Poetry Collection:

Siftings

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Siftings

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Fenland
Minimalist

thin washed-out light

grey tissue
with a charcoal line

that’s it

...  

Mepal
Queen Adelaide in June

Not even a village, a hamlet
sliced into four by level crossings;
its vertebrae of steel rails run on forever.

A blinding sun but a raw wind.
No one about. This place –
chopped and sectioned off-
turns a soured face towards community
as though the sky’s emptiness
could devour it any moment.

The houses are brick and one, webbed with cracks,
announces ‘Lettuces 15p’.
Swifts and swallows swoop and dive
as the summer sky lours, mopes to an inky grey.

‘Ely Ouse Flood Defences’ says a board.
But the river is animal-like in its rush
to get through, get somewhere else.

...
Prickwillow

This is Vermuyden’s land, drained and silent, a land of sunken levels, absorbing the slowness of the day, the opal light. A market-cabbage-green fills black fields that stretch prairie-like to the sky’s rim, touching its arc of blue enamel.

A Primitive Methodist chapel, For Sale, stands in a dip beneath the road. 1894, home now as last resort - those singing upholders of the spirit have long gone, their hymns abandoned. Hens pick and peck round a disused van.

A heron stands motionless as though made of blue-grey stone - he has become all eye. Mother rivers and daughter canals criss-cross their geometry, hold the Fen in an alluvial grid. Water, shrew wife to the industrial imperative -

crux of the long working day, feeder of the dawn-to-night worry and submerged nocturnal tension: ears are strained, alive to slurp and splash sounds of levels risen too high, too close to the swung bungalow window. ...

* The Dutchman Cornefius Vermuyden supervised drainage of the Fens in the seventeenth century.
Ely

rises thickly
through opaque light,
greyly cowled in mist,

is all insistent purpose,
each design a symbol,
the cut stones, theology.

But time and the roughest hour
have rubbed away its snarl,
drawn the ferocious teeth.

February: chill pit
of the Fenland spirit
and the cathedral no defence

against the cold.
It has begun to look its age.
Wizened now and absent minded,

it is the Grand Inquisitor
in advanced years, arthritic,
gripping his chair,

staring quizzically
through small-rimmed spectacles.
He cannot see what has changed.

Rooks squawk and flap
about the stumpy towers,
bickering theologians.

...
Near Littleport

Pink and mauve wash –
eggshell
January sky,

the horizon
pricked with pylons,
Ely crouching.

Night seeps up
through the ground,
a property of soil.

Four p.m., the light
congealing to pearl, the day
creeping away.

...
Telegraph Poles at Coveney

Like a silver point drawing,
dawn has its own silence,
revealing these columns
that have come among us;

they mark a settlement,
an odd fraternity,
measure out
a claim to the land.

None is upright. Some,
Pisa-like, defy earth’s pull;
others tilt only slightly,
as though listening.

Why are they here? Their
solidarity affronts.
Aliens, they are waiting
the given signal.

...
The House at Thorney

An upside-down world -
the rivers banked higher
than the surrounding land.
Roddons – silty hillocks
of extinct rivers, wind
their way, scar-tissue
across the Fen. Peat shrinks
the height of a man
in the life of a man.
The land is shedding itself.
This house rears as though on stilts,
the front door unreachable
without a ladder -
a whistling shell
of draughts and creaks,
of muffled groans. A house
under notice to quit.

...
Agoraphobia

A keening
of telegraph wires
sings in the ears,
makes the head swim:

nausea -
the stomach lifts,
legs are rooted.
The light's a grey veil.

A single step
and the disc spins,
lungs expel their air -
the Fen horizon whirls.

Anything domestic
would do - a handkerchief,
cup, or friendly hand -
a steadying lode.

Cities are a rumour,
fables of density.
Crows drift across,
masters of space.

One step. Pressure
builds on the ears -
one step, eyes shut -
an edge, an edge.

...
Sunset, near Mepal

It could be Moses' burning bush,
a row of shrubs flaring.

Darkness and fire:
winter's inferno and not a soul.

The canal is a still glass
holding the purple sky

and across the middle distance
brushwood trees march on to nowhere.

The Bedford Levels flat as an iron
and Ely breasting the horizon.

...
Nightwalk from Ely

1
January: ice cracks with strain under the stars.
The Plough breaks its back across Earth’s rim.

Slugged soil, cut and pressed beside canals,
the nearside bank a quick horizon:

endless levels for our devices and desires.
Paths crunched to biscuit, ice-ribbed and silvered,
the torch redundant.

The stars - are they map or clock?

2
Listen, the slow tick of Earth.

Watch for the hooded man.
He know thy fate and, if met, will tell.

Be ware of nets, of ankles in unhappy tangle
and the death-trip into black canal, lipped with ice

Distrust soft lights. Do not ask how far.

Recall. Remember while walking.
The mummer in wooden shoes, his many tricks,
how he conjure, how he shake.

And forget. Bone-stick and drum,
death’s head and grin.
The faded pattern on the curtain.

The stars - fine stitchwork for the back.

...
Crossing the Severn Bridge

Strung taut across the estuary, white
and gleaming, it rises like an instrument
tightened and tuned to a harp-like elegance,
curving away into the blue afternoon.
We follow our line, drive forward, cross
as though slowly taking flight, and sense
a weightlessness, a change in our motion.
Maybe it is the experience of rising high
over water, bird-like in air, creatures
of transience, caught on the wing. And the bridge
is in flight now, arcing backwards, span on span,
through our rear-view mirror. We touch down

on the Celtic border of Wales. Dual language signs
glance slyly at us, the crowded consonants
clustered on each board. ‘Abaty Tyndyrn’
points the tourist route, red dragon motifs
heralding our way. The Wye Valley stretches out
sown thick with trees, the Abbey shell
skeletal against late sun.
Pendragon

A black wind sculpts the hills,
shapes his matted beard to stone;
he stands, feet firmly spread,
holding his hazel staff aslant
as though he would steer all Wales

across the sea. Shading his eyes
with pantomime gesture, he scans
the distance, seeing nothing. He berates
an ingrate people, his country’s decline –
couples enclasped on parkland grass -

fornication is the world’s undoing,
anyone with half an eye can see that.
A buzzard flaps from the promontory
and, in the park below, his unemployed sons
pick locks, take a joy ride out of town.

...
Madness in Perthshire

*In Perthshire, the insane were chained overnight to a holy stone near a well dedicated to St Fillan in the belief that the saint would release them before dawn and send them home in their right mind.*

The blue intensity of gothic night:
the dedication of wells is complete,
the mad now placed under St Fillan’s care.

The wardens approach, drag iron fetters
across the holy stone, chain down
their lunatic, his head silvered by moonlight.

Departing, they cross themselves
with elaborate gesture, mumble prayers
to St. Fillan and all the saints.

Chained to the stone. All night is what they said.
The moon’s face winks and grins, then slides
behind a cloud. Why is the world so quiet?

He will turn into a wolf and bay
at the moon, lift his fine throat to its light,
will grow a hair coat against the cold dawn.

Stone and moon, stone and moon, his time has come:
he will howl and hold the forest in awe
or, a she-wolf, give suck and nurture Rome.

A screech owl adjusts its perch, fixes
its amber eye. Bored by such repetition,
it digests a vole, lets drop the sour pellet.

...
A Dirge for St Edmund

They took him to the wood at noon,
    they took him to the wood;
they removed his purple cloak and crown,
    they removed his purple cloak;
they whistled the air with his greening wounds,
    they whistled the air with his wounds;
his royal blood sang out to the earth,
    his royal blood sang out;
they laid him low in the leaves and earth,
    they laid him low in the leaves;
and frost imprinted his bones with stars,
    frost imprinted his bones.

...
St Veronica

She moves through a series of frames, photographic stills. Each compositional change jerks into place. Turning, she is blurred, her face a smudge.

She waits with the others grouped by the gate, clutching their drugged wine. Silent, motionless, they stand as though carved from the wall.

The convicts are led out, roped in a line. They slip and slide in yellow mud, through streaked capillary tracks of blood. The sky darkens, violet and violent.

One falls. Stooping, she raises his head, wipes the face that is blind with pain, imprints the cloth with the negative of the day.

...
Mercutio

Stain, slow at first,
a dull red spreading across
the doublet like a map.
Shock of him slumping, eyes
glassed, seeing nothing …
and the arrogance –
once so finely expressed
in the high cheek bones and jawline –
suddenly imploded.

The fountain steps,
yellowish stone stained darkly
and the cup chained to the wall,
swinging free - red-faced, sweating,
we stoop to drink.

Snarl, a boy almost, turned
to dog. Lured. And in the open,
not hooded and bound. Stop.
Him, that one, moving through the crowd -
light tap on the shoulder,
touch the quilted jacket. Stop.
He freezes, turns,
the eyebrows lifted, Me?
Butter wouldn’t melt.
He shrugs and slides away.
He knows.
Consider clouds …
a lion’s mane, blue, ragged, or an anvil,
    coalescing, angry, and the leaves
suddenly shadow-darkened,
rattling like tin.

Eyes meeting (he’s seen us)
    and look! he has the neck
to approach.
    The soft glide of youth -
a smirk there? Eyes
    that say it all. We know
what has happened –
    the stone blood-stained,
its ochre flaking
    in the careless sun, the fountain step
worn to a shallow dip, water
    splashing freely …

No more words for God’s sake.
    We all know
who did it. Holy God
    we all know that.
Eyes, their breath on fire,
    the dark stare, dark
exchange. Touch.
It could all have fallen out
so differently, a sense of belonging,
suddenly ... No, not that,
a death

...
Blondel

The rusting of light:
red tracks wind
between olive trees,
the sculpted rocks, baked ochre.

Breathless, his lungs are seared
with effort - he struggles
over resistant cliffs,
blood pulses in his ears.

He stops for rest, gazes
across luminous plains,
inhalates the pine scent
filling the slopes. Evening.

He moves on, limping
across the plain. His blooded feet
poke through split cowhide,
his slung lute worries

an ulcer on his hip.
Castle after castle ...
every bridge is closed,
every banner hostile.

He pitches his frail tenor
to reach the arrow slits. Richard?
No sound. He fears
the walls are too thick

for a song to pass.
Or Richard may be dead.
A lark mocks him
with its trilling ascent.

He is sick of the sound
of his own voice,
its troubadour whine
trailing through dreams.
The Late Queen’s Jester

Crookback, I sit
at the great bay window

swinging a pig’s bladder
from a stick – a severed head

condemned to lightness.
I’m muddled, addled, a mad egg.

Pick, peck, pick – purple-black,
I count mussel-coloured elytra,

beetle my brain into shards,
listen to nocturnal insect taps,

tick, tick, tap.
Laughter turns to cackle.

Whistle and jibe, whistle and jibe …
didn’t want for a kickie-wickie,

bumpy-bed. Halls filter their ghosts,
sudden draughts swirl in corners.

The deaths heap up, fold us in silence.
A caul of time stretches over their lives.

Drove and drive, duck and dive –
light blades her soft pelisse

still hung from its rack, a dusty grey
as though a heron watched me there.

They’ve burnt her gingie wigs
I used to mock – she’d beard me for it

and I’d offer to snatch her gingie
in return, for which my ears were boxed.

She would sometimes receive me
in her shift.

...
Daft Davy

... and began to speak with other tongues,
as the Spirit gave them utterance.

He’s sauntering about the yard,
swagged in mire. We’ve checked his coat
for matches - he’s clear
and won’t come to harm out there.

He’ll take a kitchen knife
and strip a willow switch,
then throw the knife aside.
It’s just fire attracts him.

Hums to himself, keens
high up in his head, nodding
intensely to a distant music.
His eyes are soft, distraint.

The girls don’t mind him,
treat him as a household pet.
He’s safe I suppose - wouldn’t know
what to do with a woman.

But the glossolalia: it happens.
Not frequently, but it happens -
Götterdämmerungfrau -
he shouts, or something like that,

clustered syllables spat out
like fruit pips, his face twisted
into rubber, bangs his head against
the wall like a bell clapper.

Tall, flame-haired. They say
Plantagenet blood runs in his veins.
He coughs like a motor
crunching its gears.

...
Elements

(Virginia Woolf 1882-1941)

Stones plucked at random, 
scooped desperately 
from the river bed 
without regard for their soft tones, 
now heavy and sullen 
in the dark 
of distended pockets;

the flapping wind 
churning its emptiness 
about the downs, 
blinking the sky, 
glazing the eyes of sheep;

London burning, 
the mind wandering 
in the desolate ruins 
of my old squares: gashed; dismantled...
    Russell, Gordon, Tavistock, 
all crackling as tinder;

and the innocent river 
spreading wide its skirts, 
stroking each pebble, 
catching sapphires 
from the clear day.

...
Henry Moore Sketches the Skull of an Elephant

He enters
the colonnades of bone
through his eye,

the domed vastness
of what once housed
savannah wisdom.

He shapes the contours
of a temple,
the vaulted aisles

of this proboscidean,
shades the mammoth shaft
from which grew the trunk.

And he is entirely at home,
smoothing his hand across the bone
as though stroking marble.

...
In Search of Robert Lowell

we are all late
in a slow time

Charles Olson

I tried to track you through Boston,
past Colonel Shaw’s Civil War memorial,
through the neatly trimmed park. Excuse me.
You’re welcome! We glide on smooth civilities.
Jostling with tourists, I photograph Shaw
but his ‘bell-cheeked Negroes’ remain ambiguous.
Black and white street bums trawl through trash barrels
along salubrious Newbury. Their ditch,
if not ours, is nearer. Nothing’s changed,
yet everything announces change.

The Aquarium shines, attracting crowds.
Sharks cruise round their tank as though ruddered
by remote control. If they register
a sense at all, it must be freedom.

The Boston Herald (you would not approve)
announces ‘Lawyer squeezes O.J.
from use of his name for profit’.
The Communists tamed, we feel free enough
to unplug some warheads. Our worry now
is fleshed into nagging obesity.
John Hancock’s blue bladed tower cleaves Boylston Street
in two. Cars crawl and stop. Downsized, they have lost
their fins, the sweeping dorsal arrogance.

Did I find you? Harvard is terse, rubbed clean,
correct, peering through Armani spectacles.
You sit uneasily on its bookstore shelves.

...
Monk, playing

feet
and steering
impatient flippers
until it sings
but
in the nodding fur hat
has just stepped back into
are paddles jabbing
tormented rapids
poised
ready to slap
Off Minor
he is laying out
and the tenor
an empty
of an angular tune hands
a stubborn keyboard
we hold our breath
this splash-chord genius
out front
lift shaft
Aegean Songs

i
Is the sun
a god?
It scatters
its dust
across this sea
and a thousand
flash guns
wink
from the blue.

ii
The ocean
mocks us
as it mocked
the erotic gods:
ancient axis
of history
perhaps, but still
the sump
of our desires.

iii
A red hibiscus
leans
from the wall,
draws
the eye
to luxuriant
flesh: a careful
staining
of ocean's glass.

iv
Bully-boy
Achilles, fat
brainless Ajax
and Odysseus,
whose chic cologne
could not fool a dog,
are vanished now
into purer air.
...
Doorways

Six postcards from Rhodes

1
Closed but inviting, the handled edge
worn from the island green of its paint
to shiny black, the wood polished by years
of unconsidered pushing, of welcome.

2
An underwater cavern hollowed out
from turquoise light where the climber struggles
up the steps to reach the lobsterpot-linenbasket beside a grainy door
like a ship's hold, hinged and bolted.

3
The obligatory earthenware jar –
asymmetrical, the neck aslant –
set next a sun-baked portal. Behind the chair
an ancient vine python-twists fawningly.

4
Plain doors and windows are cut-out shapes
across the scabbed surface of the wall –
the street door is pegged wide open.
Geraniums placed by whitened steps offer
minimal colour, their heraldic red
summoning the absent occupier
who will return at any moment.

5
Sunlight maps fresh continents across
this red ochre wall filtered through foliage
lost to our view. But the inner courtyard
resists the heat and maintains its coolness
which is located in the Aegean blue
of the house door, reserved but no less plush.
A purple bag slung over a hook
contrasts with orange and green vegetables.
This casual assemblage is contrivance,
the photographer reaching
for a painter's palette, the stairway
and rickety balustrade going unnoticed.
At Rhodes

Tired of the guide book’s inanities (icons: the art of eternity)
we soak up the benign climate, relax with coffee.
The whole town’s a postcard.

The arms of each knight adorn the street,
a weather-smoothed ochre,
biscuit shapes ready to snap off and crunch into nothing.

At the gate, St John’s emblazonment of four inward pointing darts announces effacement of military pride.

The castle stands in obstinate grey, massive against the Aegean blue, ready to withstand any assault by sea.

The walls, in places, were only two feet thick, offering a defence more honoured in the observance than the breach.

It took the Turks six months to discover this – a few cannon volleys later and the knights were waving their hurried surrender from across the rubble.
Early autumn filters
honeyed sunlight through
thick-leafed palms; hibiscus
blaze their heraldry
from dusty gardens,
throng every crevice.

The castle admits defeat,
reveals only
a papier-maché strength
and ceases posturing.
Its flags flesh out
the freshening breeze.

...
Rome

There are moments in life
when even Schubert has nothing
to say to us.  

Henry James

I could never have dreamt so many years,
their burden. Even my skin … you know,
has turned ash-pale. We are passing out
of the frame. Baroque, rococo,
we worry so much about style. And yet
time is a string, a thread leading through ruins
that look as though they have never
been anything other than ruins.

Stop playing with your table napkin and listen.

We start to count the countries of Europe
but run out of time. Inconsequential.
Taxis swirl and stop, drop off, pick up.
We dine by the Forum tonight. It’s all, somehow …
more elegant, more romantic in the rain.
(A screech as we scrape our metal chairs
on the pavement.) Waiters. Menus
opened with extravagant gestures.
They despise us. No, don’t say anything. Shut up. And don’t stare at them. Remember,
there are no corners in eternity.

The plaster is crumbling in the hallway,
along the stairs. It’s all so dimly lit.
You said she lived here. Well,
it’s squalid, I’ll tell you that.

For such the steady Romans shook the world:
coins, fountains.
Trash.

The Circus Maximus recedes into the sunset
like Turner’s classical diminuendos.
The dogs are settling for the night,
nestling among the ruins, comfortable
with their own warmth and their own smell.
Do as I do and you'll be fine.
Look out at the station though – amputees,
women trading babies ... they'll try anything.

Distribute the candles. Genuflect.
How can one know God in this darkness?

Tourist coaches line the avenue
with Dutch and Germans trailing through
the electric evening, exhausted.
You can't move for luggage. And here comes
that party still wearing their funny hats.

What is to be said, staring into the sun?
That all our betrayals and lusts are antique?

Come, we must go now.
Just look at the painted figures,
nearly falling out of the ceiling.

... 

*For such the steady Romans shook the world:*

Samuel Johnson, ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’
A Dutch Interior

You can hear the tinkling
four rooms away. The studied
repetition of a passage
she is determined to conquer.

Nodding in her cloth cap
she is seated at the clavichord,
tapping out stilted time.
Broad and energetic,
she is used to hard work.
We cannot see her face.

One room leads to another,
endlessly. You could fold them
into a box like a furniture flatpack.
The figures would then flatten
and the clavichord’s sound die.

But lift the top flap, it starts
to tinkle again. The servant
sweeping three rooms off
is once more jerkily busy.

... 

*after Emanuel de Witte*
Menhirs

Twin forms, narrow
and erect, slice through
this landscape
of jagged cliffs,
and granite hills -
the quick blaze of sky
forcing its way through
the gap dividing them.

Repositories
of ancient night:
black stone
burnished
until the fossil
surfaced, spread
to its feathered flowering
in the Atlantic air.

...
Peninsula

Zennor, Morvah, Pendeen,
    where north and south converge –
the Atlantic upheaving,
    slant sting of rain, 45 degrees
to the hill, silver point light
    pricking the granite face.

Elephant skin road twisting
    between farms, sloshed with slurry.
Outbuildings crouch, hugging the fields
    like long barrows. Farm people
look narrowly from under
    dark lintels, wearing their quick-stare mask –
*Who’s this? What he want?*
    they turn and fade, go about
their daily. Rain peters,
    light flickers, the sky switching blades.

A buzzard tacks, rag
    of silence. Soaking cattle stand
in small fields, nonplussed, as though
    placed there just for the moment.
Cuckoo calls haunt the middle distance
    as rain sweeps again, the hill’s eye closing.

Engine houses stare, empty as skull shells,
    the tunnelled earth a grave.
The working road skirts and humps
    its way over the remnant land,
thin end of the wedge.

...
Blue

Again
   rain
swashing down
   sweeping, driving
as though on a mission
   in league with the wind
to have these parked cars
   cleansed and chastened
and the trees shaking and bending
   their oh no, oh no
enough
   of this tragic existence,
this old Greek drama
   when suddenly

it stops
   (it is quite some while
before you realise that it has stopped)
   and a sheen or skin, blue,
forms across the car park asphalt.
   Filaments spread out
across the new, high sky,
   wisps of grey
like an old woman’s hair.
   The trees, at a distance, darken,
deepen their collective green,
   poplars turning over a new leaf
ready to try again
   in the blustery evening,
sensing only a gathering
   in their waving,
wavering delicacy.

The whole earth is sodden,
rolled into a gluey clay,
   a tight ball turning slowly
in the last of the blue light,
   like a museum exhibit
on its small rotating table.

...
August

The golden rim is closer,  
   touching even the city,  
spreading its sense of rural space.  
   A fresh-bladed dawn finds us attentive,  
clustered, like saints in a Giotto painting  
   about to witness the miraculous.  
The crops are harvested, the fields textured  
   like medieval tapestry  
and look! two fallow deer running alongside  
   the train – the sudden sight a rush of joy,  
easier to grasp than happiness.  
   A wedding party is held outdoors  
as the day tapers towards  
   its final flaring before nightfall.  
Cut-out figures stand grouped on the lawn,  
   each shirt and dress catching briefly  
the light of the sky’s failing coals.  
   A fox’s brush flags through stubble –  
he is part of the aureole,  
   silhouette against the fat moon  
which will persist long after dawn,  
   a silver coin struck into the blue, morning gift  
   ...

Agraphia

The poplar, a moment ago
   all firm outline and dignity,
clear and constant against the sky,
   now arcs and shivers,
shakes its leaves in an orchestration
   of lament at the gusts
that presage autumn.
   It flexes, like a girl shaking
her hair free in the shower,
   then returns to upright
only to be twisted
   in a parabolic wave, a gush
of grief flying through the leaves
   of its book without words.

...
Gliders

Their element is an air of surprise,
the silence on coming into view,

the sudden sweep, the angled rise,
pterodactyls skimming the blue.

...
At the Glazier’s

We queue by the door,
not wishing (and not allowed)
to venture further
on this threshing floor.

They move without speaking,
crunching splinters
in Doc Marten boots
with a steady tread.

Their arms extended,
they hold onto nothing
but a blue-tinged edge
caught by the light;

and it is a form of slow dance
in which they engage
as they cross the shop
meeting face to face,

a ritual observance
forbidding touch,
pane moving clockwise
parallel to pane.

...
Beach Huts, Southwold

An attentive family group, they await
the colourist's vision
to tell them
how to pose,
how to stand aslant
to the spirit level
of the sea's grey edge.
Doubtful spectators,
made self-conscious
by their proximities,
they are hermetic
against the salt breath
of dawn, blanch before
the first slit of light.

...
Opportunities

The trees are still blue
and Paul Klee is dead.

Portraits – how I hate them.
Do I take life too seriously?

All happy families are boring
but each train in its own way

is quite shiny. This one is from Los Angeles.
There. I told you so, didn’t I – she wouldn’t be on it.

And it looks like there’s going to be another joke -
it’s always like this when it’s sultry, with couples,

hand in hand, taking their solitary way
through the glittering internet café.

You smoke? Birmingham is next
but I expect you’ve seen all that before.

I remember. Alabama was it…
it was all over the television anyhow.

But that was the 60s for you,
you could have found something different you know,

you had the opportunity. Oh come now,
don’t cry, don’t take life too seriously.

...
Months

Time hung heavy about her as she lay bejewelled, her bracelets clasping. She was sly.

Why, she said, just look at January – locked in the flatness of its pewter sky.

You needn’t go out. It’s better to lie on the rug by the fire. Don’t you like the fire?

February came with its occasional green. Careful, she said, I like to talk dirty.

Her bangle winked craftily. Dear gamine, I said, Is playing with emerald playing with fire?

Be satisfied with that, she said, And don’t enquire after June or July, do not climb so far in your thoughts. You could lose a limb.

March and April should satisfy you –

English skies can excite – see the clouds skim over our concupiscent avenue.

I longed for May, her benevolence of touch, for all the willowed avenues of clutch.

...
April

the garden pulsing
to its spring vibrato

clouds mass their masonry
the lawn greying in shadow

drawn-out vocal timbres
cross the decades

my mother calls to me
from the back door

at four years' old I stand unseen
dwarfed by golden rod

...
Towards Zero

‘Closure’ as in music:
the dying fall
is satisfied.

Afternoon sunlight
surprises, invades
the curtain with innocence.

Corridors
of the hospital adjust
their angles, reach into light.

The face that is dearest
cannot be looked upon,
we turn our face to the wall.

Wishing for nothing …
nothing
is what we cannot achieve.

To reach bedrock, pared down, stripped:
how we adore bone and stone –
and how we fool ourselves.

...
Scratch Marks in the Snow

music
is not your friend

the solo piano
*triste et lent*

is the tension
at your throat

you venture
beyond the garden

where birds have left their marks -
territory and hunger

they are all gone
into the world of ice

you tread back
to the house

listening to the sound
of your tread

...

*after Debussy,*

*‘Des pas sur la neige’*
The Whole City

A whirring
of insects charges
this collapsed mass
of dexion, this heap
of scrapped girders.
Palace of scorpions,
it throbs to high
frequency intent
under a sulphur sky.
Marshalled ready
with pincer and drill
they throng the labyrinth,
swastika bands wound round
each armoured head.
The whole city pulses,
its matrix grid
ready for onslaught.

...
Ideogram

A heavy silence –
the field pampered in fresh snow
caught in the glare
of mid-morning sun, remnants
of mist spun into its margins.

Japanese, the brush stroke
dark at the centre,
the arched back and alert ears
the sign for ‘Hare’.

...
Barn Owl

Curving into view, a ditch-hugging sweep of flight, keeping below radar level, its eyes set, sights trained for prey. Dusk. It draws the last flares into its cream body, the beak screwed in tight to the flat of the face, the business end.

...
Early Morning Crow

A blackness
coming out of the north,
landing heavily
on the leisure centre’s steel roof,
claws clattering like crampons.
Dishevelled, its feathers flap
like a Dickens lawyer’s coat.
It marches up the roof apex
It marches down again
but this time mutters
a dismissive guttural croak –
leisure centre roof no good,
bad start to the day.
It lowers its haunches, its head,
sloped upward thirty degrees,
hunched like a jump jet
on an aircraft carrier,
then springs off to attack
the neighbouring conifers.
Thirteen Deer at Littlebury Green

They try the edge of the wood,
nose the air. It is almost
as though they are not there
but printed on the receding mist.

It is heraldic: the raised heads,
the deliberate planting
of each foot. They share
a vigilance, a sprung tension

and shift as one, leaving nothing to chance.

...
Rose-hips

bead
the frosted hedgerow
with garnets,
each tip
a burred pentagon
or hexagon,
matching
the cut glass whiteness
of the day.

...
Earth, Sea and Ice: Three Siftings
Skull of the Child Bride

Anne Mowbray, 1472–1481

1
A pattern of doves scores its geometry
across the sward. February.

Sunlight strengthens, holds, then switches off
to a camera shutter's click. On again.

Cumulus, heaped mile-high against the blue.
Bulbs split and peel in the gentle earth

which covers her lightly. March.
Spring at the speed of light.

2
The lime secretion from crown to temple
pitted and cratered to moon landscape:

she is sidereal, interlaced with light,
her caverns staring with dull obsession.

Crystal gourd, delivered from darkness,
inharmonious pod, seed rattle

pitched into our glare of day. Sour breath,
sour time: a shell held to our ear:

3
'Take his hand while we say these few words -
you must speak a little more, then go and play'

Royal bride, combed through ancestral tables
and married for life, her widower husband

smothered in goosedown at nine years’ old.
I weigh the frailty of this necrotic head,

its spindrift hair a winnowed skullcap,
her bed and bridal chamber London clay.
4

Foxglove, teasel, poppy, these
she would celebrate in her quiet way,
stand amazed when let into the meadow
while adults, high-toned and shrill, held their talk

And at mass, the Lily. Care for her soul,
the small head bent with its weight of sin.

Difficult child, you collapse the years –
a stopped watch raked out of the muck.
Raising the Mary Rose

Cables tick through the winch,
the ratchet banging
into the pawl;

inch by inch
tension is absorbed
by the lifting frame,

the men in Tog Mor
cool, steady,
patient as surgeons.

She is raised from the mud,
away from the suck
of the sea bed

that threatened to rip the hull.
It is now an open shell -
one sharp jerk could break its back.

Hydraulic jacks
were worked for days
to clear the smallest gap.

Air bag cushions
ease her cradling,
gentle her in position.

The wire strops strain
from the crane hook,
bite into the frame.

Water spouts as though
from gargoyles -
.lifted free, she streams with light.

And Lazarus, again
and again, is uncoiled
from his weed and swirl,
hauled into gaping day,
his dried remains
shivered and loosed.

... 

_Tog Mor:_ giant floating crane.
Mallory on Everest

A shin bone
now the wind’s flute -

tweed jacket, torn socks,
ripped underclothes
flap in low wind;

the exposed finger bones
are like delicate marine fossils,

the shoulder blades
interlocking ivory plates

still hunched in the effort
to obtain a grip,
now grafted into cobalt ice.

The wind tugs at loose straps, pulls
at the hand-made sweater,

is tenacious
in this undressing,
this ungraving.

...
Voyages

Eight Scenes from Pericles
I

Thaisa

i
Childbirth at sea

Pericles’ issue and bloodline:

the blood and water flowing
in the scream of the storm;

against the lurch and strain
a palimpsest
of indelible stain
on the ship’s boards,

Thaisa’s body racked
against racked timbers,
frame against frame
to the point of brasting

then sudden and malignant calm -
both ship and woman
drifting, insensible.
Muscles and sinews strain
to the heft and pull of ropes
as they lift, then lower
the coffin gently
as though it contained
a live and precious cargo
entrusted to their care—

breathless and panting
they align to the ship’s motion,

a rocking to rhythms of grief.
iii

At the Temple

Diaphanous, the silvered light
from off Thaisa’s hair:

folding the altar cloth with care
she smoothes each crease
with fine white hands.

Her silence filled with sorrow,
she glides through the sanctuary,
touching each vessel
through rehearsals of love

and, at ceremony’s end,
lifts up her eyes -
twin olive lamps – in trust.
Marina

i
The abduction

A cold dryness
in the mouth,
in the eye,
the body frozen

as though marble or bronze,
rigid in attitude,
earst turned to stone:

running and shouting
along the beach,
just fifty yards away
when she notices a gull
landing awkwardly on a roof,
shuffling its feet forward
to keep balance.

The evening sky flares
to a blooded abstract,
impasto, throbs
to a pulse in the brain
that blots out the coastline
and the embracing sea.
She thought a brothel
was a soup kitchen
and stews a dish of orts;

thus filched and bargained for,
she added quickly to her definitions:
if she did not escape
her life would be
the history of her body.

She holds her breath, closes
the door gingerly and,
step by cautious step,
makes her way into fresh
intrusions of weather,
observes tearing clouds,
the timeless shore.
iii

*Seascape, with frieze of girls*

They enter from the promenade
flushed with racquet exercise,
fall onto couches, laughing.

Chiaroscuro: sunlight floods
from the arbour, scatters
green and yellow coins about the room.

Rituals of hospitality
announce a cliche of sounds:
the ordered rattling of plates and flasks,
short crescendos of social laughter.

A gaiety of strings and pipes:
music unifies,
binds the discontinuous.

As the last notes resonate
among garden statuary
she reflects on changes possible
within so short a time.

The room chills, a salt breeze
enters the open casement,
flecks her skin.
A Villanelle for Pericles

Every voyage is a voyage of loss
and mariners craft a sombre farewell.
Each ocean’s a grave we venture to cross.

We sailed our tall barques from Tarsus to Kos
and witnessed comrades sinking in the swell.
Every voyage is a voyage of loss.

Our prow became a funereal boss,
more dead than alive, we journeyed through hell
Each ocean’s a grave we venture to cross.

We wish for a tomb roofed over with moss,
not the sea-fog alarm sounding our knell.
Every voyage is a voyage of loss.

I cling to trinkets that others count dross,
cheap bracelets and rings, a sea-urchin shell.
Each ocean’s a grave we venture to cross.

We aren’t deceived by El Dorado’s gloss,
there’s more honesty in the tocsin bell.
Every voyage is a voyage of loss.
Each ocean’s a grave we venture to cross.
IV

Unification of Pericles, Thaisa and Marina

We observe them through glass,
silent and holding hands,
cool, expressionless:

daughter, mother,
husband and father,
sea-swallowed, sea-borne
and sea-returned;

holding each to each,
they are indissoluble,
a single form cut in ivory
tinctured with the pearl of day.