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
Beyond Measure........................................ 84
Utterance-That-Rises-Briefly-
    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

IX
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
10th 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

XIII
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.
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