

MAN IS WOLF TO MAN

Until the consummation of things:
man, wolf, man. A man hangs
like an amulet. His death to counter-
weight the deaths by his hand,
assuming God has a sense of balance.
The skeleton in the sand of Ash Sham
wears its clothes. Shirt unbuttoned
to show a cage of sand, the blindfold
blown off his three eyeholes.
Men's muscles did minutely grow

as they dug their holes to waste in.
Napoleon loves his soldiers, as do
the ravens, the first *guerrilla* said
with his purse of French ringed fingers.
From that time we knew little-wars
will be stockpiled as one great cause.
Dusk is useless. We want not beauty
but light for aim, or the cover of black.
Sometimes the enemy knocks before
entering. A baby is hidden in the drawer.



SLEEPING AGAINST A SIGNPOST

The post is cold at first but it will soon mimic his sour warmth. His body on the first angle unsustainable without something to lean on; feet tilted in shoes that stay flat to the ground if loose enough. Look—there goes his old dog on that tram, bullet set like a jewel in its head.

You can be timeless and a little less hungry when still, the stars buzzing to crown you. There goes his old street-partner on that tram, cloaked in cardboard, beard to the floor, godly-strong to build his own god. For the back of his partner's head he gave his eyes, too late.

The post is tucked in neck-nook and collarbone, then in between arm and ribcage like a friend. He ignores the women who pass in loud shoes. There goes his wife on that tram, plaiting the hair of his lover like a mother. Every weapon-heeled step may be the gunshot in his dream but at least

he is asleep, self-inhabited. There goes his boy on that tram—his old house!—brick-safe with a happy chimney, a little nose to the pane. You can be a sundial, you can have your heart as your home, wrought-iron ribs. You can be the quiet geography so you won't miss a thing.



THE BOTANIST

Fiddling with his radio dial to escape a certain song—*what song* she later asked—the driver knocked her off her pushbike. She flew headfirst—flight always being headfirst, and first to be forgotten—her helmet split open like an apricot. Her brain showed its new colours in the scan, a stout bouquet of red, green and yellow, the blooms' colours no longer evolutionary but *acquired*, like the lurid erroneous blue of an orchid dyed in a cheap florist. *Blue China*. The name of the wild cyan one found in heathlands, Spring-flowering. *But what is its real name?* Gone was the species *gemmata*, the genus *cyanicula*, even the family *Orchidaceae* on her bad days. Her colleagues came for tea and talked of a fungus re-found after a century; she could remember nothing about it afterwards—no name, nor its workings, biological imperatives nor its haunting—except for its place in a story of a gentleman-botanist who covered the phallic-shaped specimen in his handkerchief. The science she once knew she had unlearned, every sprig cut for knowledge grafted back where it came from. Left to her was the eye's pure feeling for shape and colour; flora shaped in her watercolours until *Blue China* was its only name.



MY LOVER MEETS THE BOWER BIRD

He nods at the silence then tries out his love song;
a sound like your callused palms rubbing in the cold.
To end he drops bottle top onto bottle shard: a *chink*
that stills him with wonder at the beauty of human excess.
You are formally welcomed with a flash of pink topnotch

and a bow to admire his masterpiece in the making; sublime
with the melancholy of fetish-love, unconsummation.
He guides your eye through his lovelorn mosaic, constellations
of plastic and foil, soft rings of back bones orbiting round
Monopoly pieces, jewel-bits of shattered windshield

for making sunlight his own. He dismisses you with a sudden
cry at a composition of seeds loosened by the breeze.
He nudges them back into a pattern divined
then at the bower's exact centre he stations himself:
still as mortal sculpture, mad with symmetry.



THE HEAD

She sits at the head of the table; she is the head not the heart.
Her dead husband's heart was a boat, his lungs so deep
she did not believe when they told her he did not float.
For a year she dreamt he was governed by the laws

of driftwood; his boat-heart will wash up on a strange
shore, polished and calling for his whole, and her.
For a year it was a pathetic note she duly ignored.
The loneliness of a sailor's wife is strictly professional.

She looks after her whole; her soul overlaps no other.
Her sons clung to motherland and did not understand:
the loneliness of a sailor's widow is strictly pre-prepared.
Her sons married late, which is hardly better than never:

clinging to her bather-skirt, they never learnt to swim.
Each grandchild is a little more blurred than their father,
her sons fathering dilutions of her late husband's face.
She drinks to the gilt-framed faces: lineage is an art.

Each generation is more blurred down the table,
receding through time from her original dreams of what.
She raises her drink to the compassion of dreams,
the way they do not linger when unfulfilled,

receding like ship-songs. She squints into the fresh
angles of a grandson: an economy of more jaw, less cheek.
Beauty never lingers when no longer used. She keeps still:
his soft child face is sharpened and held to her throat.



She lives on a cruel economy of less memory, more past.
She was a blind woman building a ship in a bottle,
trying to grow these children up: to be sharpened
to the matters of human convention that out-live us.

Her past is built in a bottle. With each drink she calls
to the table another wet ghost. They sit down on the laps
of those on chairs, impervious to conventional human matter.
There are fewer manners in the warm living, her sons

using cee-yew-en-tee at the table imperviously.
It was a word that once trailed out of port towns
from the warm real, lingering on ill-mannered mouths
then thrown back to sea like a fish reeled in dead.

It was once a word that did not make it home.
My darling son, please do not say cunt in front
of the cee-aych-i-el-dee ar-ee-en—from the dead
she must be speaking, the living all silently staring.

Her sons must be drowning in front of her, she will act,
the far-away children are now giggling, the wet ghosts
are silently staring. She will save her flailing sons
from the things that once never made it home.

Her sons are so young, on the porch they smoke and laugh;
strange children clear the table around her. Her husband
always made it home smelling of nothing; clean bone.
At the grand head she sits: she is the head, she is his sweetheart.



NOON SWIM

for n & t

At the river's swollen joint
we dive in, suddenly light
and jointless as our six feet
mix the warmed crust
of water with the icy below.

The frangipani behind my ear
is presumed drowned
until it resurfaces between us
as a beautiful relic.
Matchstick-sized skinks

dart at our every scream
as if powered by sound.
Bumblebees hover to drink
from our hair and crown us
with their impossible flight.

Unserious Sirens, we swirl
like blood drops in water
then float, flush against sky,
meniscus breasts bobbing
with pelvises, roses-of-bone.



A PROBLEM OF FILING

I could not find the saint or sentiment
for the time when I put on my shoes
then put on my father's over the top
and I just stood there, my tiny ankles
just holding me up, my love enclosed
in formality, my heart lost in a heart.



from LONG SONNETS OF LEOCADIA

And if we die, let us be buried. Francisco Goya y Lucientes

The Black Paintings

There the black cipher of a He-goat with mantle;
goat-shaped door open to coax the to-be-witches;
pock-wound in the good. Their faces dappled
on wallplaster, skull-portions of sorrow, itching

to be real. It looks like our house has burnt down
and these pitch figures the flames' firstfruits.
There's no telling fire from a master housebound,
the careful debris of brushstrokes on four mute

sides with your furious head in the room's middle,
a quincunx steadied only by your chronic saneness.
You paint a purposeful silence, mouths chasmal
to consume all sound, small complete eclipses.

To live with you, deaf dauber, one is left to converse
with your Saturn, muffled through his mouthfuls
of son. And you are holding our child by her little girth,
barely knowing what to do next. There are myths for

such moments, monumental forms to hold her for you.
Her dirty feet make black work of your shirt.



Self Portrait

After his first near-miss death he drew himself;
reduced by one sense, his useless ears hidden behind
a black halo. One eye looks at himself, a taut unfelt
line from body to thought. The other eye is misaligned,

lowered by the weight of being watched, fearfully
re-alive. On a badge above his heart he signed
his name upside-down, the savant's reminder pinned
to the idiot. The second time the nearness was finer,

Fate-crones near enough to hold the backcloth for
a self-portrait with doctor as a still-life prop,
propping him up gently in the bed I made not for
death but to approximate married life. You cannot

see me standing at the foot of the bed; a visitation
made see-through with exhaustion. I saw my father
dying behind the Señor's death-mask face; Señor
saw in me all the women he formed with the fewest

possible strokes, each lovely face the same worded prayer
but with a different want. I just wanted him spared.

