

Possum

There you go, fast in a long swagger,
cool cat on a hot night,
impenitent and gleaming.

You, your siblings, grandes dames of the band,
slick as spit on brown limbs,
mount, rear, are flung

with aplomb against the surly clouds, printing
claw and brawn on dome and mind,
your plunge all defiance.

'I can', your name says in Latin. You do,
leaving a reek, year by year,
in my stone tent's pitch,

hooking your way by stubs of wire, fleering
back at a ruckle of twigs, launched
to bypass rhyme or reason.

Small clown, prince of the raw, moron
with blazing eyes, keep watching:
you are not alone.

Mending Gloves at Anglesea

Uphill from Demon's Bluff and the long blue haul
 To pack-ice and white night,
The curtains drawn, slow bubbling at the stove
For company, a year and a day near done,
 I'm needling the soft leather, with all
 A male's half-lost, half-won
Belief in patience, pleasure at putting right
Something gone wrong, and an eye to the next move.

Without the prospect of North American snows,
 They'd have stayed, dark and unstrung,
Stashed in a drawer. As it is, they'll be heading, hand
Over hand, for another country, another world —
 That zone where anything goes that goes,
 Precariously unfurled
From the heart's perpetual tundras, smoothed and hung
Up there for admiration, Narcissus Land.

Come to think of it, all that flourish and dash
 Should suit them down to the ground:
The stonemoss brown mittens of Gotland, the sleek
And finger-kissing gloves of Moretto's lord,
 The jewelled, brodered, macing flash
 On the hilt of England's sword
When Elizabeth came to town, the gage to found
Promise or menace — speechless, all of them speak

Of themselves, and ourselves, the pelted in the pelt,
 Born and bred for display.
Pricking a thumb-ball, I think of Burgkmair's storm
Of spears and crossbows, banners and furbelows,
 Whose eye's right at the knight's belt,
 Where mailed fists dispose
The Landsknechten's ferocious swagger, and play
The hand of beauty in its lethal form.

Our puppets, stuffed with gold, or shielding the bearer
 From brute unbiddable things —
Ropeburn, frostbite, talons — they've bodied us out:
And this time round the stitchwork will proclaim
 The amateur status of its wearer,
 Ferric and stoney by name,
But understrapper among overlings,
A lightweight in the contest for chief lout.

The soup's looked after itself, and the sun's gone
 Some distance alone in the dark:
The wind's come up with a sprig of cold to speak
Of more salt for the pot. It's time to pause,
 Time to allow the truth come home,
 With or without applause,
That needle, brainpan or ladle sends an arc
From pole to pole when hunger meets technique.

from A Mass for Anglesea

Prologue

As ever, these are enough, the few makings
 on a plain cloth, squared away
for a voyage of sorts. Below, the Southern Ocean,
 languid this morning, could play the whaleroad
to berg and crevasse, but here on the whited table
 in all simplicity are flagged
the heart's currents, the ways of flesh and blood
 from sarsen-time to now.

'What, must I hold a candle to my shames?'
 True, in darkness they seep and clot,
but the little column budding into fire
 is not for them — it stands as badge
of a reared Lord. An hour ago, the bay
 mirrored the sun in sheeted flame,
and now, the local cockerel done with crowing,
 it's time to find the light.

By the candle, water — as it might be, our living selves,
 private and planetary, both.
Denied it, we know the face of hatred: indulged,
 are given up to relishment. Today,
a thimbleful or two will meet the need,
 fingers to be rinsed, wine to be mingled,
the world in its thirsts to be met with no begrudging,
 lip and vein a blessing.

And so to wine, the stuff of celebration.
The Antony who said he'd force
the wine peep through the scars of his captains was
the fool of love and death at once,
but knew the way to happiness for a while:
and we whose follies, coral-branching,
darken counsel, still may hear the word
of wine in a realm to come.

And what should we bless if not bread, the name
a basket for good upon good — ciabatta,
pumpernickel, damper, sourdough, bannock, tortilla —
and the thing itself a byword for life?
So here in little's the round we keep on making,
for better, for worse, in the mortal way,
hungry by turns for the great crumb of the world
and for all it cannot be.

In the end, as at the beginning, here's the Word,
boxed away in its book, and light
as breath itself, but no wraith, and rising
to eye and ear and mouth. Its tale
of good having the last word is a quaint one,
given the plague and the camps, but I'll read it,
heart a crosspatch often as not, and mind
losing and finding the way.

Word

Hand on hilt was the way to listen once,
smoke from the burning spice around you,
the Good News brushing mail, and you its minder.

Later, a placeman, chic in SS black,
could lodge for an hour in the high Dom,
denying Christ the star his mother gave him.

‘By the words of the Gospel blot out all our sins’—
the book kissed, an old yearning
up like crocus out of the blank of snow;

or, as it might be, a curlicue of tendril,
greening its inches across a branch
of mother-vine, a partisan of life.

Outside, a bronzewing’s foraging in the shrubs,
chestnut and cinnamon feather-deep,
and a flame skipper’s backing and filling in air,

printed again and again on the ocean’s page.
As John tells it, Christ is word
and vine both, meaning and fruit displayed

on the world’s lattice, if only the light will hold.
The rumouring leaf is frail with use,
but the tale’s there, as once black on papyrus,

or lit by gold and lapis on the clipped skins;
so, blind at best to much about me,
I try once more for a touch of the word's Braille.



Credo

Easy to picture them, shaven and crimped in linen,
 bowing to Ra, to Aten, to Horus,
the flaming disk branded above them: and easy,
 God help us all, to remember the jaguar,
humming-bird, eagle, and all the obsidian knives
 to keep the sun from dying of hunger.

Urbanity or deviltry, they're gone,
 and a star's furnace plays the candle
to the likes of us as though they'd never been.
 Still for once, I think of our coursing,
fire for tether, around a galactic hub.
 The mind pulses as though a heart.

Not to have been at all . . . the flesh grass,
 the grass dust, the dust a void,
the Master of Starcraft all there ever was —
 it might have been, and would now,
for all that blaze and the bright water, without
 maker, donor, keeper of being.

The rocky spine of Point Roadknight glints like mica
 across the bay; on the little river,
a parade of two, cob and pen are cruising
 a world of their own; on the Shell forecourt,
all tats and brawn, a haulier grips the wheel
 and swings clear for the spooled miles.

He'll take the rig by mountain ash and blackwood,
by manna gum and melaleuca,
messmate, and ironbark, and stand on stand of blue-gum:
on the hot road, by the tall files,
be born again for a while as a man of the trees,
as once it was for all our band.

I think of the other traveller, working his passage
from boy to man, country to city,
sawyer's horse to the bloody work on a pole —
'et incarnatus est' with a vengeance —
the trees of myth and time growing inside him
as water's column rises in wood:

those fatal branches once cajoling Eve
with glowing fruit, the oaks of Mamre
where God gave Abraham a future, the rustle
of mulberry leaves for David's battle,
almond and olive, sycamore and willow,
and pomegranate for a last drink.

Never to be done with a tree, by the look of things:
wrists marked as though with bracts,
the braced feet a wounded dancer's, and the flag
sap-red on a white field.
Up from the earth, agreed, and drinking the light,
but grounded still, and gripping hard,

the soil more native than the others know,
the flesh embraced without resentment,
and all the greening hours retrieved from darkness.
So now, scentbark fringing wattle,
I'm back at school for love of the quick and the dead,
touching their dish, and fingering their cup.



Offerings

Blessed are you who called the mammoth-hunters,
Russia to Mexico, their hearths
trig or askew like our own, awl and bodkin
tamped deep where they fell: and blessed
in the bistre horse with his black mane at Lascaux,
a thing received and given: blessed
in the grubbing mattock of antler, the flint blade
lustred from harvesting grain, the querns
of Khirokitia, the tall tumblers of Susa,
necklace of boars' teeth, ibex in glaze,
horse-bells, trunnions, faience.

Blessed are you in the sprawling tracts of loess,
the oracle bones of oxen and turtle,
dragon-mask bronzed on a coffin-handle, the brine
drilled in Szechuan for salt-panning:
blessed in the terraces bearing the rice of Luzon,
in a Shan harmonica toning the air,
in shippers of camphor and parrots, of copper and pearls:
in the golden panther and crouching stags
of Scythia lost and gone: in the bronze mirrors
of the Britons: and in the hefted spears
of those who walked the Dreaming.

And blessed are you who fit us all for naming —
telling the arrow's nock, the gladdie's
corm, the Bellarmine jug, the Milky Way,
spinnaker, follicle, Nome, Alaska:
catfish, deckchairs, the age to fall in love,
gaspers and megrims and the Taj Mahal,
derricks, and El Dorado, and peach Melba.
Blessed are you: the years toll,
and yet I chance my arm enough to say,
(the brute tide swayed by the moon)
I bless the wine and the bread.



Dreaming the Bridge

*after Claude Oscar Monet, Bridge Over a Pool of Water Lilies,
1899: oil on canvas*

This way the light is all gone and a velvet abyss
 opens, you hope, for solace. Darkness
teems with darkness. Something has bundled place
 for time to hold, and sent it away.

 You cannot remember your name.

A voice confides that we live in a rainbow of chaos,
 its arc a wave in a lost sea:
and you think that you think of words on a warrior's gate —
 'The world is a bridge: pass over it,
 but never build a house.'

There was a time when mammoths crossed the Seine
 as though to pace by Notre Dame
and take the Rue Saint-Jacques: a time for Xerxes
 to clog the Hellespont with ships
 and span a way to death:

time for the Roman engineers to fling
 arch over arch in the Pont du Gard,
holding a cup to the lips of thirsty Nimes:
 time for 'When your enemy flees,
 build him a silver bridge.'

None of them lingers now. Only Monet's
 Japanese bridge, itself the match
of liliated water, air in green array,
 earth's rondure, and for gift
 the mind's dark fire.

Singers

All music is folk music. I ain't never heard no horse sing a song.

Louis Armstrong

The truth of it is, Louis, they've been singing,
Every last one of them, since first Adam
Took with Eve that solitary way.
Under the earth at Altamira, hewn
Whitely against the English green, done
At three-times life-size in intaglio
Among arroyos on a desert pavement,
Their long throats have been reaching for the pitch,
Too much their own for our hearing, where
The song pours out of them, and they are solaced

For being mortal after all. Subdued
Up to a point in Hittite cavalry,
Exulting among trumpets, cocked beneath
The raw will of Colleoni, provoked
By zany Napoleon at the Alps, they've had
A combination in their chests, like the note
That sleeps in double basses and comes out
When the apt listener's to hand. By night,
Not just the night we know, but the braided darkness
From which, we can't tell why, the world emerges,



They're foaling melodies for Gabriel
And you yourself to blow descants upon,
Louis, with your exalted horns. They say
That Gypsy gold does not chink and glitter,
But gleams in the sun and neighs in the dark:
And there they are, transmuting sweat to song,
Faking a silence for the workaday
Beings who load or spur them forward, while
The long mane of music rides the wind.



Shower

for Vincent Buckley

The rain comes down. Melbourne endures
Its slow intrinsic dreams.
Spire and towering blockhouse urge
What is upon what seems.

The inching clock, the spangling rain
Flicker from stop to start.
Odyssean pacers hold a course
Traced for the home-bent heart.

Lift the glass, then: talk: be played
Into the body's part.
The red wine greens, the skilled hand palms
A candle in the dark.

