I listen as only dead men do.
This old old song is always new.

5. Poem in October (just!)

LEAVING FOR WORK

The real me is glad
to be alive and sober.

Watches her chopping a mango
Doesn't mind the radio

Tiredness? An illusion!
No foothold for self-pity!
Happiness comes. *The real me*
lifts a glass of hot green tea
feels the flavour warm his throat
strikes a much chirpier note.
Maria's off to the market
The door closes behind her.
Niets vragen, niets weigeren.
Ask nothing, refuse nothing.
This looks like being a day
tinged with immortality.
In short decisive spells!
Julia, your picture's visible
from my desk. Maria's back
makes sandwiches for lunch
Carts the green garden rubbish

out onto the Eekhoutstraat.

The Real Me strokes his beard
almost ready for his muesli
almost ready for some profound
statement, both feet on the ground.

While he contemplates the Norm
newsmen talk about a storm.

Your grandmother is now about
to leave for work. *The Real Me*
looks at the wedding photograph
and makes an effort not to laugh.

She's gone. So what happens now?
He collapses into a chair
and runs his fingers through his hair.



LA FETE DES MORTS

Ballad of an Indian soldier
wounded on the Flemish front

*Some things I used to think
were essential in my life
are now irrelevant.*

Hizo Dios a la Mujer
de la costilla del hombre

And God created Woman
from poor old Adam's rib

and the leaves are falling
into the done washing-up
painting firebirds in the sink

Normal people like Anabel
find it perfectly normal
to let go and move on,
leave the things of youth behind.

I see everybody
reaching out
for what they love

and nearly everybody
pushing it away.

I see the ascetic (in me)
gazing into Zina's eyes
across a noisy crowded room
the music going boum-boum
a latter day Saint-Exupéry
scanning the distant evening skies.

I see fat boys in pantaloons
stretching out for plastic food
thinking its flaccid junky taste
will rectify their restless mood.

In thousands of other ways
we all grab the things we crave.
Let go! Cry my Buddhist friends
the means will never meet the ends.

But there's only one Zina
belly dancer, café queen
who dominates the scene

shouting at me across the bar
in a big-cupped outsize bra
that makes her breast a bit
grotesque: half melon,
half peach, a bit of each.
(She serves me without boo or baa
perhaps I'm going just too far).

Is this young Moroccan couple -
the boyfriend is my favourite bud -
with their two diners in the street
needed for my life complete?
And John & Roger, Kris & Jan,
Anabel, Ana, Marie-Anne?
Where does one draw the line?

The ladybird is on her way
to the princess of Saint-Mammès
showing things too hard to say.
Tomorrow is another day
for both of us to laugh and play.
Now all I have to do is pay

this tasty juice of ananas
without a straw or nuts or glace.
Pay, get out and go back home
to my unoccupied living-room
where I sat up since half past 3
reading and writing poetry
and studying the war at sea
fought by my father Mike and me.

Do not ask me questions which
excite the brain-pans of the rich.
Does the rabbit in its hutch
suffer very very much?
Is it prone to maladies
or only fleas?

Written on the Jolie Brise.
Faith and Sobriety
are the two essentials
of my life right now,
followed by Hope and Love.
Hope that I will see you
at Christmas, Julieta

and take you in my arms,

Love for the world we live in

and all its beautiful people.

Now I can light my candle!

Another two hours till dawn.

Venus enters my Seventh House,

the sweet place of partnership -

with Martin and my Maria -

made clean and pure by Saturn

now in Scorpio. The moon

shone briefly in the window,

wrapped in cloud and hurrying

to other destinations. Tolle

and his NOW wink warningly

from one of the many piles

of books and papers round my desk.

Is that a moth tapping the glass?

I may not be feeling on top of

the world as I say this prayer,

but experience is here to assure me

there is a wonderful day ahead.

Human beings are killers:

Halloween revellers riot

in the street outside our house

where I am peacefully engaged

under the glow of the lamp,

reflected in the black glass.

Pendlebury is dead (page 90):

The glass-eyed archaeologist

of Tel-el-Amarna and Crete

put up against a wall and shot

by merciless German paratroops.

(Proof-reading Platon's book

Target: Corinth Canal in which

my father's the central figure).

The suffering in the world has

always GOT to me, Ilona -

that's why I have some trouble

uttering my nembutsu with JOY:

as we are always told to do

by the Great Masters of our school.

This morning I want to let go
of all that frigging bad karma
and enjoy being with Maria
while the dogs and cats rain down
and last night's Halloweeners
nurse their hangovers in bed.

They got Mike too, the sales boches
took him out, lined him up
and put a bullet in his head
five miserable wretched days
before the Liberation.. History
is so damned easy to falsify!
That's why I loathed the subject
at school – that nationalistic
British blarney about Blighty
being God's gift to humanity.

Cooled down after my hairwash
and shave. Maria's turn upstairs.
Back to my old writing desk

with a quick glance at Julia
proudly installed on the fridge
examining her teddy bear
and on with this very morning.

I thank all the saints of Lima
on Maria's wooden bracelet,
Cadiz (God bless the ladies!),
Malaga and Barcelona
for this most welcome holiday
which means my woman is at home
to sit with me and watch that film -
not flitting off again to the Drôme.
I'll drink another coffee on that
and think of Martin in his flat
uncleaned probably for many years
and several meetings in between.

I thank Sir John for mailing me
when not taking care of his bees
and Cousin Kate in Halifax
who as a child remembered

more than a million men who died
down in the Flemish poppy fields
before the armistice was signed.
Canada, you're in my mind!

I'm definitely not the man
who walked down this street yesterday.
Think about that at your leisure.
My body is ten years younger
and my heart in a different place -
there's happiness in my face.

In Rida's diner the Nepalese
taps my bottom with her tray,
writes her name in this book: SITA.
Mine in another life, perhaps.
I'd do anything to meet her
off work, in a boat or train
just to see that smile again
which cheers me up & kills my pain.
She's from the Himalayan snows
where my imagination goes

racing along on randy skis
whipped up by this damn disease.
Rida and Sita, serving waffles
to waffling foreign guzzlers ...

Her father is back from Paris.
At last. Order in the brothel,
a signature on my painting -
by the Moroccan Mo-casso -
the two green apples firmly stuck.

After the usual useless banter
at the bar, a seat goes empty
at the back.. plain bottled water.
Sober thoughts about Eternity:
how butterflies, that symbolize it,
meet their deaths on motorways
and Mike, the poet of the 30's
snuffed it in Sachsenhausen.
Death IS a feast, my darling
Claudine, my dear Mikush,
it comes to Kennedy and Bush,

so *dance!* And let the devil sing ...

Maria asks about the rain.

“Had to shelter” I explain.

The bedroom is unusually bright.

I light a candle on the altar

to my father, mother, Len and me

after drinking champagne aged 3,

proudly picking up a cat.

This is where it's at. The film

of Allen Ginsberg's early years

can wait five minutes. Prayer

and meditation, a lit candle,

a first of November ritual

scribbled on the edge of the bed.

Cars pass in the street. I'm alive.

Roll on the fifties, I'm coming!

After watching the film of HOWL -

angel hipsters in the Brooklyn dawn -

our afternoon ends. Poor Maria

has pain in the head and stomach

(a complaint becoming common)

and goes upstairs to bed. At six

she may feel well enough to eat:

food at any rate will be ready.

Making a supreme effort

I distance myself from her pain

and certainly don't feel guilty.

I'm a buddha – let go let God.

So this wet November afternoon

ten days before Canada and Oz

remember Ieper and Passchendaele,

one day after wild Halloween,

fizzles out like a damp squib

leaving me with broad beans cooked

and the makings of another book.

Ginsberg, man! That chick's so cool.

I might start a serious new academy

for sex-starved students from Wales

walking Wool street with waving pricks,

filling up holes with walking sticks.

Jokes apart – this dreary day,
sent to hell by booming bells
of five o'clock, now nears its end,
closes down, exits in sorrow.

The grey, almost lifeless garden
where only a few branches stir
looks like a home for buried birds.

Even the Belfry plays no tune
and not a shutter can be heard
locking out darkness. Nobody
can see what I am writing.

This body, unmoved by feelings,
apart from cramp in its fingers
approaches beatitude. Foretaste
of a more relaxed attitude.

(What normal people call normal).

I'll tell them that at Question Time:
feeling relaxed is not a crime,
and though they may not believe me
with open arms they'll receive me.

Three women trampled to death
at a Halloween party in
Madrid – the *least* bad news
on television tonite. It's all
such negativity: meant to keep us
cowering and afraid? I turn to
John, who's in the kitchen
making coffee and remark
how only *here*, at Van Volden,
good things in life are always
talked about. So glad it's Thursday.

*I feel normal, which is highly
abnormal for me.* Euphoria
is out of the question. Hardly
a moment down. I feel good.
Last night my best for months.
Today about a hundred lines
written, a dozen mails.
I'm into the Battle of Crete.

Try to accept with humility
the life that you've been given,
don't look for other excitements.

What reassurance that gives!
And a deep sense of gratitude..
there's nobody in the room.

John joins me, unwraps sugar,
drinks the same tea as I do -
Turkish apple. Glances at papers.
If it wasn't for him! Pure gold!

Some will have paid their respects
to the recently departed
(A few Late Chrysanthemums),
some will have perished themselves.

Imagine this day is your first
and your last. It's nearly past.
I might not survive this ordeal:
this telling them how I feel.

HELLO SOMEONE

to Pieter and Rida
who listened attentively
in their respective cafés

Everybody's doing their best:

Maria grating an apple
into the breakfast muesli,
the poor crooner on the radio
with his charming tuneless lyrics,
the poet sipping his tea
with a splinter in his head.

Mars, opposition to the moon,
also tries to steer an even course
between our Earth and Jupiter.

The world can be a funny place.

Nog een paar nadelen
van het overmatig drinken:
gemis aan zelfvertrouwen,
uitstel, geen zelfrespect,
ontploffen van je antabuse.

Here comes the actual poem
which constitutes this morning's work:

Amida, of whom I am
the tiniest little fraction
makes, and goes on making
this sempiternal vow -

I'll save the universe.
I'll save Marjan and Kris
and the unknown alcoholic
nobody wants to kiss.

Thank you Amida for this.
Thank you for the green dustbin
on which I write these words
for Julia, prettiest of birds
who one day may appear
in Bruges again in the rain
and read my manuscripts
on the Paris-Brussels train.
Saturday 3 November 12 at 9.

With the moon entering Cancer
at nine fifty two a.m. next day
je bavarde avec Rida
dans son palais marocain.

It was great at Pieter's,
my first and only coffee
of the morning, Pavarotti
singing La Donna è Mobile
in nineteen seventy-one
(Benny joins in the fun)
the year before I came to Bruges.

Yesterday fizzled out badly
on the poetry front,
early in the afternoon:
Saint Gillis fully occupied
my powers, talking with May-Cile.
No need to speak of that.

Glackin crosses the Atlantic
(an e-mail bout before brekky)

slowly, on an expensive ship
sharing uncommon fellowship
with guys in Europe and the States
in highly publishable notes
to please the world of motorboats
and maybe pilfer Romney's votes.

Gary, Southampton's reverend
freshly ordained in Kyoto,
organizes a conference
for Buddhists of my persuasion
two years from now: he calls it
'negotiating a minefield',
planning the visit of the Pope ..



AFTER LUNCH SATURDAY

The whole city is in town
and a few from far beyond
hunting for brown chocolate
breasts in Wool Street windows.

Sun flashes out for a minute
as coach horses gallop past
the two Betrothed on the Burg
where a stranger hits this dustbin
as I get things off my chest.

I've written to you, Juliet -
just a few words: I did my best.

Under the whispering chestnuts
I snap a couple from Brasil
kissing like holy Mary.

Killuminatus, my young friend,
spirit of this lost weekend,
avoiding mobs on Breydelstraat,
locked in World zonder Haat,

let's skateboard together, mate
to Lieve's poetry place
in this election year of Grace
Wooler, and photograph *her* face.

* * *

Sun through an almost naked tree,
that's how you looked in fifty-three.

* * *

Emoto – the Man of Water
who earned our love & gratitude
floats into my weary mind
while Lieve listens to the other
guy who's drifted onto her beach
leaving the city out of reach
to play with its daft puppets.

Their Dutch chatter drones on
agreeably. Not listening at all
I understand. Her voice is sweet
and he's a cosy friendly chap
who doesn't seem to drink.

I hear the Irish violins
against a scene of peaceful light
and welcome warmth. Two people
come in, just when I thought
tea and solitude were my lot.
(I'm thankful for what I've got).
The music changes to Spanish.
A well known poet reads tonight
to eight eclectic Brugean souls
accompanied by a guitar and me.

* * *

Be honest. Keep big words on ice
when a little gesture will suffice.

* * *

The Lord is with thee Maria,
blessèd among women, my wife
and dear companion of my life
now working at the library. Thanks
for all you always do for me.
I hear your footstep in the hall
above a roaring motorbike

and watch the shadows in the garden
hiding under the wintersweet.
Tino Rossi is crooning the songs
I listened to during the war
crouched on the sitting room floor
on Mike and Nancy's gramophone
(my pa and ma for those who are
unfamiliar with my family tree).

Nothing done today. Waves of guilt
build up inside me. Platon's
book about my father in the war
unopened; Jan's Snizzly Snouts
forgotten (I wasn't in the mood
for translation; and worst of all,
no progress on the article
for Handelsblad. I saw it coming
as Maria left for work – a whole
day to myself, fresh from a good
night's sleep, and no-one at my back
making unreasonable demands.

First to Fati, Zina's mother,
for a quick coffee, a human face
and a few lines of poetry before
getting on with the heavy stuff
(at least, in my imagination).

The rest is history: the Déli
closed, on to Pieter in the Verdi
and back again, upstairs and on
to Mo-Mo for his work of art
and on from there and on & back
for lunch & typing, out again -
the story of my bad old days
retold without the girls and beer
(not that I am turning queer) ..

Every ounce of energy went
into Julia's Christmas poem:
tiny Julieta playing havoc
with my fuddy-duddy heart.
And now it's time to start dinner

CHICKEN SOUP

Kate has a date

with Dan her man

at the fair

in Saint Hubert

Vorm is leegte

Leegte is vorm

Thinking to myself

under the chestnuts

So why not

Yin is yang

Yang is yin?

You have to begin

somewhere!

Chickens have

hard breasts

turkeys have

soft ones

Zina maria

Maria zina

ZOUK -

music of

Guadeloupe

chicken soup

for the group

poop! poop!

Niets vragen

Niets weigeren

(Marie de Bruges

left me this Tibetan

motto on stone)

Madame

je ne sais quoi

passee divers hivers

dans son chalet
de montagne
drinking moonshine
from the bottle
at full throttle

Brugse borsten
shock-o-lade
vóór de ontbijt
tot mijn spijt

Obama Cinerama
Romney Marsh
or is my judgement
harsh?

Kris Kras Cross
Julia's the boss
pitch and toss
he's a decent chap

but doesn't rap

Cavalry charge -
your legs are large
deep freeze chicken
screw your courage
to the sticking point.

(On the kitchen radio
where Maria chops
a sports program is on.

The micro man
sounds like a dinosaur
with a heavy attack
of flatulence
or an Afghan terrorist
murdering Americans.

Must I listen
to this trash -
this balderdash?)

FOR PIETER

The morning
advances -
no haiku

Yet:
an idea
might come

after my next
sip of
English Breakfast

(a whole pot
for two euros
fifty)

here in Verdi
talking talking
to Pieter

while Pavarotti
sings La Donna
è Mobile

and the cleaning
lady flirts
with me.

Atrocious!
I got up
w/ gd intentions

Made my bed
wrote to Jacques
for his b'day

consulted
the stars,
Jupiter

and Mars
(not the chocolate
bars)

But was stopped
by a woman
in the street

With "D's Events"
on the back
of her T-shirt

So I scribble
on bins
and Cola tins

hoping all this
will be clear
to KRIS.

MEMORY

Each step forwards
is simultaneously
one step backwards.

Although invisible
it leaves a trace
of dead and buried life

which is indelible -
the fine dust
in the hour-glass of time.

From the Dutch of Germain Droogenbroodt

Today I will resist
the temptation to write
a seventeen-year-old.

The leaves of the wintersweet
hang provocatively -

wanting to be picked.

(The garden hasn't recovered
from a hard night's sleep -
it looks exhausted).

Today I will resist
my impulses – to wish Marjan
another happy birthday,

yesterday's was enough,
telling An with Peter
our alcoholic stuff ...

“Silencio en la Noche” -

my muscles are asleep,
I'm tired of counting sheep.

And I'll resist the urge
to cross my boundaries
into unwarranted action

Walking, when bicycling

is just as possible,

writing poetry

when staring at the autumn

sky, quite dry,

is a viable option.

Am I writing

about now, or then

or afterwards?

I vaguely remember

translating that poem

by Germain,

It was definitely

this morning but

before or after breakfast?

Had I just written to Platon?

The book was lying on my chair.

I crept stealthily up the stairs

Not wanting to wake Maria

who's an incredibly light sleeper

and an incredibly long one too.

I do remember, however, laughing

at myself in the mirror in the hall before leaving

and how surprisingly light my blue donkey jacket was

(I must have taken out the purse Werner gave me

with its heavy collection of coins for drinks in town

and the Moleskin notebook which accompanies me everywhere).

She reminded me not to forget the bread for lunch

(I'd pick up some thyme drops and gourmet coffee while at it)

not that I'd be stupid enough to forget something so essential -

I remember she was wearing the Thai silk scarf Rita gave her

with the purple butterflies and screamingly funny but very saucy

dark blue 1930's hat with a blue woollen rose on the side -

I told her it was nice and she agreed. Lunch (a boterham) is on the table

ready for us, the little Jimmies and Julies are playing in the school yard over the garden wall, and I'm expecting her any minute now. This is just a little bit of Droogenbroodt's Memory Dust. Her footsteps in the hall. She's here. Hello!

I'll always remember this morning, the 6th of November, thanks to bringing my notebook, Obama winning his second election, Marjan 5 years sober, the moon in Leo trine my Aries Ascendant and Mercury in Sagittarius (stationary about now), Maria coming out of the shower at 7.30 as I finished on the computer, inviting Platon Alexiades in Montreal to come and collect his proof-read book about Mike and the Corinth Canal in mid-December (I'm afraid to post all that work and want to talk with him), cleaning my teeth with the electric toothbrush, looking into the low Winter sun out my bedroom window and later at the front door and back along the Vlamingstraat – a hello note in Gerard's door – and Wollestraat after depositing my COI letter with the editors of the weekly Brugs Handelsblad, parking my bike outside the DELI (an absolutely delicious fruit breakfast with Maria, after 3 mugs of Oxfam BIO-tea and BIO-coffee from Suvéestraat, plus 2 or 3 Mentos at my office desk to build up the sugar level), Zina sitting in the window – what am I saying!! - nibbling a croissant to my surprise, passing up the street I had thought it was Rida, taking a plastic bottle of water from the fridge, to celebrate the successful accomplishment of the Handelsblad mission and plonking myself down at her table.

The conversation which has ensued for an hour up until now, with a few interruptions to feed customers and give them drinks, and an awful lot of ZUMBA from the television behind my back, is not of a high enough standard to be recorded here (after all, this is a poem, not a scene from an avant-garde black & white movie filmed by Mo-Mo Boudi her father), except that I told her for the nth time that my pension amounted

to 125 euros a month (nothing granted by France or Belgium, although I taught two years in the former and translated 20 years officially for the City of Bruges), which was why I was rather hoping that SHE or her man would pay our air tickets to Morocco for the free holiday they had promised us. Now Rida has arrived with his van and is unloading shelves. End of page.



TWO E-MAILS

which helped to get me back on track.

Friday 2 November

Wow, you have been busy lately!

All that work, no wonder you're tired.

Just take your rest now and think about the lovely trip you're going to make to see your grandchild in Paris.

It will do you good to see her again.

Children have an amazing way of making us happy: it's like a "life's elixir", they make you laugh and give you energy.

So try to keep the spirit up, and do rest a lot.

Ana

Tuesday 6 November

How great you can at least put your feelings on paper and release some of the depression-pressure!

I've read all of it and glimpsed how confusing it must be for you ...

just keep looking for the pretty things in life,

as in the eyes of your granddaughter and the time you are going to spend with her through Christmas.

Debora

VENUS AND NEPTUNE

I want to sing an Other Power song

for Mick & Tixie's daughter from the Land of Bliss,

a melody that penetrates her heart

and sets her small feet tapping on the floor.

I want to write a pearly string of words

to hang around her tiny little neck,

pull stardust from the early morning sky

and sprinkle it with laughter in her hair.

I want so much. And yet the most I want

is just that Julia should be happy and enjoy

the freely given love of Mick and Tix.

How quickly childhood passes! Now it's here

and now it disappears, gone in one day.

Thoughts of Julia tease me out of myself,

make this early morning something magical.

Venus and Neptune are in perfect aspect.

The Sun has entered Sagittarius.

I could go on singing for our Julia
as though time did not exist and dawn
was some dim future event prophesied
by the Aztecs, not an actual happening.
Thank you, Amida, for the gift of light
shared in the burning candle at your feet.
Prayer mingled with Morning Meditation
distracts me for a moment from the dance.
Give me a bit of your boundless energy.
Make this a perfect day when all works out
harmoniously, in tune with the stars.

Breakfast is over. Maria's fruit muesli
goes down a treat. The cleaning lady's here.
An e-mail to Isabel, with this poem, and one
to Tixie, asking what they'd like for Christmas.
Julia will love the spinning top I've seen
in the toy shop where we've already been.

THE WEEK THAT WAS

Up in the attic sending pictures of Julia to Isabel
so she can paint a portrait for the cover of *Christmas with Julia*.
I still think the one of her gazing at her teddy bear is the best.
The expression in her adoring eyes is absolutely unbeatable.

After the Spanish class with Leonor, Mónica and Ana
(Jupiter is in Gemini, trine to the Moon in Aquarius,
which may have helped me to communicate with these women),
I came and sat down in the empty passage of Kopje Troost
opposite a seascape painted by somebody called *Leen*,
waves viewed from a distance rolling up on the sand
and a breakwater of vertical black logs pointing out to sea.

Anabel brings me coffee and retires discreetly,
sensing probably that this could be the badly needed breakthrough
to my family in Saint Mammès. A week has elapsed.

A week in which nothing important happened. But what is ever
important?

Moments of meditation at my desk in the hour before dawn

may be looked on as meaningful, moments spent with Maria,
the priceless minutes together talking quietly over tea,
a hand with the cooking, a hand in her hand in the park,
pulling the covers up over the wounds of a wasted weekend,
the helpless in-between ballast of gloom with a touch of despair.
She has been wonderful. The list of her kindnesses has no end.

The always welcome Isabel is here to see *Bey's Elegy*
for which she did the much liked drawing on the back.
Her visit picks me up and paints a long-lost smile upon my face.
I can think of few people I'd be happier to see right now.
Effortlessly, and without the slightest effort, our twin moods click.
We have both of us taken some particularly unenjoyable stick
from our non-creative apathy, the lethal attraction of our beds.
Not without Isabel's inimitable chuckle here and there
to kill the negative, we share our experience, strength and hope
creating a mood of innocent fun beyond this poem's scope.
To my delight she has agreed to paint a picture of our Julia
within two weeks, and takes a very careful look at the young lady
on the fridge. This will make a perfect cover for my book.

It only seems natural for us to have lunch in the veranda.
Winter – the joy of waking up at six
and a whole empty-minded day ahead.

The purpose of my existence today?
To be happy, and benefit others.

Fill my heart with peace and loving-kindness,
empty my soul of bitterness and wrath.

Maria comes down. Fear of the future
vanishes into the mist of the past.

Isabel has got your picture, darling
and probably will go to work today.

A teeth-cleaning session in the bathroom
immortalized by a stroke of the pen.

In the white light of a November morning
a long forgotten acquaintance appears
telling me there will be trains to Deinze

but not promising they will be on time.

It's absolutely vital I capture

the gleam of sunlight on the Lake of Love.

For this I'd miss my train, my day with Kris.

For this I'd throw a haiku to the wind.

Piled on the sloping banks of the canal,

golden brown leaves, the bright gifts of summer.

The mysterious light of trains in stations,

the strange glances people give each other.

The predictable views from the window

of a train that will miss its connection.

Got it! Luckily the connection was late:

repercussions over the whole network?

Boring stuff for you, Julia, I'm afraid.

How can I please such a pretty wee maid?

Look at the houses, the gardens, the cars,

Girls are from Venus and boys are from Mars.

With joy and enthusiasm we worked

together on my haiku collection,

weeding out some of the weaker elements,

thoroughly enjoying all the good ones.

Ethel's apple cake replenished our strength,

we worked without stopping all afternoon.

With darkness falling we walked to the station.

I was home five minutes before Maria.

This morning I dragged myself out of bed

at ten. Yesterday had taken its toll.

Mars ruled my horoscope – his energy

soon became felt, and the rest of the day

was devoted to my professional life.

I copied Platon's book about my father

and sent it to him with my corrections.

Bruno came round and we worked together

on the program for the North Sea Convention.

With dusk approaching I turned my attention

once more to the haikus – all two hundred

and fifty pages of photographic inspiration

needing to be dealt with on the computer

in order to be ready for a book next year.

Julia, a tiny ball of cosmic energy

bounces around that charming house in France

while Opa talks with his Moroccan buddy

about a dangerous alcoholic brother

causing untold misery to his friends.

Rida sets off for Paris in his Porsche,

hoping to make some difference to that drunk.

Blonde petite Françoise I get on well with

in her beauty salon just across the park

where Sagittarian sun has come to play

talks of her children as she cuts my hair

and gives me an enormous bag of toys

(mostly for kids of kindergarten age)

to take to little Julia in Saint-Mammès.

This year I'll be a real Father Christmas.

For months I've sported an unruly mop,

a shapeless, shaggy, woolly head of hair

to frighten dogs and children in the street -

frequently needing to be washed and combed

but still not falling into place, embellished

by a bushy sailor's beard and eyebrows grim.

Thanks to Françoise and a pair of scissors

I've lost a kilo and a dozen years.

Another day has passed without events,

sorting out all the work I did with Kris.

I left my bicycle at Biddersstraat,

the place we meet on Friday afternoons,

in the confusion following the sale
of two *Reflections*: Hilaire and Fabienne.

By street lamps and a hazy Aries moon
I kiss my favourite knotted leafless trees
that stand beside the Augustine canal.

Our meal can wait until I've got this down.

I cycle homewards through the dodgy town.

That was the week that was, up here in Belgium,
described by Baudelaire as orderly and calm.

We have a government, a gay prime minister

I rather like (he wants to penalize the very rich),

and all the usual football clubs and stars of radio

and screen. *Four Times a Lady*, beauties on guitar,

get us out of the house on Sunday afternoon

into a concert hall packed to overflowing:

strings plucked delightfully to charm our ears.

Will Julia inherit Mick's colossal talent with the years?

And how will *she* have spent these last November days?

Entertaining her parents in different funny ways?

Oma purchases a dark blue woollen top, but Opa
stays at home and writes. He simply cannot stop.

DARK AUTUMN DAY

The tree-of-heaven has almost shed her leaves
and the wintersweet is coming into its glory.

Through the dark and uninspiring air
a dull deep bell booms from the far-off city
I won't be visiting again till Monday.

Maria takes advantage of a Christmas market -
keeping a sharp look-out for suitable presents
to take to the family down in Saint-Mammès,
leaving me alone and perfectly contented
in the almost pitch-black living quarters
brightened with coffee, but not the sound of music.

Here all afternoon I sit and think of you, Julia
under the roof of Mick and Tixie's house in France.

You must be unaware of my existence,
the fun we had in August long forgotten,
busy with many more important and amusing things,
passionately enwrapped in magic fleeting moments,

inexperienced in meditation, peace of mind
and all that boring heavy grown-up stuff.

Thirteen years later we meet again on this page,
the buds of your imagination starting to burst open -
mystified, curious as to my strange motivation,
wondering what in heaven's name made the old man tick.

But that's for later. Much much later. Now,
blessed with the abundance of your parents' love,
life is one tremendous game and you're the winner.

Everything exists for you – it has no other purpose
than to please you and satisfy your every whim.

From here, as evening falls, and it gets even darker,

I watch you in your sheltered little universe

creating reality the way you want it to be -

just like Isabel the artist and me the poet

making this work of art for you, with Meyfroodt's help.

But learning too – hélas! - is part of this adventure.

Life is not ALL a piece of cake when you are two.

Some things are difficult – a fact you know too well
already. Mother has the knack of saying “no!”.
Your drives don't always meet with a response.
And early bedtime often interrupts the Game.
Life is a learning process which is never done -
that's what I've learned so far. This wordy song
I write for Mick's guitar is harder than it sounds.

The garden (sometimes) and the street are out of bounds.
I see you frowning, as you try to understand
the meaning of it all. That puzzled and enquiring look
makes you more beautiful. Peace on you Julia,
my child, take comfort in your warm surroundings.
You belong in our hearts, blissful maid.



MY SOUL HAS CHOSEN

My soul has chosen. I get up glad and sober
to enjoy my day. Maria leaves for work
with a kiss. “Turn the Christmas lights on if you want!”
I do. Because they remind me of you, Julia
and the great times we'll soon be having together.
The little tree Maria bought on Saturday
brightens the street window and keeps me company
here in my dressing-gown this dark November morning.
In slightly less than a month the little Julia
will be pulling my beard, as cameras click
and Tixie watches in amusement. Or else we'll be
at table, spooning food into her birdlike mouth,
or on the floor, playing some spell-binding game
to tease our hearts and while the time away.
How I long to see that portrait Isabel is painting!

I know Amida wants me to be happy
and I shall make his wish my purpose for today -

I remember that the good times are for milking,
that nothing gives me so much joy as poetry
and that nembutsu, uttered with a grateful heart,
supplies the key of meaning to this earthly life.

Venus and Saturn, Mars and Pluto, the planets
harmonize and come together for a day.

Everything tells me the good times are for milking.

Esoteric symbols litter my agenda.

Mercury is sextile to my natal Moon:

this means I'll write a letter to Japan

about the Buddhist website, contact Jeremy

and thank the German priest for all his money.

After lunch together, I'll go to Kopje Troost

(Maria has her quilting afternoon this week)

and look at *Tannisho*, accompanied by Anabel.

And now, fruit muesli while I meditate at ease!

Under a nice hot shower I discover

that I have the body of a child of two

and wash it tenderly and carefully with soap -

a thing I never do. The bathmat has been used,

the towel is wet. I emerge a reborn Buddhist

ready to put my clothes on, brush my teeth,

go down, and make another pot of tea.

Patches of pale blue sky: the sun tries hard to shine.

That's all for now. John Meyfrodtd comes on Saturday

to see if he can conjure all this loving work

into a book for Julia by Christmas. Tixie has reacted

favourably, like Maria, to the piece I sent her

(my autumn meditation on the state of Julia's soul)

and nothing remains now but to tie up the loose ends.

Our grand-daughter has become a citizen of France.

We're terribly proud of her and both her parents.

To see her on my next birthday will be the best

present I've received for years. Light-footedly

I'll step off the slow train to Saint-Mammès,

light-heartedly open Mickétix' front door.

FINISHING TOUCHES

2 years 112 days old

I'll write one more poem for you, Julia
and then we'll call it a day. The moon swings
slowly away from the garden window
into other people's dreams, in England,
Ireland and then on into the Atlantic,
so often sailed by our ancestors at night ...
The moon! You may not have seen her yet,
for your great dark eyes are fixed on Mama
and her skin that is lucent mother-of-pearl.
It will be quite some time before you realize
that silver disc in the sky brings change
of fortune, ebb and flow, excitement in the brain ...
For me, my chicken, you're a wild Plutonic force
deep in my subconscious. You're a playmate
for my inner child, Markitos, the essential me
who lives beyond astrology and daily news.
You've crept into my bones. You stand and laugh
at the ancient gods, tumbling from their thrones.