

**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 Cornelius 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  
glasses, 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,  
inhales 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, distrait.

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

are paddles  
jabbing

and steering

tormented rapids

of an angular tune  
hands

impatient flippers

poised  
ready to slap

a stubborn keyboard

until it sings

*Off Minor*

we hold our breath

but

he is laying out

this splash-chord genius

in the nodding fur hat

and the tenor

out front

has just stepped back  
into

an empty

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.

6

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  
inaneities (*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,  
through 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.

...

*after Barbara Hepworth*

## 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.

**C**ut-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.

...

*after Max Ernst*

## 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  
Duke of York-wise. Nothing doing.  
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.

ii

*Sea Burial*

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 smooths 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.

## II

### Marina

#### i

##### *The abduction*

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

as though marble or bronze,  
rigid in attitude,  
ears 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.

ii

*Escape*

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 cliché 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.

### III

## 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  
tintured with the pearl of day.

...