

David Henry Wilson  
**MEMORIES AND MYSTERIES**  
*A Book of Poems*



*With ten paintings by*  
Claus Dietrich Hentschel



## MEMORIES AND MYSTERIES

In memory of Lisbeth, and for Chris, Jenny, JJ and their families.



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and I am most grateful to her for giving me permission to use them.

My thanks also to Dr. Markus Hentschel for permission to use his photograph of  
Withdraw Behind Your Curtain.

The front cover painting: On the Edge of Twilight.  
The back cover painting: Clearing



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## FOREWORD

These poems span a period of some 60 years. There is no uniformity of style or subject matter, and I have selected each one simply because it represents a thought, an emotion, a memory or a mystery that is still resonant for me. Some may even offer contradictory views, but that is because for every dark there is a light, and vice versa.

The paintings by my late friend Claus Dietrich Hentschel, who brilliantly illustrated the German editions of two of my novels, seem to me to provide a perfect visual accompaniment to my own vision of the world. I am deeply grateful to Inge Hentschel for giving me permission to include them.

dhw  
Taunton, Summer 2017

## Flight

I came as a stranger out of the waves,  
And my eyes were cowrie shells set down in clay,  
And my hair was soft tresses of sea-lilies,  
And my teeth were thorns from roses plucked away.

My body was a driftwood log unfashioned  
And yet symmetrical upon the earth,  
And as I breathed, I drank deep draughts of sweetness,  
And so I came to celebrate my birth.

Now, like a seabird, I have spread my wings  
And touched the clouds with saltiness at my feet.  
Yet, as a stranger still, I scan the skies  
To find the hand that made my heart to beat.



## The dog

“There must be a hidden motive for the best.  
Watch for the sun.” And a frozen dog is whining.  
“There must be a hope, even for the hungry.”  
And a half-chewed hollow bone lies in the snow.

“Let us pray,” says a blue-cheeked parson to his flock,  
And the solemn shadows echo piety,  
While the trees begin to wilt beneath their burden,  
And silent birds will never sing again.

But a child has almost understood the new world.  
“The sun’s gone cold,” he cries, “and the dog is sleeping!”  
He knows the truth, except that the dog is dead.

## Away from the World

Build me a warm house under the trees  
Away from the wintry world.  
Build it out of foam from the seas,  
And dripping honey stole from the bees,  
And the peace of a prayer from a nun on her knees,  
Away from the wintry world.

Take off the fetters, unbar the door  
And wander into the air,  
Over the hills and down to the shore,  
Where the waves beat rocks till their backs are sore,  
But life is greener, cleaner than before,  
Away from the world so bare.

Make me a pair of light feathered wings  
To fly away from the snow,  
To soar to a land where the day-bird sings,  
Where the soft bell of contentment rings,  
And the sun thrills warmth into living things,  
Away from the world I know.





*A Human History*



*Among Trees III*



## The Butterfly

I fed a snowlight butterfly on willow shoots for bread  
And asked him if the world was round, and laughingly he said:  
“Your bread is good for humans and the world is very round,  
And it only has an ending when the bone is in the ground.”

I asked him if a feathered man could reach a summer sky,  
And he smiled and asked me if I thought a feathered man could fly.  
Then he brushed my cheek with wing-tips and drank the salt I shed,  
And bade me go to sleep and made me dream that he was dead.

And when I woke, the sky was red, and its hands and feet were torn,  
As though someone had driven nails into the cross of dawn.  
But when I tried to sleep again, I heard a small voice say  
That if a feathered man had wings, he'd fly all day.

## Three Love Poems from Long Ago

I love the girl with the long brown hair  
And the shining, sunlit, moonlit eyes  
And the light white flash of her star-swift smile  
And the silken swish of her inbetween-song sighs.

My mind's soft fingers run through her hair  
And cup their coolness round her cheeks,  
And we marry our lips in a wordless dream,  
For this is a love that never speaks.

Her gaiety runs like bubbles on waves,  
And the thrill of the air bids her laugh, bids her dance,  
And it makes a mind sad to reflect on the time,  
The sketches of sorrow, the quick jealous changes of chance.

But when old soft silver makes shades of the brown  
And the scythe of the evening cuts lines in the day,  
Then I shall call out with my love from the past:  
“You have not lost your smile. With my love I have locked it away.”

Who is the girl who walks through my head  
In a red dress, hair tumbling to shoulders?  
She leans towards me, eyes embracing me,  
Although not a word of love is ever said.

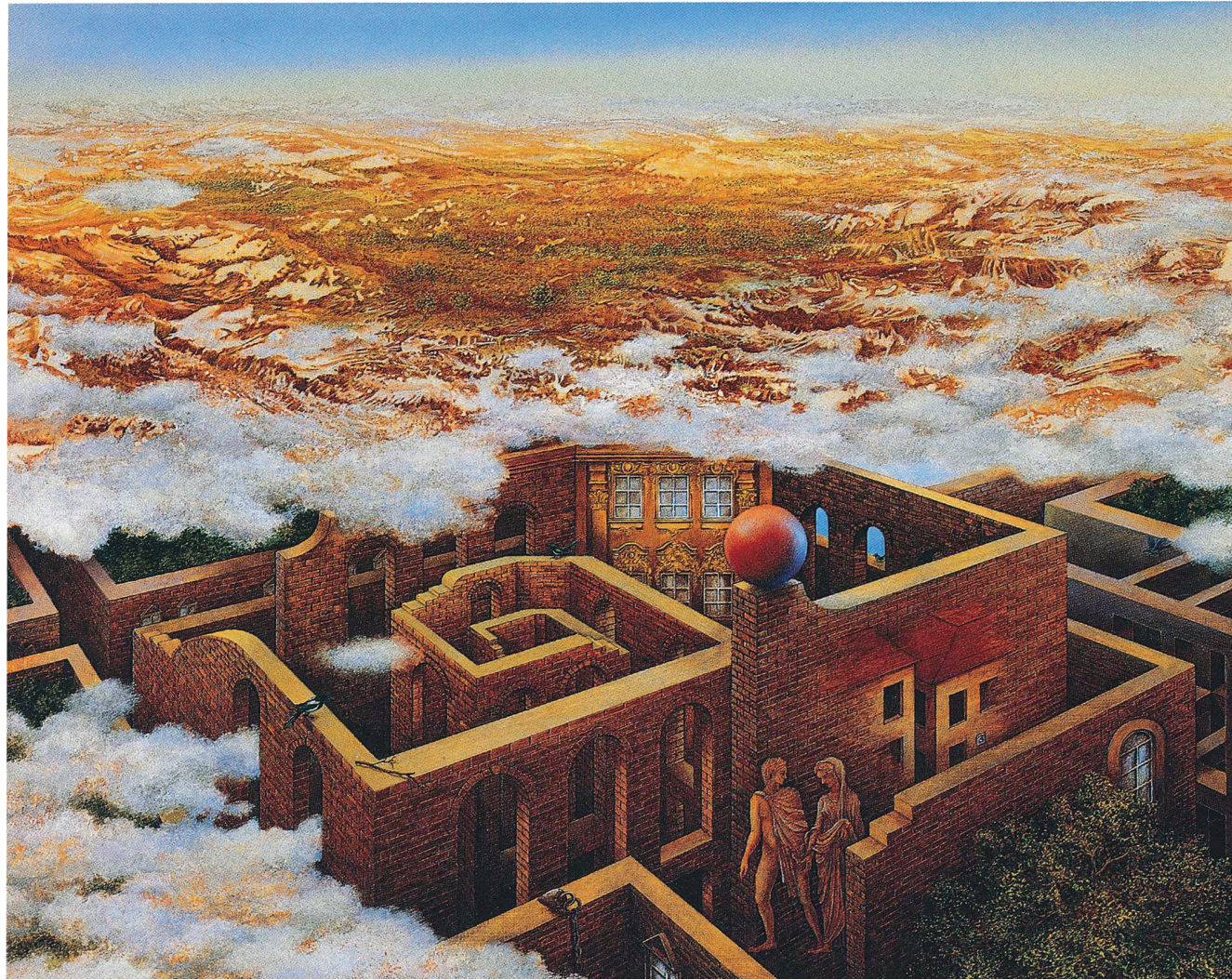
She brushes her hair into my heart,  
And we laugh because it's a funny old world,  
And we're sad because it's a sad old world,  
And we are close together, but apart.

The wall is there whenever we meet,  
So we often talk to paper ears.  
She writes me a card of invitation,  
Pencilling it first to make it neat.

Only these words stay hidden in the drawer,  
For they would end the visits and the laughter,  
The messages, the sharing of twin worlds,  
And then she would be gone for evermore.

She comes through the past like a bell through the night.  
Hair drifting, eyes deep, now laughing, now sad,  
And though in my sleep I no longer dream of her,  
Yet in the day I always wait for a letter,  
And pretend to take her hand, as I always pretended.  
And even if I burn more slowly now, yet there's an ache,  
And sometimes it is as if an arrow has struck -  
Memory pierces and emptiness fills for an instant.  
She has not written for a long time now,  
And perhaps has forgotten or does not want to remember,  
Or if she does, would she ask me gently to stay,  
Or bid me hurry away, back to the past?  
Or worst of all, have the memories turned to dust?  
Perhaps she will write again, and I shall know.





*Place of Towers*



*Design for Ceiling Fresco*



## **For Peter, who visited me in Ghana**

The carved black body gleams in the white sun.  
A mammy, bent as a hairpin, washes the cloth.  
A painted lizard scuttles, stops, surveys,  
Then scurries faster through the heavy haze  
Of Africa.

An old, old woman with a sunken face  
Half dances under a load of crooked sticks  
Along the path to naked girls and boys  
Who chatter, laugh, and sing the simple joys  
Of Africa.

The sun sets swiftly and the drums begin  
With the rhythm of a hundred beating hearts,  
And bodies swing and weave as in a trance,  
Oblivious to all but the ageless dance  
Of Africa.

The roads are built, the factories and churches,  
Lorries rumble, big men drive fast cars.  
The children go to school, where minds are filled.  
Oh brother, could it be we shall have killed  
The soul of Africa?

## **Man in a cage**

There is a man who lives in a cage,  
Who slumps in sleep or roars in rage,  
Who grips the bars or shakes the door,  
Who scans the roof or pounds the floor.  
He has no company or friend.  
His isolation has no end.  
He does not know why he is there –  
A plight impossible to bear.  
It seems he'll suffer night and day  
Unless he gives his life away.

And yet when he has plumbed despair,  
A miracle comes after,  
For there is borne upon the air  
The sound of laughter.



## The girl beside you

Will you remember the girl beside you,  
With scented skin and flowers in her hair?  
Will you remember the words she whispers  
And the laugh you share?

Now is the moment, here is the joy,  
This is the missing image of tomorrow  
Which you will turn from melody of spring  
To song of sorrow.

Now she is gone and nothing else remains  
But the echoes and the fragrance of the mind,  
And so you seek in vain to hold the shadows  
She has left behind.

Do you remember the girl of the golden day?  
Ask her to kiss the silences away.

## Tomorrow

The morning came, and the moon leapt  
Like a startled fish into the net of clouds,  
And men awoke, not knowing they had slept,  
And pushed aside their soft rehearsal shrouds.  
“Tell me about the stars,” I said,  
“Oh tell me about the stars.”  
But the stars had gone.

Grey was the sky, and the rain fell  
Home to home, down to the waiting streams,  
And love rested, having drawn from the well  
Another pitcherful of yesterdreams.  
“Give me the silver moon,” you said,  
“Oh give me the silver moon.”  
But the moon had gone.

Salt was the rain of the day begun,  
But every day save one has a turning noon,  
And men must take their strength from the shining sun,  
For only fools warm hands upon the moon.  
“Tell me about tomorrow,” I said,  
“Oh tell me about tomorrow.”  
But you were gone.

## Beauty

When the evenings and mornings and gentle stars  
Ease us through time, we might sing  
The sadness and swift fading of all delight.  
And yet the lines of an old woman's face  
Tell us there's beauty too  
In the smooth passing of day to night.

In the clouds that shroud the mountain tops,  
And the shades deep in the forests,  
And the smile of a girl we shall never see again,  
And meteors scything across the sky,  
There lie the secrets and mysteries  
In which our joys have always lain.

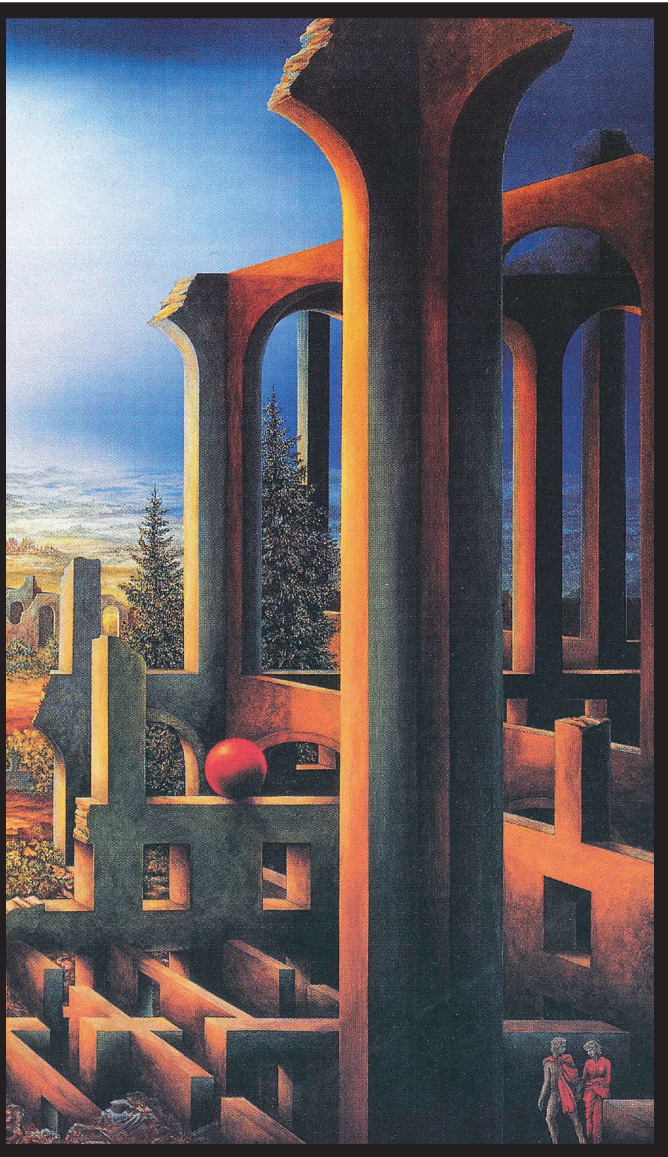
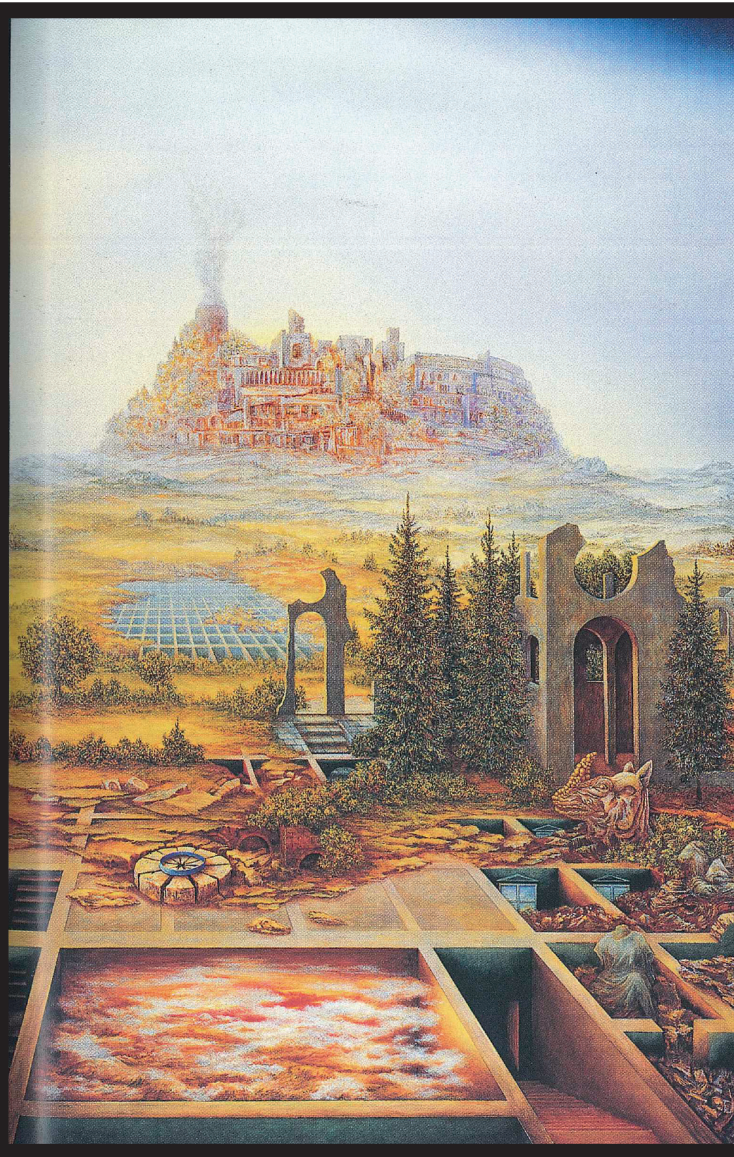
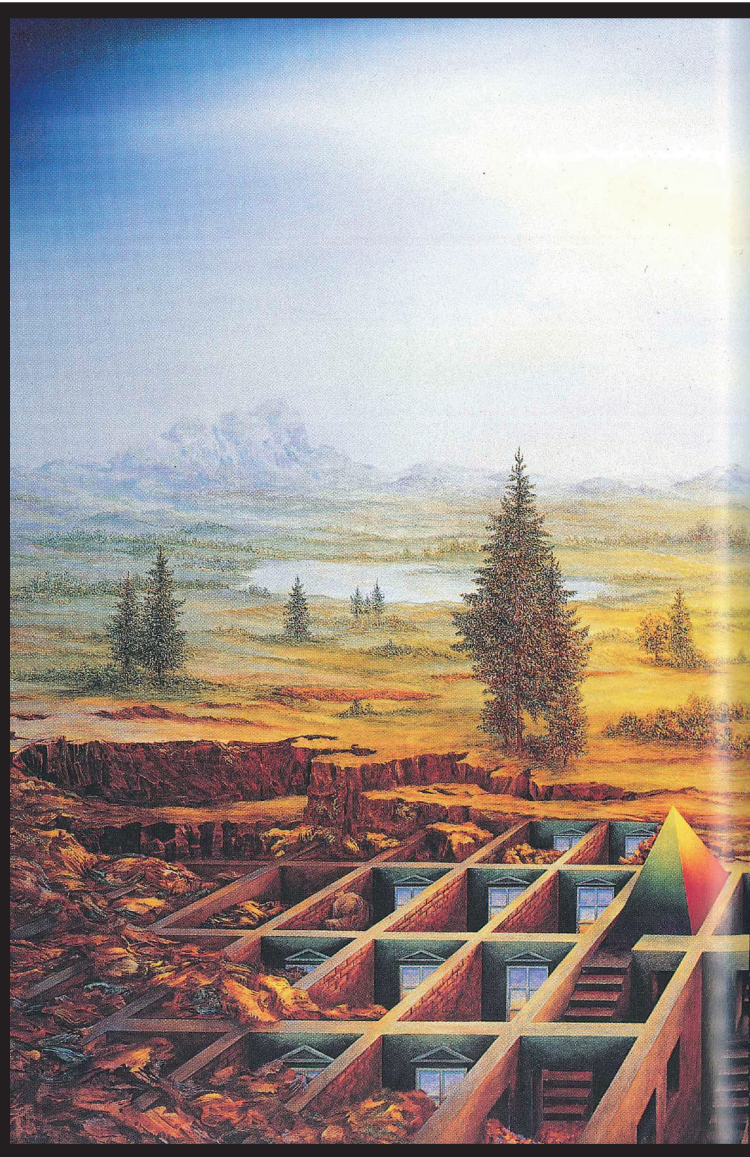
And so when vainly we reach out  
To grasp what can't be grasped,  
And weep to see the present slide to past,  
Let us learn that the beauty of then and now  
Is only beautiful because  
It cannot last.

## Small Life

With the full swing of a wind-rocked reed  
The small life touches what it can reach  
Until, in the soft twilight of rolled age  
It aches away and wrinkles down to the earth.  
It is the best of the seasons, the drum of the heart,  
The regular turning wheel of the travelling world,  
And at its core is a slender, simple delight,  
Like the deer through the trees, drinking,  
Or the heavy lion played by its golden cubs,  
Or the vast elephant on its back in the water.  
A charm: the old man rocking in his chair,  
The grey beard plucked by a baby hand,  
The big king singing in the bath.

If I were a god, I should hold in the palm of my power  
A deep pity and love for the small life,  
A delight in the sheer sweetness of aimless things,  
And I should be happy to see them, and think no more  
Of angel-devils but, like the oak by the reed,  
Cast a friendly shadow round the thin shoulders  
And never care to ask for its purposes.





*A Still Day*



## Lights

Nonsense, we came about by chance  
As part of the infinite atom dance,  
Higgledy-piggledy, till the blending  
Led to this perfectly simple ending.  
All that was needed was a spark  
From random forces in the dark,  
Then lo and behold the rest evolved.  
Nothing strange. Mystery solved.  
Besides, if you question how we began,  
We'll ask you who invented Man.

## Man with a Mark

I was born with a mark, with a mark I was born,  
And this mark I shall bear all my life,  
And because of this mark I'm an object of scorn  
And a victim of gun, whip and knife.

I can never feel safe when I walk down the street,  
And even at home I'm in danger.  
Wherever I go and whoever I meet,  
I am made to feel like a stranger.

There's no act of shame or vile deed that has led  
To my bearing this mark that I bear.  
It tells nothing about my hands or my head  
Or my heart. It is simply there.

We who are marked have suffered since life began  
From those who don't care that a man with a mark is a man.

## Song of the Politician

I can change your life, my friend,  
So listen to my song.  
You may have a different view,  
But clearly you are wrong.

I am true to my principles,  
And how can you oppose me  
When for all my qualities  
So many people chose me?

I've been given all this power,  
And so I have to use it.  
And I have to use it now,  
Just in case I lose it.

I shall mould you to my image  
Before conditions worsen,  
And then you'll know you're dealing with  
A Very Important Person.

## Comfort

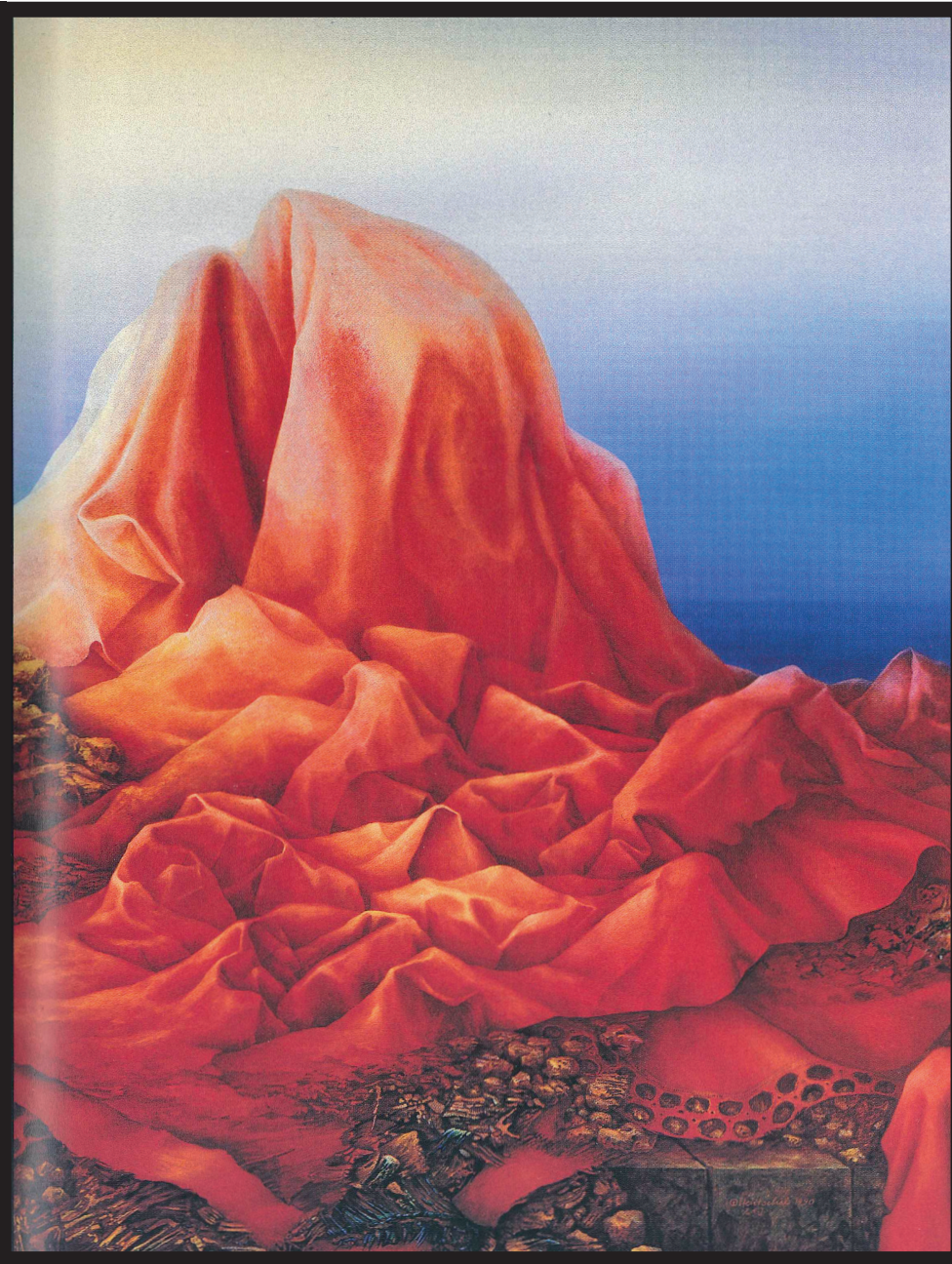
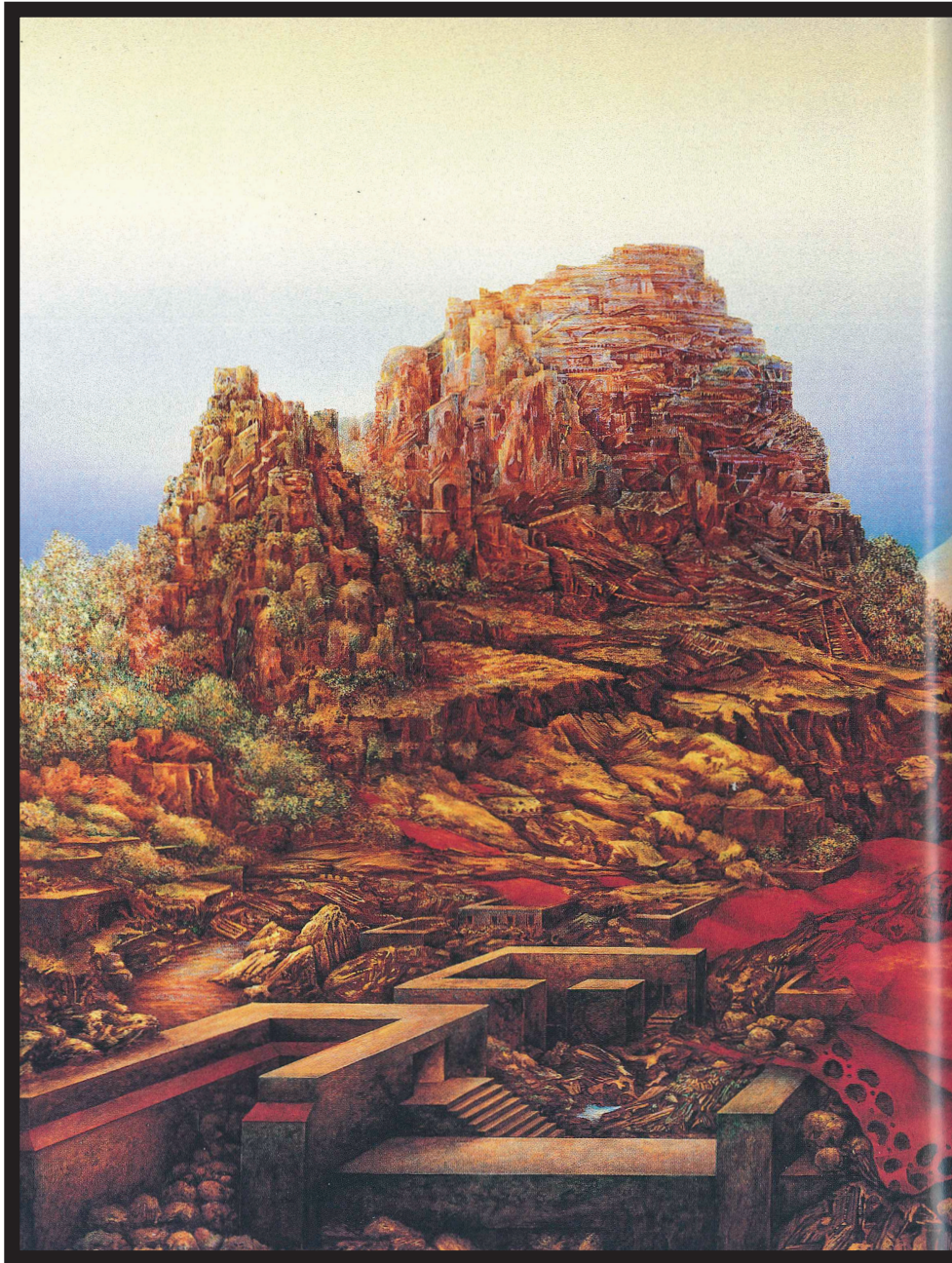
We wander through the Valley of Vanishing,  
Amid the smoke and the roar and the dust,  
And we lift up our eyes to the smiles of our Comforters:  
Men of distinction and judgement to trust.

“It's perfectly normal to put on your mask, sir.  
The pain in your lungs, sir, will probably clear.  
The growths on your body are things you can live with.  
We're lucky to have such a warm atmosphere.

It's true that the water is clouded and smelly,  
But it can't do you harm if you don't drink it down.  
Green leaves, sir? Green grass, sir? Not seen here for ages.  
The colour of leaves, sir, and grass, sir, is brown.”

The past is an error, the future is bright,  
And so reassured we grope on through the night.







**Experts**

Expert A is most convincing.  
So is Expert B.  
The problem is the two of them  
Always disagree.

**Theories**

If your theory doesn't join  
The dots in the allotted space,  
Then your theory must be wrong,  
Or the dots are out of place.

If you find your theory's wrong,  
You'd best go back to school,  
But if you want to replace the dots,  
You're a genius – or a fool.

**Recipe for a friend**

Take a slab of sunshine,  
Sprinkle it with showers,  
Add a touch of make-believe  
And relish it for hours.  
Garnish it with humour,  
Season it with love,  
And you shall have as many joys  
As there are stars above.

## Wolves

Where are the wolves, the wolves of the winter,  
The wolves of the winter that howled at my door?  
Gone to the forest, the ever dark forest,  
Gone to the forest to come nevermore.

Whose are the shadows, the menacing shadows,  
The menacing shadows that pass by my door?  
Those are the memories, ever dark memories,  
Memories opened by tooth and by claw.

When will they leave me, the menacing shadows,  
The menacing shadows that pass by my door?  
They'll leave you tomorrow, along with your sorrow,  
And you shall lie quietly at peace evermore.

## Mystery

Child of the night-like silences,  
Coming through to my heart  
Like a swan that sails through the mist,  
I keep wondering what are the thoughts  
And the dreams that you hide like wine  
In your dark and cool-walled cellars.  
Even your lighted windows are my mystery.  
Sometimes in the heart-brightening of your smile,  
Entranced, I think I see a well of love,  
But when you are not smiling,  
I fear I am losing you,  
As if you had sailed back to enveloping mists,  
Not to be known. So dare I ask to know you?



*Withdraw Behind Your Curtain*

## The Code

Such silences, strange lady, such silences  
In the flickering shadows of your ghostly streets,  
Such silences as make imagination dance  
To unheard beats.

What do they tell, your coldly coiling silences,  
Such silences as open worlds unknown?  
Are they the hush of the still stones' contentment  
To stand as stone?

Or are they the lull of the tempest approaching,  
These silences that burrow into walls  
And crumble towers and grow beneath foundations  
Until our castle falls?

Your silences, strange lady, your silences  
Are all and nothing under the blue-black sky,  
And we shall never break the code of your silences  
Before we die.



## Song of the Jailbirds 1

Everything comes, everything goes.  
What will become of us nobody knows.  
Summer is autumn, winter is spring,  
The feather's a pen, the pen is a wing.  
When the sun shines, the apples are sweet.  
When the wind blows, they fall at your feet.  
Roses are budding while the tree grows.  
Swiftly, then, swiftly bottle the rose.  
Ocean to clouds, clouds into rain,  
Falling to ocean, rising again.  
Everything comes, everything goes.  
What will become of us nobody knows.

From *The Castle of Inside Out*

## Song of the Jailbirds 2

Everything comes, everything goes.  
What will become of us nobody knows.  
Children skip, stick in hand.  
Waves to rocks, rocks to sand.  
Tresses fair shade to grey.  
Stars of night fade to day.  
Blushing grape upon the vine,  
Falling, falling into wine.  
Present lives are only tales,  
Wrinkled faces only veils.  
Everything comes, everything goes.  
What will become of us nobody knows.

From *The Castle of Inside Out*

## On the death of a mother

She is the rock on which all castles stand,  
The root and blossom, source of life and love.  
Between our coming hence and going thither  
She is the nourisher that never fails,  
Giver of light even to those in darkness,  
For those in darkness have most need of light.  
She is confessor, refuge and inspirer,  
The shoulder of our leaning and our crying.  
And in her passing passes that most holy  
Of all the human virtues: selflessness.

From *The Castle of Inside Out*

## For Lisbeth on our anniversary

I love my wife. I love her face,  
Her lips curved in an archer's bow,  
Her shining cheeks, eyelashed in lace,  
Her smooth skin's sunlight glow.

I love her laugh that's body-deep  
And fades into a lingering sigh,  
The dovelike cooing of her sleep,  
The light or darkness of her eye.

I see the Takoradi girl,  
Blue uniformed, white cap on head,  
Making all my senses whirl,  
Smiling down upon my bed.

Then she was young, and still she's young,  
For in my heart her portrait's hung.

## Child

You are a child.  
You play with us all as if we were at school,  
And we have to dig castles,  
And run barefoot to please you,  
Because you are a child.  
You do not hold onto the reins of your emotions,  
And we have to listen,  
Whether you laugh or cry.  
I have watched you splashing in the sea,  
Striving to win a game,  
Frowning as you learn to write.  
I have heard you singing for the joy of song,  
And talking of life as if it were something new.  
You will grow up, and you will know yourself,  
But please don't ever leave the child behind.



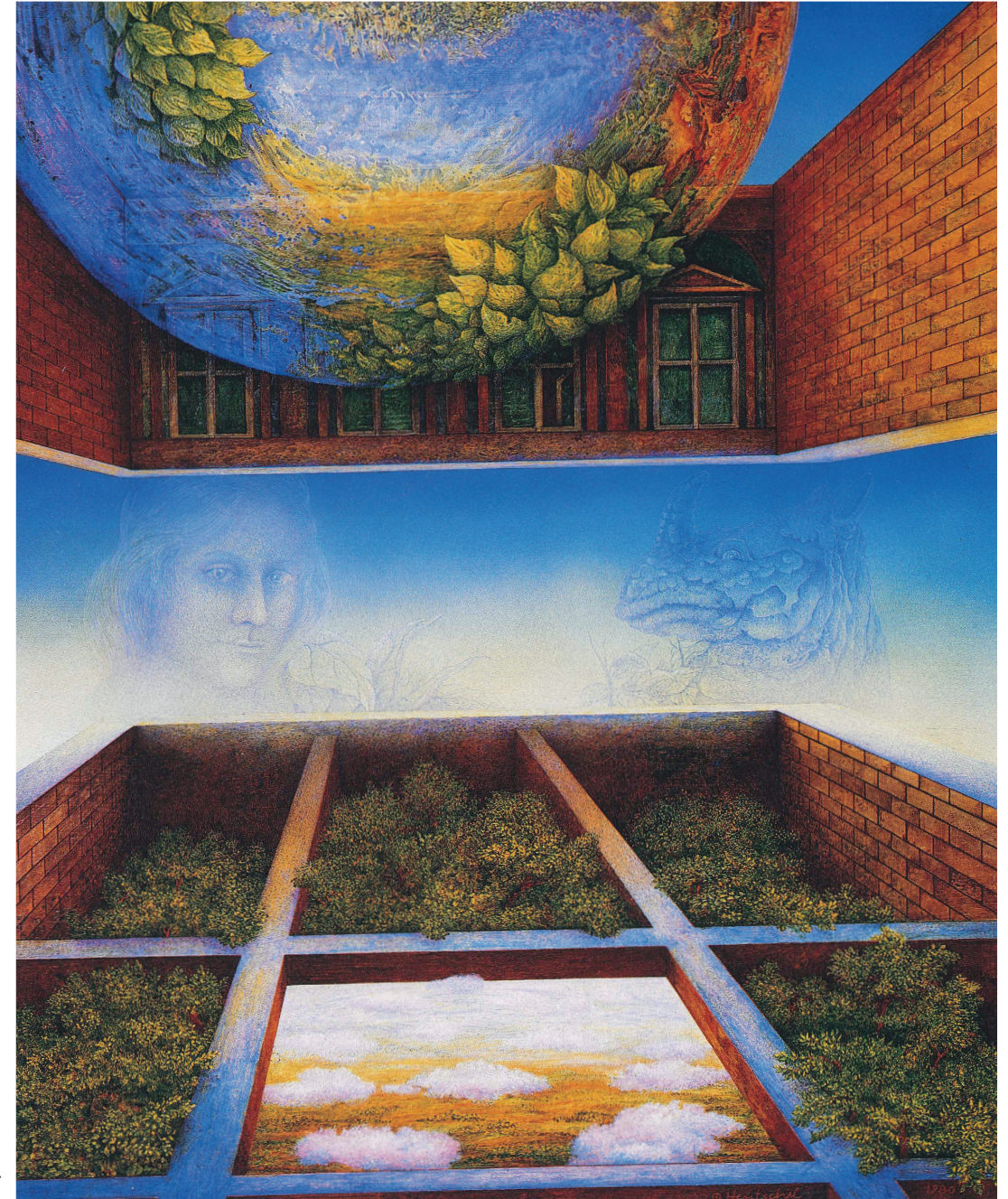
## For Claus Dietrich Hentschel

How can one hope to paint in rhyme  
An artist who transcends all time,  
Whose towering trees and tree-like towers  
Create a world that's parallel to ours?

Above the ruins forests rise,  
Pointing to labyrinthine skies,  
And all the structures man has made,  
Once strong and proud, have sadly now decayed.

The long, dark tale of human history  
Lies wrapped in folds of cosmic mystery.  
The rhino wields his brush. His muse looks on.  
Their world will stay when they and we have gone.

*Meeting*



For Wolfgang Iser, 80 years young

THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT THEORIST

It is an ancient theorist  
And he stoppeth one of three.  
“By thy shining head and bright blue eye  
Now wherefore stopp’st thou me?”

He holds him with his glittering eye  
And charms him with his tongue:  
“Dear birthday guest, hear of my quest,  
And stay for ever young.

With boundless zest did I set forth  
On the academic track,  
Only to find my subject  
Trapped in a cul de sac.

Text interpretation,  
Study analytical,  
Readings biographical,  
Linguistic and political.

Professors here, professors there,  
And all the heads did shrink.  
Theses, theses everywhere,  
Nor any thought to think.

Stuck in their groove, they could not move,  
Lit crit had lost all motion,  
As idle as a painted lip  
Upon a painted potion.

‘Aha!’ quoth I, ‘of all this stuff  
The reading world is weary.  
‘Tis my intent now to invent  
A brand new lit crit theory.

We’ve looked at authors, looked at texts,  
And seen what’s to be seen,  
But no-one’s ever analysed  
The spaces in between.’

My books I wrote, the world took note,  
With envy some turned green,  
As people hunted everywhere  
For the spaces in between.

My students were much happier  
Than they had ever been,  
For new ideas now filled their ears  
And the spaces in between.

Even the London Underground  
This fertile source did tap,  
Telling all its passengers  
That they should ‘mind the gap.’

The odd queer Fish refused to cheer,  
But this was an exception.  
In general space exploration  
Had a great reception.

However, I did swiftly tire  
Of all this adulation.  
With grateful thanks, I turned from blanks  
To realms of imagination.

Why do we need fictions to read?  
What is the implication?  
I found myself prospecting  
The range of interpretation.

But none of these paths satisfied  
My exploratory urge,  
Until another theory  
Started to emerge:

And this it is that I have learned  
Upon my quest for truth:  
Tis not the finding but the search  
That brings eternal youth.”

The ancient one laughed loud and long,  
And then away he ran.  
The birthday guest departed,  
A happier, wiser man.

22 July 2006



## Looking Back

When I look back upon the years gone by,  
I wonder if the person passed was me,  
For every night we sleep as if we die  
And wake to take a new identity.

The child, the youth, the man have lived and gone,  
And all their thoughts and deeds have ceased to be.  
Nothing except the memory lives on,  
And that's a tale without reality.

Just as the body breathes without the mind,  
Just as the mind breaks from the body free,  
We shed our skins and leave ourselves behind,  
Yet grow again each day unknowingly.

When I look back, the person that I see  
Is somebody who dreamed that he was me.

## Box of Pine

They brought me home in a box of pine,  
Of pine my box was made,  
And they stood around without a sound,  
As if they were afraid.

Oh do not tremble, little ones,  
For there is nought to fear.  
This box of pine was made for me,  
And I am happy here.

The thing inside that lived and died  
Is nothing but a frame.  
The light that shone is swiftly gone,  
And only leaves its name.

But in this place is perfect peace,  
And you shall have that too.  
This box of pine which now is mine  
Will one day welcome you.

## Dead Voices

I am speaking to you with the voice of the dead,  
And you hear me although I am long in the ground.  
My words will allow you to enter my head  
And wander around.

Here are a thousand longings you share,  
A thousand questions, a thousand fears,  
And they may give comfort when no one is there  
To wipe your tears.

So turn to the pages of friends long gone  
If you cannot turn to your present friends.  
We are all with you, for the tale goes on  
Until time ends.

Though I speak to you with the voice of the dead,  
My thoughts are thoughts that wander through *your* head.

David Henry Wilson (b. 1937 in London) is a playwright, novelist, children's author and translator. He was educated at Dulwich College and Pembroke College, Cambridge. His plays have been produced at many well-known theatres in Great Britain as well as abroad, and his children's books – especially the Jeremy James series – have been translated into many languages. His novel *The Coachman Rat* received critical acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. For many years he lectured at the universities of Bristol (England) and Konstanz (Germany), where he founded the university theatre. His translations from French and German cover many subjects, ranging from literary theory, art, travel and general culture to children's novels and picture books. He is widowed, has three grown-up children and three grandsons, and lives in Taunton, England.

Claus Dietrich Hentschel (b. 1937 in Berlin, d. 2012 in Konstanz) was a painter, sculptor and teacher. He studied Fine Art at the Berlin Hochschule für bildende Künste (1956-62) and German at the Berlin Freie Universität (1959-62). After working in Berlin and Stuttgart, he settled in Konstanz in 1969, where for almost thirty years he taught Fine Art and German at the Heinrich-Suso Gymnasium, while continuing to produce his own paintings and sculptures. His work has been exhibited at countless exhibitions, and has been the subject of many books and essays. Of his art he himself wrote: "I see things ('the environment', 'Nature') as bearers of meanings which, although they are not objective, can be triggered in myself. [...] In the process of creating, the subjective impression is objectivised through form and colour, through complementarities and analogies, and these endow the work with something universally valid and timeless."







