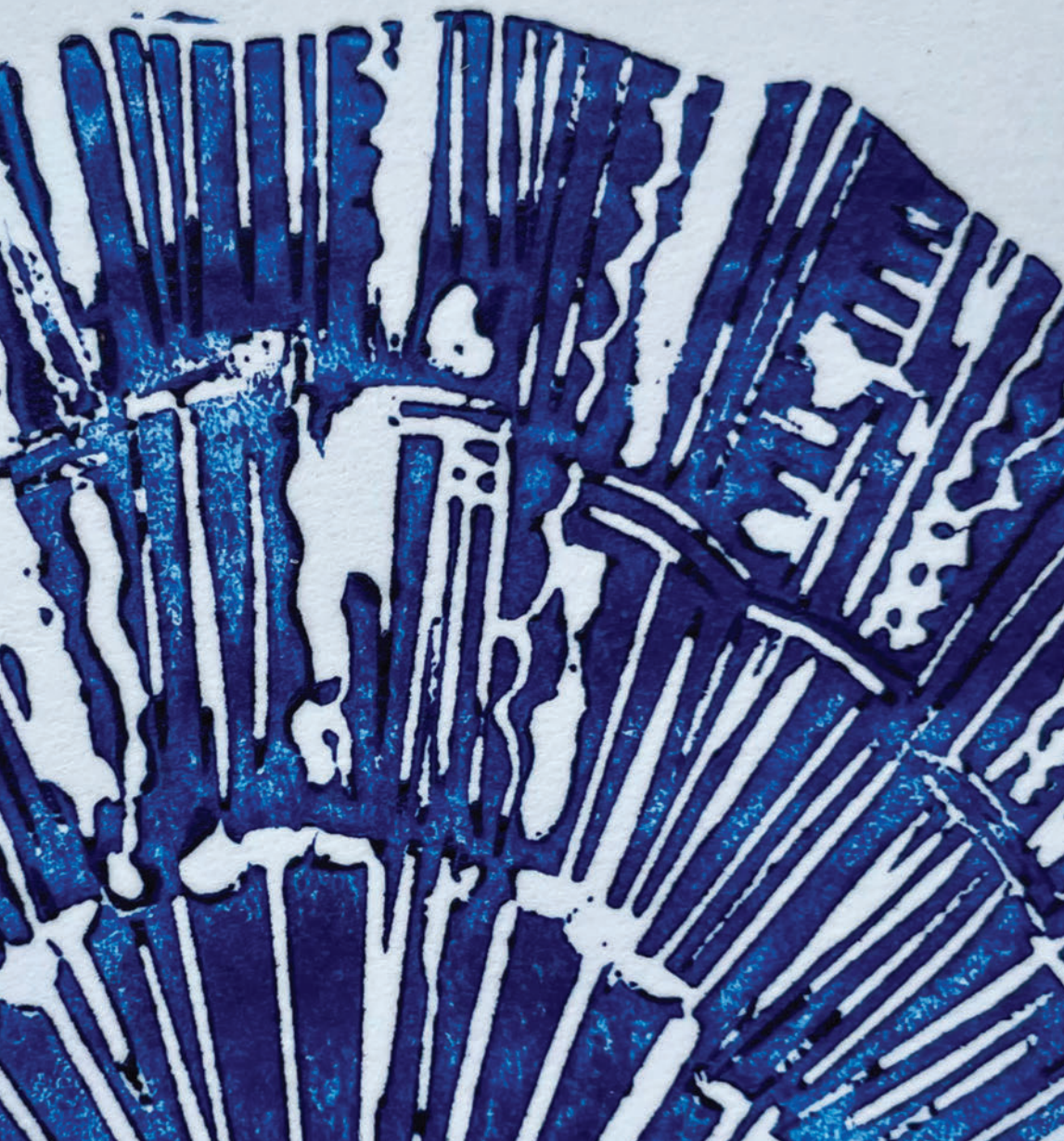


Self-Portrait as Scallop Shell

Poems for the Cuckmere Pilgrim Path

Oenone Thomas



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Scan the code below to listen online to the poems read by the
author. Includes 'Sound Made Solid', Highly Commended in
the Sound of the Year Awards 2024.



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Encounter

Put yourself in the way
of yourself. You

cannot flee your feet,
fend off your breath,

escape your pulse, the line
of trees, earth's tracks,

its watercourses,
or this morning's

toss-up of breeze,
headwind, tailwind.

Beginning

I was afraid
I had forgotten
how to walk

mile after mile,
step upon step.
lifting knee, shifting

hip, altering at the ankle,
lower back, adjusting
impact, testing

boots for cracks.
A long time
since I last set out

across a clutch of fields,
over a stile and up
the hill, that one

with the pylon
to Poundsbridge,
with our dog.

A small, personable
chapel, and charming
like Lullington is

after the climb.
In so many ways
a reminder of how

I'd given in to her
that one last time.
And in the end, I was able

to carry her home.
A lightweight
in fur and bone.

The Map and the Territory

Heavy tread on a September afternoon
and a sagging backpack
mark me

as one weighed down by custom
and bound to a singular
outcome.

Pilgrim. Footsteps set out in the dew
of a Berwick morning, mapped to paths
of sites

uncharted. *Pilgrim*. The word is on repeat
inside my head. No, not me,
I'm just

walking. Nothing like the picture book,
cloak, bundle, sturdy stick. I'm just
looking

this way and that, I'm just seeking
something. I've been here
so often.

And soon I'll be back again
for the first time.

What We Carry

Spare socks. A grief zipped
in a hidden pocket.
A well-made flask
from a favourite friend.
Hard words. Great love.
Biscuit bars. Regret.
Antibacterial gel.
Tissues. Essential
hat with broad brim
to protect from the sun
and also from the rain.
A box with fitting lid
for an item as yet
undiscovered. A map
of the heavens.
Intention long-held
in the palm of one hand.
A new scallop shell.

Autumn Sky

The Fireworks Galaxy has bright blue pockets, spiral arms, a luminous core. It's the centre for newly formed stars, 225,000,000,000 silent Light Years from us. Not long now until the Fifth, and we'll all be able to hear rookie explosions at the Lewes Bonfire

Side by side

they walk and they talk. They've heard this
is a kind of healing, the way

to fall into step. No need to face eye to eye.
Only forward motion, points of interest, grasses

whose forgotten names they promise they will
remember, together, later. And there's the weather.

Much better than forecast. They confide
how they worried it might be chilly or stormy.

One of them hums a tune they have in common,
the other joins in, rhyming Alciston, Selmeston,

Arlington, Wilmington, Lullington, Alfriston,
starting the round at Berwick again.

On Route

How small and tight and bound
and pained with left
and right,

shoulders steering on, loaded
down, and charged
with meeting

a weighty thing.
A me
called pilgrim,

hauled into being, presenting
this upfront face
tilted

at winter's advance, lancing
crosswinds, leaves
in blizzards, fears

of death.
And worse,
of dry existence.

What on earth am I seeking?
What on earth am I?
What on earth?

What. This me, in hiding still,
now by a stile,
at a hedge,

before a plank of a bridge bridging
water. Water exactly
as it is.

The Long Man of Wilmington Wants Answers Too

Who am I?

How did I get here?

What's my purpose?

Who put these staves in my hands?

Am I Neolithic?

Early Modern?

Mythic Odin?

Constellation Orion?

Anglo-Saxon, Roman?

A Tudor joke, the god Baldur?

And you down there! Who on earth are you?

This Faith I Seek is Still Beyond Me

I set out, one foot
ahead of the other, always

in the mapped direction
of illumination

in shook foil, some grandeur
or other astonishing

shining thing
moving with grace

via bootlace
to the tips of my toes.

Shedding

I remember when
you clutched at your handkerchief,
the show-off silk one at your breast,
tugged it free, flagging up my tears,
your flourish of concern sending confetti,
long since forgotten in the fold,

drifting bright scraps of rice paper
made all the brighter, all the clearer
by the glass-stained sunshine
washing through the church.
How we both leapt and chased,
laughing so hard, crying harder.

What a long year it has been.
So many of ours dead and carried away
on a breeze. I bring a pinch of confetti,
under cover to spare the others
our shedding tears. It's pocketed
deeper than yours.

Pocket Squares

If the scent of piled apples
is a colour, this is true
green, rolled to the foot
of the stone font.

*

Autumn's scratch sun
warms the stone dial.
A little.

*

How would you sign yourself,
if not with your name?
With a butterfly,
a wheatsheaf.

*

Night walking single-file,
silent since the meadow gate,
all willing the nightingale
to his song.

*

I pull off my boots
and tonight
when I sleep
the path finds its way
into my dreams.

Winter Sky

Before the full moon Take a blanket Wrap up warm Drink Snack Use a compass on a smart phone Download app Let your eyes adjust Give it twenty minutes Turn off torchlight Turn your phone off

On Reaching the Solar Dial at Berwick

All around the world's in motion,
a terrific headwind strikes.

Clouds tear across
in great sheets, tall trees take turns
to bat at autumn, grasses
whip up the racing rushes.

Only the set stone stands still.

It's what you'd expect
of a Caithness flag, prop split
from sedimentary slab.
But wait, and watch,
how it too meets its match,

its hinge of leverage a slow shadow's swipe over
the churchyard's mown measure.
Its default is constant sun,
altering hour upon hour
in pieces of eight.

Trick of the Light

We take our seats, centred
between the brilliant south
and north aisle windows.

They orientate us, at the heart
of a painterly carousel.
We look all around, look up

to skied circles, four
in total, trompe l'oeil
round windows.

It seems the artist thought this
Sussex daylight not enough
to see ourselves by,

that we must have extra mural
illumination, imported
sleight of hand, and these

blanks, like heat-hazy cataracts
of Sansepolcro sky, drawing
the congregated gaze, lifting

our sights, distracting
from feet of Downland chalk,
of Wealden clay.

Light here

has a tone
I've not seen.

Effortless
brightness.

I think I make out
the curvature

of the Earth,
and can believe

in voluptuous forms
of plateaux,

shapely hills,
distinctly

within my grasp.
But the map

is against me
and the app says no.

Walking can
go to your head.

You look, look until
you no longer see.

And there is a tang,
like mountain height.

Here, it's the light.
I can taste it.

Sound Made Solid

Tuned to a 28-second chime of Alciston's pilgrim bell

One note
broad
and long and longing
and filling
itself
with itself
sound-berg
sound-melt
glacial
quiver
of thought
as near vibration
as pinned
by tuning fork
as rippling
through slow
pooling
mindscape
this stone
these walls
might
begin
to fall
and this
place
its form
would be
bound
to be
defined
by
sound

Cuckmere Pastoral-Style

It's not the fashion to describe this
duck egg blue late afternoon with its orange

yolk clot of sun
sticking just above a dropdown horizon.

It's not vintage retro urban.
The flood plain isn't trending.

But this is the place of the next big thing –
over there's the latest in starling-feather skies

and a supercool night with the stars
is coming soon.

Spring Sky

Pick an early buttercup hold it up

to the sky look
for the yellow
glow
hint
of
sun

At the Reservoir

In my mind's eye, I am
invisible,

appearing only
to shape the spaces between

occasional others.
It feels good

to be shedding my self. I
am no more able

to make waves
than create a ripple

in this giddyding
body of water.

I am invisible
as this year's

unsung nightingale,
the hearsay dormice,

mammoth tusk, buried skull
of woolly rhinoceros.

But I can see,
and I'm looking

at the heron looking
for appearance on the surface

and deep down
for a fluttering fish.

The Path in Fractals

April comes and I walk and I walk and I get
nowhere and change nothing and nothing
changes and in May
I return.

The Romanesco cauli keeps repetition,
Passiflora incarnata unfolds,
I still can't skim stones
seven times.

June comes and I walk and I walk and I get to
August by way of July, nothing
changes and so on,
I return.

In Spain, the Nasrid set geometry in the walls
of the Alhambra in Granada.
I go there by plane,
back again.

September is... October not so much at all.
November. I get to the road's end
and then at nightfall
I return.

I remember to tell of the memory nurse.
You say you wish I hadn't, maybe
you could try harder,
I forget.

December comes, I run the errands and I get
some change at the Poinsettia shop
and then, presently,
I return.

Our Prayers Here

For clean water.
For babies.
For those hurt by war.

What we ask is all
the same,
a blessing

for the missing
and the missed,
recovery from illness,

on paper torn
and folded
and posted

into the open dark
cave mouth
of an earthenware pot.

For eyesight restored.
For friends found.
For pets.

Listen

for the long vein
note of
aeroplane,

a child's far cry
ringing out
in decibels,

a dog biting
the soundscape,
and sheep

bleat-bleating
in chorused
rounds,

your breath
whispering
breathe,

your heart
insisting
beat,

every footfall
a call
and response.

Summer Sky

paragliders

their own

gulls

all making journeys

a Spitfire

too close

with chaser plane

a drone

overhead

Self-Portrait as Scallop Shell

Phylum – Mollusca

Class – Bivalvia

Order – Pectinida

Motif – archetypal,
aesthetic seashell,
fertility symbol.

Dictionary definition –
Cosmopolitan, free-living,
it's as though we are

world travellers, both
pinned to intention and
expectation of pearls.

Phylum – badge

Class – seeker

Order – St James.



Notes on the Poems

In 'Autumn Sky', *rookies* are firework bangers set off during the Lewes Bonfire parades.

In 'Pocket Squares', the *wheatsheaf* is a signature image in stained glass at St Andrew's, Alfriston, and St Mary's, Selmeston; the *butterfly* signature can be found at St Mary and St Peter, Wilmington.

'This Faith I Seek is Still Beyond Me' borrows from 'God's Grandeur' by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

'Trick of the Light' refers to the italianate round windows painted by Duncan Grant as part of the decoration of St Michael and All Angels, Berwick.

Skied is a term used by museum curators to describe pictures displayed high up.

In 'Light Here', the phrase "tang of mountain height" is taken from Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain*.

'Our Prayers Here' refers to the glazed earthenware pot, by Jonathan Chiswell Jones, placed at each of the churches on the route. Prayers and messages for fellow pilgrims can be left inside.

A version of 'Sound Made Solid' was Highly Commended in the Sound of the Year Awards 2024.

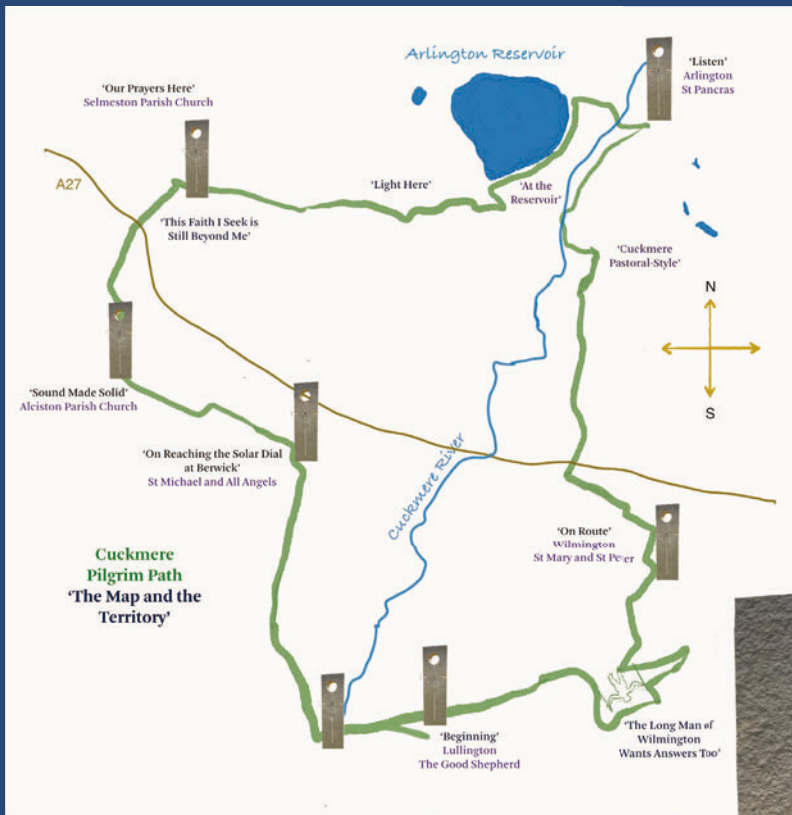
Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Peter Blee, Rector of Berwick, to all who work alongside him, and parishioners and members of the community, for their warm welcome and support throughout my residency year.

I am grateful to Tamar Yoseloff for her editing of this collection, and to Andrew Lindesay for its design.

About the author

Oenone Thomas is a poet, psychotherapist, and chocolate-maker, brought up in south Wales and southern Spain, and now at home in the south east of England. She has an MA in Writing Poetry from Poetry School London and Newcastle University. Her poems are widely published in poetry magazines and anthologies, and she has been shortlisted for the Live Canon International Poetry Prize and longlisted in the National Poetry Competition. This is her first collection.



The seven Solar Dials by Thomas Sargeant are made from 370-million-year-old Caithness Flagstone. They stand like sentries or guardians at each church on the pilgrim path. The design is based on Medieval Mass Dials which were used by priests or monks to tell when prayers were to be said.



"This selection of poems, the product of Oenone Thomas's time as Poet in Residence for the Cuckmere Pilgrim Path, allows us to walk side-by-side with her, and to consider the act of walking as an aid to contemplation and redemption. The words often take the forms of trails or circles in which we can find refuge. This is a beautiful collection, dwelling on what it means to occupy a landscape, to move through it step by step, and to observe the passing of seasons and weathers in Thomas's thoughtful company."

— Tamar Yoseloff

"The Cuckmere Path weaves its remarkable spell again, this time in the delightful – the lightful – lyrics of Oenone Thomas. Every line and stanza partakes of movement, whether of the figure walking the path or of thought as the journey's prepared for, the fields and hills traversed, the changing skies beheld. One can only echo this beautiful remark – one of many – at the close of 'The Map and the Territory': 'Soon I'll be back again for the first time'. This is a splendid walking company of poems."

— Glyn Maxwell



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and All Angels, Berwick

