

THE WAY  
UNDER  
THE WAY

The Place of True Meeting

MARK NEPO

# CONTENTS

In Conversation with Life ..... xv

## BOOK ONE

### SUITE FOR THE LIVING

The Necessary Art..... 2

#### BREAKING SURFACE

Breaking Surface ..... 6

Where No One Stays a Statue ..... 7

The Lesson ..... 9

In Muir Woods ..... 10

Crossing Some Ocean in Myself..... 12

Fighting the Instrument..... 14

The Music Beneath the Music..... 15

Unearthed Again ..... 17

Accepting This ..... 18

Walking North ..... 20

At Stadium and Drake ..... 22

The Fire That Takes No Wood..... 23

Look Around ..... 25

On the Way to Coney Island ..... 26

This Is It..... 28

The Feather Never Lands..... 31

God's Wounds..... 33

One Step Closer..... 34

Carving the Raft into a Flute ..... 36

Earth Prayer ..... 38

Things No One Asks About..... 40

At the Window ..... 42

Let's Voice the Possibilities ..... 43

## FIRE IN THE TEMPLE

|                                      |    |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| The Secret Is Burning.....           | 46 |
| The Finitudes.....                   | 48 |
| Fire in the Temple.....              | 49 |
| Things Carried Through the Fire..... | 51 |
| Road Trip.....                       | 52 |
| If You Want a True Friend.....       | 53 |

## THE GREAT OPENING

|                                     |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| Caught In the Rain.....             | 56 |
| Don't Give Up on Me.....            | 57 |
| Taking Turns.....                   | 58 |
| Evident.....                        | 59 |
| Where We Need to Be.....            | 60 |
| Knowing, Drinking, and Seeking..... | 61 |
| The Aftermath of Rain.....          | 62 |
| Gemseed.....                        | 63 |
| The One Thing.....                  | 65 |
| What Holds Us.....                  | 66 |
| Releasing Beauty.....               | 67 |
| She's Next to Me Now.....           | 68 |
| To Glow.....                        | 69 |
| An Open Hand.....                   | 70 |
| Least Complicated.....              | 71 |
| Sample Boards.....                  | 72 |
| Going Inward.....                   | 73 |
| Going Home.....                     | 74 |
| Relic from the Future.....          | 75 |
| For Your Birthday.....              | 76 |
| Upstream.....                       | 77 |
| Before the Twice-Locked Gates.....  | 78 |
| Tidal.....                          | 79 |
| The Great Opening.....              | 81 |
| Being a Feather.....                | 82 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Beyond Measure.....                                   | 84 |
| Utterance-That-Rises-Briefly-<br>from-the-Source..... | 85 |

### SUITE FOR THE LIVING

|                                    |    |
|------------------------------------|----|
| Suite for the Living.....          | 88 |
| 1. Endgame.....                    | 88 |
| 2. Tell Me You Have Come.....      | 89 |
| 3. Advice That’s Hard to Take..... | 90 |
| 4. Acequia.....                    | 91 |
| 5. Practicing.....                 | 92 |
| 6. Freefall.....                   | 93 |

## BOOK TWO

### INHABITING WONDER

|                       |    |
|-----------------------|----|
| Time Is a Garden..... | 96 |
|-----------------------|----|

### THE KEEPERS OF KINDNESS

|                                   |     |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| Inside the Drum.....              | 100 |
| Beneath All Trouble, Oneness..... | 101 |
| Across the Street.....            | 103 |
| Self-Employment.....              | 104 |
| What Happens Otherwise.....       | 105 |
| Though Loss Is Everywhere.....    | 106 |
| Surf.....                         | 108 |
| Sometimes a Great Cleansing.....  | 109 |
| How Not to Abdicate.....          | 110 |
| Above and Below.....              | 112 |
| Unless.....                       | 113 |
| Crossings.....                    | 114 |
| Joining the Circus.....           | 115 |
| The Blood of Theology.....        | 116 |
| Inseparable.....                  | 118 |
| My God, We Are Alive.....         | 119 |
| Long Way Home.....                | 120 |

|                                    |     |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| The Book Won't Let Me Hold It..... | 121 |
| Understanding Leaves .....         | 122 |
| Yes, We Can Talk .....             | 123 |
| Inhabiting Wonder .....            | 124 |
| This Time.....                     | 125 |
| Good as Air.....                   | 127 |

## LETTING WHAT IS SHINE

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Feeling Lost .....                      | 130 |
| A Nameless Ritual .....                 | 131 |
| Believing the Guest .....               | 132 |
| The Work of Presence.....               | 133 |
| Authority of Being .....                | 135 |
| A Mighty Kindness.....                  | 136 |
| Letting Go of the Need to Be Liked..... | 138 |
| View from the Hut.....                  | 139 |
| Tossed About .....                      | 141 |
| The Prayer of Resistance .....          | 142 |
| Breaking All Principle.....             | 143 |
| The Quarter Turn .....                  | 144 |
| Stacks of Wheat.....                    | 146 |
| Dreams of Joy .....                     | 148 |
| The Rhythm of Each.....                 | 149 |
| Old Window.....                         | 150 |
| Eclipse of Love.....                    | 151 |
| Over Coffee .....                       | 152 |
| Music to Read Wind By .....             | 153 |
| Letting What Is Shine .....             | 154 |
| Disrobing in Time .....                 | 155 |
| Now That I Feel.....                    | 156 |
| Signs of the One Essence .....          | 157 |

## IN

|                          |     |
|--------------------------|-----|
| In .....                 | 160 |
| In the Milky Ocean ..... | 161 |
| In the Spaces .....      | 162 |
| Intuition .....          | 163 |
| Into the Next Life.....  | 164 |

## SOFTER THAN TRUTH

|                                     |     |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| The Truth of Experience.....        | 166 |
| Great Unseeable Thunders .....      | 167 |
| The Descent .....                   | 169 |
| Softer than Truth .....             | 170 |
| Wanting Moments .....               | 171 |
| The Dive .....                      | 172 |
| Heartsong .....                     | 173 |
| The Deeper Chance .....             | 174 |
| No More Crisis to Hero Through..... | 175 |
| Falling Through.....                | 176 |
| Attempts .....                      | 177 |
| For the Thousandth Time             |     |
| I Want to Know .....                | 178 |
| A Fugitive Awareness.....           | 179 |
| How the Divine Speaks.....          | 180 |
| The Second Flower.....              | 181 |
| Why All the Noise? .....            | 182 |
| Ontology.....                       | 184 |
| The Stripping of Our Will .....     | 185 |
| As We Move Deeper.....              | 186 |
| Staying Awake .....                 | 187 |
| To Wear Light .....                 | 189 |
| Covenant of Wind.....               | 190 |

## BOOK THREE THE WAY UNDER THE WAY

|                                 |     |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| The Place of True Meeting ..... | 194 |
| Found and Cleared .....         | 196 |

### THE PRACTICE

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| BEFORE THE PRACTICE.....               | 197 |
| Being Here.....                        | 198 |
| Not According to Plan .....            | 199 |
| This I Know .....                      | 200 |
| Below Our Strangeness .....            | 201 |
| In Singing the Secrets .....           | 202 |
| These Human Days .....                 | 203 |
| Attendant Spirits.....                 | 204 |
| Flight Status .....                    | 205 |
| Loose Like Silk.....                   | 207 |
| Listening to Clouds.....               | 209 |
| The Givers .....                       | 210 |
| They Myth of Urgency.....              | 212 |
| I Shout Their Names .....              | 213 |
| Thinking Like a Butterfly.....         | 214 |
| You Ask About Poetry.....              | 215 |
| Physics of the Deep.....               | 216 |
| The Mystic Spinning of Threads .....   | 217 |
| Breaking Bread.....                    | 218 |
| Anything That Glistens.....            | 219 |
| Heartwork .....                        | 220 |
| Bareback .....                         | 221 |
| If Mother Could Rest.....              | 222 |
| If Hawks Could Speak of Heaven.....    | 223 |
| Nothing Is Separate .....              | 224 |
| Lineage.....                           | 225 |
| The Practice Before the Practice ..... | 226 |
| The Appointment .....                  | 227 |

## A THOUSAND STORIES ON

|                                     |     |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Getting Closer .....                | 230 |
| The Early Sky Is Degas Yellow ..... | 231 |
| The Purpose of Fishing .....        | 232 |
| Overlook .....                      | 233 |
| To Be and Belong .....              | 234 |
| Lost Speech .....                   | 235 |
| Chant .....                         | 236 |
| The Long Fire .....                 | 237 |
| Understory .....                    | 238 |
| The Fourth Orchid .....             | 239 |
| Following Whispers .....            | 240 |
| Brevity .....                       | 241 |
| Pathways .....                      | 243 |
| How We Talked .....                 | 244 |
| The Empty Necklace .....            | 245 |
| Oh Grandma .....                    | 246 |
| 19th and Irving .....               | 248 |
| Disappearing .....                  | 249 |
| Light Meeting Light .....           | 250 |
| The Poems .....                     | 251 |
| Side by Side .....                  | 252 |
| The Angel of Grief .....            | 253 |
| Losing Yourself .....               | 254 |
| Skip's Poem .....                   | 255 |
| A Thousand Stories On .....         | 256 |
| Incandescence .....                 | 257 |

## THE END OF ALL STRIVING

|                               |     |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| The Ring of Rings .....       | 260 |
| I Promise You .....           | 261 |
| The Better Way to Go .....    | 263 |
| The Whales of Australia ..... | 264 |



|                                 |     |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| Inside Out .....                | 265 |
| Stalled Between Dreams .....    | 266 |
| Meeting My Selves .....         | 267 |
| Finding Our Way.....            | 268 |
| There .....                     | 269 |
| Rethinking Time .....           | 270 |
| Lesson Plan.....                | 271 |
| For His Students.....           | 272 |
| Holding Wide .....              | 273 |
| The Deeper Song.....            | 275 |
| Endless Pools.....              | 276 |
| The Silent We .....             | 277 |
| We as Blind Sculptors.....      | 278 |
| Rising Through Our Faults ..... | 280 |
| Where to Now?.....              | 281 |
| Falling Open.....               | 282 |
| The End of All Striving.....    | 283 |
| Being Carried.....              | 284 |
| My Favorite Glass.....          | 285 |
| Beauty Is Everywhere.....       | 286 |
| Be a Circle .....               | 287 |
| Seeing It Through .....         | 288 |
| The Hard Human Spring.....      | 289 |
| The Moment of Poetry .....      | 290 |
| The Way Under the Way.....      | 291 |
| <br>                            |     |
| Gratitudes .....                | 293 |
| Notes .....                     | 295 |
| Permissions.....                | 299 |
| About the Author.....           | 301 |



BOOK ONE

SUITE FOR THE LIVING

*for Susan and Robert,  
whose spirits  
let me see  
my hands  
in the dark*

## THE NECESSARY ART

Poetry is the unexpected utterance of the soul that comes to renew us when we least expect it. More than the manipulation of language, it is a necessary art by which we live and breathe. It is the art of embodied perception; a braiding of heart and mind around experience. Consider how a simple fish inhales water, and somehow, mysteriously and miraculously, it extracts the oxygen from the water. In doing this, it turns that water into the air by which it breathes. This ongoing inner transformation is poetry. A much deeper process than fooling with words. For us, the heart is our gill and we must move forward into life, like simple fish, or we will die. And the mysterious yet vital way we turn experience into air, the way we extract what keeps us alive—this is the poetry of life that transcends any earthly endeavor. All this while the Universal Ground of Being we call Spirit is working its unknowable physics on us, eroding us to know that we are each other.

As sheet music is meant to be played, poetry is meant to be felt and heard. In this way, what we feel in our depths is poetry waiting to be voiced. And just as music, once heard, stirs our very being, voicing our feelings stirs our consciousness. So I encourage you to take the time to read aloud the poems that touch you, so they and you can come alive. After all these years, I can affirm that the gift of poetry is how it allows us to be intimate with all things.

The assumption of all poetry is that when we're connected, each of us is able to be more fully alive. Poetry finds and gives voice to those connections. But as we keep trying to inhabit the possibilities we carry within, we're inevitably stopped by

the fires of experience that burn down the temples we have built, whether it be the temple of our dreams or the temple of our love or the sanctuary of our secret ambitions. Like it or not, the fire of experience is a stripping away—a stripping down of the ways we feel compelled to please or meet the expectations of others, a breaking down of the demands that tell us who and how we should love. Until the soul sheds what holds it back. Until we look to Spirit and Nature to teach us how to live. This undoing is necessary because it's breaking surface through our pain and sorrow that liberates us. It's coming alive again in the same life that releases beauty in the world.

There are a thousand ways to break surface, a thousand ways to survive the burning of temples, a thousand ways to raise our heavy hearts so we might be surprised by the release of our inner beauty, and a thousand ways to enter the great opening that follows heartache and loss. These poems explore some of those ways.

The sections in the first book in this collection explore how initiation and experience open us to the depth of life. In the section “Breaking Surface,” the poems affirm the many ways that we break ground into authenticity. In the section “Fire in the Temple,” the poems uncover the ways that life, often against our will, makes us bring what's inside out. And in the section “The Great Opening,” the poems explore the unexpected vastness that honest living leads us to.

A word about the title sequence, “Suite for the Living,” which is comprised of six smaller poems that appear as the last section. Each was written at the crest of a troubled time, just before I broke surface in yet another way. The six poems appeared over a period of eighteen years. Each felt complete unto itself at the time, and each served as a guide for the phase of life I was moving through. It was only after living with them for all those years that I realized—they belong together.

Like beads for a necklace I didn't know they would form, I worked to polish each—only to discover, beyond any conscious knowing or intent, that these expressions were a suite of poems. They were revealed to me slowly, the way the insights of our lives appear, forming one by one. Over time, the beads of wisdom we earn reveal their power as we discover that they and we and everything living belong to each other.

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## BREAKING SURFACE

*You didn't come into this house so I might tear off  
a piece of your life. Perhaps when you leave  
you'll take something of mine: chestnuts,  
roses or a surety of roots. . . .*

PABLO NERUDA

## BREAKING SURFACE

Let no one keep you from your journey,  
no rabbi or priest, no mother  
who wants you to dig for treasures  
she misplaced, no father  
who won't let one life be enough,  
no lover who measures their worth  
by what you might give up,  
no voice that tells you in the night  
it can't be done.

Let nothing dissuade you  
from seeing what you see  
or feeling the winds that make you  
want to dance alone  
or go where no one  
has yet to go.

You are the only explorer.  
Your heart, the unreadable compass.  
Your soul, the shore of a promise  
too great to be ignored.

## WHERE NO ONE STAYS A STATUE

It was a sunny day  
and I went to the park  
and sat on a bench. I was  
one of many coming out  
from under our rocks  
to warm and lengthen.

He was two benches down,  
a gentle older man  
staring off into the place  
between things, beyond  
any simple past, staring  
into the beginning or the end,  
it was hard to say.

When he came up  
our eyes met  
and he knew I'd seen him  
journey there and back.

There was no point in looking away.  
And so, he shuffled over  
and sat beside me. The sun  
moved behind the one cloud  
and he finally said  
in half a quiver, "How  
can we go there together?"



I searched my small mind  
for an answer. At this,  
he looked away and the sun came out  
and I realized this is what the lonely  
sages of China were talking about,  
what the moon has whispered  
before turning full for centuries,  
what dancers leap for, what violinists  
dream after fevering their last note.

But I was awkward and unsure.  
He stared, as if to search my will,  
and after several minutes,  
he just patted my knee  
and left.

I watched him  
darken and brighten in the sun,  
and vowed to look  
in the folds of every cry  
for a way through,  
and hope someday  
to meet him there.

## THE LESSON

When young, it was the first fall from love.  
It broke me open the way lightning splits a tree.  
Then, years later, cancer broke me further.  
This time, it broke me wider the way a flood  
carves the banks of a narrow stream.  
Then, having to leave a twenty-year marriage.  
This broke me the way wind shatters glass.  
Then, in Africa, it was the anonymous face  
of a schoolboy beginning his life.  
This broke me yet again. But this  
was like hot water melting soap.

Each time I tried to close  
what had been opened.  
It was a reflex, natural enough.  
But the lesson was, of course, the other way—  
in never closing again.

## IN MUIR WOODS

Masters of stillness,  
masters of light,  
who, when cut by something  
falling, go nowhere and heal,  
teach me this nowhere,

who, when falling themselves,  
simply wait to root  
in another direction,  
teach me this falling.

Four-hundred-year-old trees,  
who draw aliveness from the Earth  
like smoke from the heart of God,  
we come, not knowing  
you will hush our little want  
to be big;

we come, not knowing  
that all the work is so much  
busyness of mind; all  
the worry, so much  
busyness of heart.

As the sun warms anything near,  
being warms everything still,  
and the great still things  
that outlast us