

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS

---



# Selected Poems

Robert Bringhurst

# SELECTED POEMS

Robert Bringhurst



JONATHAN CAPE  
LONDON

This eBook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licensed or publicly performed or used in any way except as specifically permitted in writing by the publishers, as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorised distribution or use of this text may be a direct infringement of the author's and publisher's rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781409015109

[www.randomhouse.co.uk](http://www.randomhouse.co.uk)

Published by Jonathan Cape

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Copyright © Robert Bringhurst 2010

Robert Bringhurst has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

This edition is based on the longer *Selected Poems* published in Canada by Gasperau Press in 2009

First published in Great Britain in 2010 by  
Jonathan Cape  
Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,  
London SW1v 2SA

[www.rbooks.co.uk](http://www.rbooks.co.uk)

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at:

[www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm](http://www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm)

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the  
British Library

ISBN 9780224090858

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation. All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace approved FSC certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at:  
[www.rbooks.co.uk/environment](http://www.rbooks.co.uk/environment)

Typeset in Bembo by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,  
Falkirk, Stirlingshire  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
MPG Books, Bodmin, Cornwall

# CONTENTS

[Cover Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[By the same author](#)

[from \*The Beauty of the Weapons\*](#)

[The Beauty of the Weapons](#)

[Song of the Summit](#)

[Ararat](#)

[A Quadratic Equation](#)

[One Glyph](#)

[The Sun and Moon](#)

[The Greenland Stone](#)

[Poem About Crystal](#)

[A Lesson in Botany](#)

[Anecdote of the Squid](#)

[\*Deuteronomy\*](#)

[Jacob Singing](#)

[An Augury](#)

[Essay on Adam](#)

[Deuteronomy](#)

[from \*The Old in their Knowing\*](#)

[Herakleitos](#)

[Parmenides](#)

[Pythagoras](#)

Demokritos  
Xenophanes  
Of the Snaring of Birds

Hachadura  
The Stonecutter's Horses

from Bone Flute Breathing

These Poems, She Said  
The Heart is Oil  
Ptahhotep's River  
Death by Water  
Leda and the Swan  
Six Epitaphs  
Poem Without Voices  
Bone Flute Breathing

Tzuhalem's Mountain

from The Book of Silences

Short Upanishad  
Sengzhao  
Yongjia Xuanjue  
Saraha  
Saraha's Exercise for Beginners  
Han Shan  
Dongshan Liangjie  
Xuedou Zhongxian  
Dogen  
Bankei Yotaku

Lyell Island Variations

*Larix lyallii*

Thin Man Washing

Absence of the Heart

The Reader

The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer

The Long and the Short of It

A River, a Runner

Riddle

Day In, Day Out

from *The Physics of Light*

Sutra of the Heart

Kol Nidre

Gloria, Credo, Sanctus et Oreamnos Deorum

*Rubus ursinus*: A Prayer for the Blackberry Harvest

For the Bones of Josef Mengele

Fathers and Sons

Hick and Nillie

Demons and Men

Sunday Morning

The Physics of Light

*Conversations with a Toad*

*The Living*

Finch

Birds on the Water

The Flowers of the Body

Giotto's Bones

The Focal Length of Fuel

So Do We

The Living Must Never Outnumber the Dead

At Last



For the Geologist's Daughter  
All Night Wood

*Acknowledgements*

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

POETRY

*The Shipwright's Log*  
*Cadaastre*  
*Bergschrund*  
*Tzuhalem's Mountain*  
*The Beauty of the Weapons: Selected Poems 1972-82*  
*The Blue Roofs of Japan*  
*Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*  
*Conversations with a Toad*  
*The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995*  
*Elements*  
*The Book of Silences*  
*Ursa Major*  
*The Old in Their Knowing*  
*New World Suite no 3*

PROSE

*Ocean/Paper/Stone*  
*The Raven Steals the Light* (with Bill Reid)  
*The Black Canoe* (with Ulli Steltzer)  
*The Elements of Typographic Style*  
*A Short History of the Printed Word* (with Warren Chappell)  
*A Story as Sharp as a Knife*  
*Prosodies of Meaning*  
*The Solid Form of Language*  
*Wild Language*  
*The Tree of Meaning*  
*Everywhere Being Is Dancing*  
*The Surface of Meaning*

TRANSLATION

Ghandl, *Nine Journeys to the Mythworld*

Skaay, *Being in Being*  
Parmenides, *The Fragments*  
Skaay, *Siixha: Floating Overhead*

# THE BEAUTY OF THE WEAPONS

*El-Arish, 1967*

A long-armed man can  
carry the nine-millimetre  
automatic gun slung  
backward over the right shoulder.

With the truncated butt  
caught in the cocked  
elbow, the trigger  
falls exactly to hand.

These things I remember,  
and a fuel-pump gasket cut  
from one of the innumerable  
gas masks in the roadside dump.

I bring back manuscript picked  
up around incinerated trucks  
and notes tacked next  
to automatic track controls.

Fruits of the excavation.  
This is our archaeology.  
A dig in the debris  
of a civilisation six weeks old.

The paper is crisp and brittle  
with the dry rock and the weather.

The Arabic is brittle  
with the students' first exposure  
to air-war technology and speed.  
Ridiculous to say so, but  
the thought occurs,  
that Descartes would be pleased:

the calculus is the language  
of the latest Palestinian  
disputations  
in the field of theology.

The satisfying feel  
of the fast traverse  
on the anti-aircraft guns  
is not in the notes.

It lies latent and cool  
in the steel, like the intricate  
mathematics  
incarnate in the radar:

the antennae folded and rolled  
like a soldier's tent,  
sweeping the empty  
sky and the barren horizon,

the azimuth and the elevation,  
sweeping the empty air  
into naked abstraction,

leading the guns.

The signal is swirled until it  
flies over the lip like  
white, weightless  
wine from a canteen cup.

Invisibly, the mechanism sings.  
It sings. It sings like a six-ton flute:  
east, west, always the same  
note stuck in the rivetless throat.

A silent song as intricate  
as any composition by Varèse,  
and seeming, for the moment, far  
more beautiful, because,

to us, more deadly.  
Therefore purer, more  
private, more familiar,  
more readily feared, or desired:

a dark beauty with a steel sheen,  
caught in the cocked  
mind's eye and brought  
down with an extension of the hand.

## SONG OF THE SUMMIT

The difference is nothing you can see – only  
the dressed edge of the air  
over those stones, and the air goes

deeper into the lung, like a long fang,  
clean as magnesium. Breathing  
always hollows out a basin,

leaving nothing in the blood  
except an empty  
cup, usable for drinking

anything the mind finds – bitter  
light or bright darkness or the cold  
corner of immeasurable distance.

This is what remains: the pitted blood  
out looking for the vein,  
tasting of the tempered tooth and the vanished flame.

## ARARAT

The deepening scour of the keel across this  
granular water. Nothing more. The fissure  
through the estuary five

thousand feet over the headwater. These  
are the real mouths of rivers: the teeth,  
not the slough and the rattles.

We have been here  
before, eating raw air, but have always  
forgotten,

all day eating the air the light  
impales,  
stalking the singular animal -

I no longer remember whether a fish  
or a bird. Nor whether its song or its silence  
is what we were listening for. I remember

a bow in a black tree, and a snowbound  
ploughshare. I find here  
no spoor and no flotsam

timber. Simply the blue sliding into  
the furrow on the tilting light, and the violet  
sky always casting the same white shadow.



# A QUADRATIC EQUATION

Voice: the breath's tooth.

Thought: the brain's bone.

Birdsong: an extension  
of the beak. Speech:  
the antler of the mind.

## ONE GLYPH

The hummingbird's tongue  
under the sun's black anther,  
fire taking the sky's measure.  
Light's core soaring over  
blue air, wave, rock, and water,  
over eagle-cactus, pine,  
and the spiked dust of the summer highlands:

bright blade of blue sunlight  
over the stone,  
spalled off the solid block  
of the sky's light like a smoke-thin  
razor of obsidian  
or an unseen wing.