

PROVERB

'In the room
where onions are frying
even the cat weeps.'

No more allegories – let's agree
proverbs help nobody.
No parables, I beg of you.

But then, who could love detail for its own sake?
Surely a gentle mind turns straight
away to symbol?

'Fact is the Kingdom of God.
Precision polishes the narrow heart.
Stories set us free.'

The enemies of complexity prefer such
companionable summaries.
But Mother Doubt, you early laid on me

your threefold cradle-gifts:
sadness, restlessness,
and foremost of these, a hopeless

passion of reality. And so
my beloved cat, weep.
No more parables – let's just disagree.



FETCH

for Nick McInerney

Of course, you say, we have heard this story
before
but have forgotten. Tell it again, fetch it up.
I can see you now, present and
quick –
sixteen, all bluster, you carried your canoe to the river
and capsized quickly, your
open life-jacket snapping up to pinion and
drown you.
Hopelessly, radically embodied, you thrashed
sucked water and began to die and suddenly
knew
how to receive your
suddenly expected release. Somewhere above
wings
had ceased to beat and all your parts
jigsawed
into the whole, cured flesh of a corpse.
You conjured yourself solely into the world's mind
into the river – a white, still, fetch.
And present and quick you smelled with your new
fresh heart
coffee, morning, a girl's hair.
And of course it can all be explained you say –
some brain impulse, an electrical trick

STRUCTURE OF THE HORSE'S EYE

Under the sun, the horse's eye
is a glass dome over a petal, the pupil a raised bud
of pollinated velvet, bisected;

the horizon in it. Almost 360 –
a narrow corridor behind
and one spot in front of her nose, are blind.

Curious about the wolf? Find a fat horse
grazing at dozey noon her home paddock;
try to creep up.

In the waking night her eyes are flat opals
bouncing your torch as you pan the black
like a river for green-gold flakes,

or better; go sightless to hear
the known rhythm coming out the dark.
Within, the *tapetum*, mirrorlike, reflects all

available light back through her retina –
Homo sapiens, one of few mammals
lacking this useful aid, to nocturne,

mostly sleeps. *Equus* watches on her feet.
Sometimes a night visit sets them off –
swilling around you like surf in a tide pool



pushing the long bones
of their heads at you. The honest creature
investigates with her face, magnolia

nostrils cupping the scent
of palms up empty at arms length. Your image
shone back on the convex surface of the eye-pool

is macrocephalic, duck-billed, your skull
a helpless baby too heavy for itself.
If you want to better love the world,

ask counsel of those who never come inside;
her order, *perissodactyla*
(large mammals with odd numbered toes)

have largely failed. Taxonomy
progresses, dividing its names. Sometimes a life,
pressing on, proves its point

but Life does not. Let her advance –
she is herself, through flowering heads; eyes careful,
thinking nothing of advancement,

above lips tough enough to strip
the exquisite thistle-crown from its armoured stem.
How excellent is her tail! She draws all grass

through the bone-set strata of her teeth,
grazing 12 hours in her open-lidded present –
deep time made one dimension

by limited depth perception, wide world
made pasture and shelter. Let her head's long neck
lift to her clear-edged ear

whose hearing threads in darkness the Earth
to its sky. Let her steady herbivorous day
blink open and consume and close it all.

RECURRING

for Petra White

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The best way to stop a loose horse –
careening at you or off, rope hanging broken
from her head like an arm
divets hurling up like bones unsocketing

while you block the exit to the road, stranded
in your spine like a mast
becalmed, thinking *a fast car*
will explain me to her – a gate left open or sometimes

terrorists and then a bunch of cops
wrestling her to the ground under suspicion, guns
to her terrified snaking head while you *don't*
hurt her! sleep silently –

if she only

but she never turns back

– is to throw your arms wide,
open your fingers like the unsheathed claws of a lion
as if you would enfold her in the embrace of a bear.
She'll always shy off – mutual convenience –

she doesn't need that love
and you couldn't take her weight, waking you

The one where you find the hidden room in the house
you've lived a long time.

Your head flies off and your eyes turn in

to labyrinth, tunnels through night
that years that grudges take: following
dark walls, smudges of unfocus round the dream-lens.

Find them quickly – stairs down
into mausoleum, dust on things-where-they-were
before they died – nothing touched.

In the locked cabinet, the corner of your eye, a key
to every real room just beyond
the followspot of waking thought.

Sometimes windows open to high plains and horses:
like they told you, you never knew how much
you wanted: a new past, a new outside: Pangeia,

your bromeliad heart high in the canopy.
Once it was my father's library as I never saw it:
cramped underground, my every future with it.

Or you sleep into a trapdoor, nauseous drain – bodies
of the thousands you murdered sleepwalking,
off-scene. *I'm so sorry!* But apology

without crime is threat so the room is a warning,
mansion of your sin&anger
or dread freedom – dormers onto cliffs slumping

to a sinkhole sea. What you could do. Or forget –
eyelids pressed under the child-thumb of having once been
and done. But it's mostly the start:

you step to the centre and have a chance,
if only you had time to move things in before the end.
But you'll dream this one again.

from LETTERS TO THE TREMULOUS HAND

iv *address to the hand as fellow scholar*

Are you a ghost? Luckily, yes –
that's why I can see you

alone at your desk, eyes turned
to your own ghosts. You mourn well –

put on the past like a perfume:
walk in a cloud of it. Carry your head with you

seeking revenge on those who did you doom.
One life is not enough

to copy and translate a lifetime's grief.
Every sorrow

gets a new body, inherits distant letters:
a past that never happened

or not in that way, to you
and yet is no one else's – foundling

on your step, the mother fled or never born –
no one to name it but you.

Do you tremble? Good. Better
to write by: the hand moving without end, griefwheel

milling the past. Glossing
heolstor hiding-place, your mark the ghost

of living thought, Time thought's winding-sheet.
No-one at court loves our language.

Schools sold, teachers punished, scholars shamed:
I am all your subject: you are mine –

life and works and time – each the others'
elegy and grave and afterlife.