

THE CHALK MAN

&
OTHER STORIES
by

JENNIE HERRERA

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THE CHALK MAN

The way it parks.
The way it idles in the late evening.
A cold rain beginning to fall.
Roads,
footpaths,
a greasy shine.
The way it remains
as though, yes, as though ...
it will stay till regimes fall.
Its occupants,
leather-coated grim-visaged,
dark with an intimate darkness,
thick about the neck,
dull about the moral sense,
have experience,
know there is no hurry,
nowhere for their quarry ...
Sooner. Later.

I knew it was there.
Between waking, sleeping, I knew
the sound. I knew what it meant,
half-expected it.
Knew it would wait.

A door, a wall, between it and me,
a bank of curtained windows ...
a gulf apart, our beliefs.
Our lights off. I long for light and warmth
this last night to see my children's faces
one last time.
But a lamp lit, a switch flicked,
would tell them ...
They know of course

but I'd rather keep them
in the dark ...

If they knock will I answer?
If they beckon—will I come?
If they thrust a sheet of paper
signed, official, farcical, in my face
will I buckle?
All life tends toward this question.

Should I put on my overcoat?
Such a night. Late autumn.
The leaves have been blowing wildly
halfway between roof and road,
an indecisive end.
But now they mostly lie, trodden underfoot,
sodden and slippery.
Should I fill my pockets?
Useful things.
A comb? Handkerchief? Pen? Torch?
Useless, of course.
They will search and confiscate
but it would say I know, I know
how you work, how the system ...
what your presence shouts ...
the meaning of a car.
They like to think they are the shadows
in the life of solid citizens.
Full light is anathema. Their eyes red in its beams.
They blink, they cringe, they retreat,
if seen for what they are ...
Not me, they say, the system, orders,
the work of the state ... the state of ...
stability ...
just doing my ...

My children sleep upstairs.
I hope they sleep. It is no night
for wakefulness. These old houses crumble,
but still absorb the sound of ...
I want no questions, no tears.
If they cling I know there are night sticks,
gun butts to beat them off.

I could leave.
No goodbyes and
be good for your mother's sake.
The back yard opens into an unlit alley;
behind this row of tired houses.
I might climb to the attic, cold and dank,
with broken chairs,
empty boxes,
and lift the opening
on to the wet tiled roof,
creep along, doubled-over, not seen
in silhouette, go down by way
of sills and drainpipes, go ...
and leave hostages to my fate? No.

What is it? Why are you standing in the cold?
My wife by my side,
rumpled, shivering.
She doesn't sleep well. Who does?
My fault? I often work at night.
Messages
the network
the organisation
swift phone calls.
Sometimes, I walk up and down.
There must be better ways.

When I was young—young—
was I ever young, born to know
there are certain ... I worked alone.
Chalks. A stone snatched up. A flick.
A word on a wall. Five words, ten,
on a quiet night.
A broken window. Grass shards.
Always triangles.
The mathematics of power.
I prided myself on speed and accuracy.
The window I had selected.
Every time.

Nothing to be found.
My chalk, always a worn-down stub.
Dropped. Through gratings. Down drains.

Crushed underfoot in municipal beds,
behind municipal bark.
I had no plans. Whims undermine the state.
Told no one.
The rhythm of my courage
an agenda with no rhyme.
Sometimes I think it achieved
no less, no more, than I do now.
Intricate cells, a honeycomb,
cut-out people, cardboard in my memory.
The need to know.
The names that are not names.
The faces never seen ...
Sometimes that me with stone and chalk
beckons.
Sometimes I wish I'd become an organ fugue
swelling out, a national tide,
a righteous army, we did good by stealth,
blushed to find it fame ...
A chalk stub in the right hand of god,
a pebble sinister ...
I would eavesdrop.
I would watch as people passed my shattered glass.
Their eyes, the way they swivelled.
There.
Back. There again.
I longed to cry—I did it! It was me!
They say the monster must always boast!
The creature that came out of the dark
and disappeared again. It was me!
My words. Still there.
They haven't come, not yet.
Wire brushes, whitewash.
Underneath the bridges,
down along the ill-lit lanes,
caught along the riverside,
seen on fences round a vacant site,
hard upon the footpath,
high up on loading doors,
swift around the hero's horse ...
My words!
A thousand people past by now.
A thousand people marching past, eyes right,

then straight ahead.

They're here. They've come.
Do as we planned.
We planned when the sun was bright,
we planned when we were young
and unencumbered.
We sat over coffee on a summer eve.
Now to take the plan
while they wait outside,
their exhaust white and thick
and nauseous
against the frigid air,
against the spearing rain ...
and they have all the time ...

Her eyes are wide ... I loved her eyes ...
I always did. I always will ...
And now against the faint filtered glow
of streetlamps I see something more,
I think I see—terror, loss, anger.
Yes, anger.
You did this.
You chose.
We had no choice.
To love you was to be captured
by your dream
and then I think ...
I mistook ...

Shall I go up to them?
Her voice is soft as zephyrs.
We don't want the children
to see, to hear, to know ...
She answers herself:
Are you *sure*?
How can you tell it's them?
Not coincidence?
Come for someone else?
Straws in ...
It doesn't matter what we say now.
I thought—natural to think that way—
the things we'd say,

when and if the moment came,
(I like to think I matter, nonentity or not)
would matter,
would carry the weight of our shared life,
our shared memories,
significant words, pet words,
the endearment of parting,
the effulgent heart at loss ...
and now ... the banal thoughts ...
You could go out the back—I'll tell them—
She would too.
But there's a faint and fragile waver ...

How long will they wait? Ten minutes?
The patience our cat shows outside
holes in skirting-boards.
I'd rather not think of cats and mice.
Mice survive but it is numbers,
sheer numbers, *we* longed for numbers,
I don't know what we got. Intelligence.
A kind of grim survival.
The silent majority?
(Are they always silent? In their homes?
In their hearts?)
I've often longed to go up to people,
faces pushing in the rush hour crowd—
You, I'd say, what do *you* want?
The head down, pushing past, excuse me,
I beg your pardon? Shrill. Outraged.
The averted eye. I've sometimes thought
the eye says more than the tongue ever can.
The hurrying as though the world can't wait.

A waiting car. Do they see them. Just a car.
Men. No, shadows, dark shapes. Just waiting.
Not my business. Do you *mind*?
Indignant.

You should eat something. You never know ...
They may not ...
Best not ...
I'd rather starve. I think. Than the humiliation—
Hunger pangs. Soiled clothes.

I put them in the metaphoric scales
and weigh ...

My stomach is faintly uneasy
like sailing on a choppy sea.
The cold. I hate the cold.
Do they know my hates and fears?
The not-knowing,
the fear of pain, the universal fear ...
the idea of betrayal ...

A sudden draught that takes the candle flame.

Have they picked up others.

Other cars outside other doors.

A door lying prone by dawn.

Shattered.

Splintered.

Is tonight the night?

Dark cars across the city.

Other cars waiting on other citizens indoors.

But they won't wait ... long ...

Yes, go up. Keep them safe. As safe as—

A touch to her cold hand.

Tell them—

Her steps, soft, rising, on the stair.

The faint creak of a door. An old house.

Creaks and groans and rattles on a winter's night.

Shadows on the walls from poor street lighting.

Excuses for children, called away, home soon.

We'll go to the shops tomorrow. We'll—

Will her voice waver—or stay firm and bright?

The door between us and them
is both thick, a bulwark,
and fragile, just wood and hinges,
a metal lock, rectangular,
the cold biting the iron.

Nothing else between them and me.

A gulf. But they don't know that.

They cannot understand the things
we might do for posterity;
not for us but for the future.

I strain to hear ... small sounds overhead ...
Boots on stone ... a car door closing ...
I hear the engine idling faintly,
a rough note in its running ...
a loose exhaust,
cut corners in its servicing.
Or is the sound I think is them
really me?
My heart running raggedly in my chest.
Will our gate clang?
Will they knock politely?
Mustn't wake the neighbours!
Will they thunder and shout?
Remind the street there's some things
won't be tolerated?
Men who don't accept—that someone else knew best ...
will they raise an automatic,
shoot a pattern?
The pleasure of it nestled
in a mid-sized palm,
the firm recoil
of close-range shots;
the tap against the failing wood.
Where should I stand? A straw man
shot through. A chalk man well-hit.
Right here. Or relaxing in a chair.
Unimportant visitors.
How nice that you should drop in. Tonight.

Should I fold my arms. Be expansive.
They never discuss that in clandestine discussions;
a man with hat and woollen scarf
for an evening stroll or—yes, I had an idea
you folk might be calling by ... in the stars ...
My wife believes in the stars ...

The mouse. Where does it crouch when the cat
sits down to wait?
Does its space seem over-small. Suddenly.
Its little heart ...
The cat with mouse-fed breath. Disgusting
in its memory. Not a thing I'd want on my lap,
not purring in its pleasure ...

Mice know ... there's nothing they can do
as preparation ...

My complacency. I *was* complacent.
All those years.
Unhindered.
Untouched.
The man who wrote sedition on city walls.
The man who could throw stones backwards.
The bicycle throw. Not me, sir, no,
I was minding my business/just on my way home/
I heard a crash behind me/didn't like to get involved/
An element/my mother would be cross if I—
Complacency. Nine lives.
I could have gone on. Interminably.
No one ever connected ...
If I achieved nothing I might still outlive ...
Someone wrote: while there is death
there is hope; political death, regime death.
I don't know who they had in mind.
Us. Our failures. Our moral miceness ...
I don't remember now.
I had no right to ask my children ...
I should have kept to chalk.

The cold! How I hate it!
It seeps in everywhere. Fills the house.
I almost begin to believe it must be warmer—
wherever I will be taken. Cold and fear.
They intermingle.
Confidence brings its warmth in train.
Fear. Doubt. They're steeped in cold.
Like the failures of the past.
One is the other.
I've come in to our front room.
Angled an eye to the slim crack between heavy drapes.
I thought to think I'd find the car gone.
Wrong address.
More urgent calls.
A wraith.
It still idles.
Only five minutes?
I have lived lifetimes since it parked.

Infancy to my putative senility.

My limbs are stiff.

Five minutes.

If I live more fears, more life lived,
I will crumble into death's fine dust,
be useless to them,
to anyone.

Not the heart and soul of dissidence.

Just enough strength
with the goal ahead ...
then ...

(Why were we afraid of him?)

I doubt they admit to fears.

They ...

Will I know them?

Will I *think* I know them?

That face, those contours, that expression.

Will I store it in my mind for better times?

Revenge. Justice. Recompense.

My decision?

The moment when the past must account
to the present, free the future of the past.
Its crimes.

Will I be able to drag muffled faces from my mind?

Then.

How long is then?

Days. Weeks. Years. An eternity lived ...

My children tiring of the question.

When will he come home? My wife ...

(Soon, my darlings.)

The loneliness, the fears, the watchfulness.

Nights spent sleepless, getting up, peering
through cracks ...

Will I fall through the cracks of family life,
tear the fabric beyond repair,
pinned up, darned ...

Family life, they trumpet!

It sounds obscene on their lips.

Modified, the natural, to serve the state.

The man with the chalk.

I should have written love

not freedom
and all the slogans
of the oppressed
that spring facilely to the hand.
The way they make families
the guardians of the state.
Children to poke and pry,
parents to mould plaster children,
in the image wanted,
passing over the shapes that refused
paternal casting,
their patting into shape.
The offspring that leant against
the mother's hand and came out so misshapen.
The eyes and ears that sharpen in
the family abode;
the listening as we congregate,
aunt, uncle, cousin, might enunciate
words ...
nephews, grandparents, take notes ...
people know people who make notes.
It discourages family life.
The knowledge people watch and spy and undermine
and overwhelm and leave no space
for spontaneity,
for the eccentric,
the seriously disillusioned,
the strangely euphoric,
the fiercely visionary,
the ultimate family.
Conformity to the state
which has nothing to conform to
but obedience for the sake of obedience.
The chalk man has a chalk family.

It waits outside,
with smoke-dark windows
and cloned men.
The biding.
Wait and wait. Wait some more.
Programmed by years of family life.
A set time. The rising. The gathering in.
I'm the one who got it wrong,

thought it was about nurturing
something precious:
my children.

But no second me, never me,
not something that's lived before,
done its time.

The uniqueness of it all.

Pristinely new.

(Terrifyingly different.)

My children.

And when they ask, I can say
I believe in family life.

It rains harder.

I can hear it beat against the path.

The steady punt.

No wonder they sit and wait.

The engine idling, a heater on no doubt,
the headlights bright aureoles
to hurt the eyes, in the fabric of the night.

The mouse in its unlit hole ...

the waiting warmth and light ...

does the moment come when the desire
to creep out and know the worst
overcomes caution ...

whiskers twitching, eyes straining,
nose whiffling ... the smell of cat ...
the smell of power ...

The gutters reaching out to catch autumn leaves
will soon be over-flowing
like the river beneath its chalked-on bridges
clogged and wet and seeping into ancient brick ...
Cold dark brick, where I am going,
cold metal, chill against the skin,
I've always hated cold.

I could've run ...

taken them, crushed in the back of a van,
anything, walked through autumn forests,
dark with dripping ever-greens ... I could've.
But I thought I was indestructible.

I thought I was the voice of posterity ...

People stood up, history books will record

in fifty years, it will make someone feel proud ...
But there won't be names in there,
the names of prisoners
who died of cold. What else?

My chalk used to float a moment
then disappear.
My chalk.
Surprising that they didn't put a ban on chalk.
An edict.
Debate in a tame parliament.
Shops found stocking chalk—
maybe they thought people would laugh ...
The chalk man will be laughing at his
sudden importance.
I could've turned to paint, to charcoal;
instead of white on dark
there'd be dark on light.
Legislation to ban paint,
laws to make you hand in charcoal ...
State folly. People sniggering behind clogged hands.

I should go now.
I don't want to say good-bye again,
to hear my wife say ...
There are things can only be said once.
And we know we love.
We know that, if nothing else.
I should go before the children ...
before they lumber up the path,
take it as a reason to turn the household
upside-down, inside-out ...
I must go before I lose ...
it doesn't matter much any more
now that they know ...

The chalk man.
They'd like to know they have him too.
He lived and died in mystery.
They hate mystery,
It teases the mind.
Not other people's ... their own.

The disappeared.
They'll send out no messages.

I wish I had it now. Nestled in my palm.
I wish their car boot was dry,
I wish the walls were dry,
I wish everything was dry.
I'd write ... Freedom.

Gentlemen. Can I help? Call a mechanic?
Nasty thing ... to be caught idling in the cold ...
the night ... dirt in the fuel-line ...
It's that—or something else, the agony of waiting,
which takes me to the door,
makes the knob turn in my hand,
sets the lock;
I won't be coming back. I know.
The rain is cold on my exposed head,
cold as cells and metal bars, cold rain,
my fingers fumble over the gate ...
Their doors open wide.
Two men.
Dark. Faces muffled.
Square and grim and shadowy.
Watch-towers.
Two men.
One for either side.
They knew I would come to them.
It is unbearably close in their car.

I know there is chalk at home.
I know my family loves chalk.
I know they long to feel it against their angry palms.
I know my family.
A chalk family.

SEASHORES

(—FOR GEMMA AND EVERYONE AT RUNNYMEDE—)

THE CASTLE IN THE SAND

No noise, said Mrs Beech, not after ten—I rule a quiet house.
We understand—and the children will be—like mice—
Of course they will, the little pets. Mrs Beech doubted;
in years of summing up ... but less boister ... and the mother,
such nice stuff in her garments, style, that brocade, but discreet ...
quite the lady ... And your husband, madam, we are to expect—
Oh, indeed. He will be down from town, a day or two ...
what would our holiday be ...

Mrs Beech stepped back. Such vehemence. *Our* holiday.
Breakfast then, from eight till nine (he won't come, silly woman,
her eyes full of dashed hopes). Thank you and might we take a lunch?
No, madam, I suggest the Blackbird Café, they do a nice
double sandwich, sundaes for the children—I do an excellent
two course dinner, from seven on, my crumbed sweetbreads are—
Yes, yes, we'll look forward—Children! Come now, it's late!
She was sharp. In haste to finish conversation.
The sheets are well-aired ... and hot water to suffice ...
Mrs Beech, duty done, went down the stairs. Doom, Doom,
said every tread, or merely Down

The sun will shine, Mama, Mama, it must, it really will—
won't it? Of course, my darlings, the sunniest sun
and the sea-iest sea. As warm as our baths? Nearly. Now to bed
and say your prayers ... And Papa will come? He will, say he will.
My promise, what is my promise? Laudanum words.
Yes, my little ones. He will come and the sea will be blue
and the gulls will swoop, there'll be funny furtive crabs
and laughing children on the strand—Did we bring
the buckets with our spades, Mama, did we? Yes, so
shiny new, gleaming red (devil-red). And the yellow spades;
brighter than the sweetest sand. Gulls whiter than Drake's sails
(greedier than Miss Sanders?)—

... her lips red as beach buckets, her eyes changeable as an English sea. But cheeks of youth. I leave you, Henry, in my heart I leave ... my love departs beyond the horizon ... but I am unforgiving as a Penzance rock ...
Jane! Don't whine! I know you're tired. Nightgowns. John! Alexandra! Please try ... and Mrs Beech saw my lies—sweetbreads ... oh, forgive me, Lord, for lying to a stranger at the shore ...

Mumma, Mumma, where is the sun? You *promised*—
It's hiding, just there, that glow beyond the mist. Sea mist.
Will we go down to the sand. I want to see the sand. She thought of the pebbled beach, round pink-grey rattling stones, to turn and click beneath their feet. Turnstones. But sand there was, a-plenty, beyond the point. And rock pools. And the view back to bobbing boats, fathers at the oars, the red-brick town in gentle curves, and Punch and Judy by the pier. She remembered them.
Donkey rides. Fashion passing and new parasols. Cream teas.
Smart vehicles. Dowagers come for the sea baths. Because of Miss Sanders we are put away here, this unfashionable house, far from the shore. Blind windows. Not even a basket lunch. No noise. Pettiness. Oh, if I could cry, just once ... Johnny don't! If nanny was here she would ... But Papa said nanny must go because he "unwisely peculated"—what is peculate, Mama? He had Mr Timms, such a good clerk ... this new desire for secretaries ...
Mr Timms had the longest nose in the world, I liked his nose, Mama (so did I, oh, so did I) ... this last bow now, and down to breakfast. Kippers, like as not. A seaside meal.

Mumma, when will Papa come? I want him to see me in my pink, my pretty pink. A sea-pink ... she watched them go, unsatisfied

with her words. I hate him. Do they hear my hate. My bitterness.

I shudder.

Put up my parasol to hide my eyes, as best ... such beads of mist.

Oh sun! A hidden world. His turning, a half-sentence. My pretence.

The maids ... and Nanny Biggs—"The master, ma'am ..." "

and a world of knowing. I hate her too. No, not hate—

she would comfort—if I cried. Tell me he doesn't deserve—

deserve! See the blue coming, children, in the sky, the patch

on a Dutchman's trousers ... John, don't throw stones

... we'll walk to the pier, by then ... the blue ...

Putch-n-Judy, Mumma?

Punch, you silly—

Don't quarrel. Yes. Punch. He hits his poor Judy. I don't know why we

laugh—but then *we* don’t hit, *we* are not hit, such a common thing ...
we suffer silences, absences, and tighten our lips. Pretend.
Think—‘excuses’—and say, Yes, dear, how unfortunate. Evade.
Know conversations over tea cups. Fluted. Thornless buds.

Will Papa make a sandcastle, with us? A big big castle.
With turrets, my darling. The strongest castle ever seen,
holding brave men, beautiful maidens, at its archers’ windows,
and a moat. (To keep out the Miss Sanders of life
... that come creeping, creeping ...)
Fidelity in its secret sandy ways.
We’ll walk to the point. See the rock pools, crystal clear.
Sand beyond. Deserted sand in a wide pale crescent.
Desert sands. Arabee sands. Loveless.
Hold tight to your spade, my darling, the rocks may slip underfoot—
see the anemones waving,
and barn-ackles, we called them, when I was young ...
mussels, winkles ... such happy lives they lead, more than the birds
of the air, the lilies of the field—(to envy a winkle)—
John! Mind your little sister! Hold her hand—
She didn’t mind me, she never does—
She is little ... *you* know that ... my baby ...
but then are we not all as grains of sand, as many, as myriad—
as unmattering

We will dig here ... lift the heavy lustreless grains, wet and sharp.
Scoop and pat. And if you tip your bucket over gently, here and here,
magnificent castle walls, thick and firm,
pour out the stuff of fun—
Later we’ll find shells, adorn the walls,
seaweed pennants or a gull’s feather.
I will sit down to watch. Watch. Such unfeignèd joy.
Was there a moment—
I remember my father, frowning in his blackest whiskers, called
a southerly storm, Boer clouds ... and my little ones ...
will they ever fear—the south, the west, the east, a swinging compass—
see such clouds building ... blessed be ...
A wind lifting nimbus, lifting sand, rilling, ridging, in the marram—
and the waves curling over, steel-grey, to beat and beat the shore.
I remember ... moments of happiness ...
I thought them cliffs and rocks, bulwarks, not simple castles made
of sand ... the tide ... each foam-line bounding forward, smoothing
evidence. Did those moments exist—like—

lustrous shells, pink and white, in bladder-wrack ... pictures in my mind

Mama! Mama! see our castle! see the tower! so strong!
Oh yes! But—where is little Jane?
We don't know—We were busy—You sat and watched.
Mama, didn't you watch us, didn't you?

THE GREAT WHALE'S EYE

God, forgive me, that I hate life tonight.
The loneliness, the cry of the sea, my fading hopes.
The smell of rotting kelp, the turmoil in my soul.
Are my thoughts evil in my despair, and do You forgive,
knowing my solitude, the lack of someone to uphold my spirits ...
To laugh—oh, if only I could—was it years ago,
that I laughed out loud, talked of everyday things,
argued, found fault, put questions, demanded—
sang music-hall ditties, read news-of-men,
and *laughed* ...

Murk between colours, above and below,
An island moulded and shaped by wind and water,
a tiny teardrop in the vast ocean; long strands,
leather-leaved, bred on brine, a circlet of green, dull green.
No Crusoe here, but a weary man devoid of fecund wreck,
thanking God, I am alive! and looking round; murk between clouds,
water of a weary serge, waves cracking in stained collars;
this islet at the world's thigh. Food of little flavour,
sand of heavy girth, birds of weary wings,
and how far, Lord, from *people* ...

Wind, speak to me, I forget my language, my mind ranges
over my life aboard—the dowry city, Raffles town, tropic-green,
port of pampas beef, hot stinking docks ... I draw maps on my sand
and watch you fritter them away ... I search for names and find them
faint echoes ... converse with me ... you glimpse, here, there, you whirl
the globe, all-seeing, all-knowing. Wind, tell me what you see, tell me if
that house by the tide-flats, boldly over, is mine still—Wind, read my future
...
will I see home again ... oh God, *speak* to me ...

(An Englishman's home is ... and empire,

a different call, not all cose and domesticity,
no kitchen fire and fat armchairs—my castle,
my empire, sand and several acres, a rood, a half perch more ...
this speck in the great whale's eye.)

He writes his message—Help me! guesses latitude, longitude, from a hidden sun—dredges memory, stuffs the bottle, oh yes, one bottle, little else ... my island home I will forsake, gladly ... come, make haste! I am already old, no, I will not think on family, still with hope ... swim bottle, make your way without sun and sextant ... He hurls with failing strength; the bottle lands, circles lazily, cocks its green-deep shoulders, impudent, circles again ... reluctant to leave its God ...

* * *

The mud-flats intrude on four o'clock tea. Salt and earth commingling; ungainly birds with posturing beaks. The crumpets, Edna, and don't forget the honey ...

Fresh wind up the garden; heard in the laurels telling the hours; kettle steaming on the hob, grandmother in black silk and creaming lace, seated, looking out, her eyes grown dim.

One gone; his face distorted in the mirror of a tear; her hands touch the black book in her lap, its pages feather yellow; 'O send thy word of command to rebuke the raging winds, and the roaring sea' ... four o'clock tea.

SEA PIECES

The pointillist sun, quick with his brush, composes no painting but a million happy sparks —and the night, oh the night, with phosphorescent skill shames the Louvre, and keeps nothing

A sinking sloop, turned to mere rafts and spars becomes a headland, rising to a turning light splashed across a seaside town with failing mansions and expanding villas, cab-ranks turned to snaking trains, past inland marsh and ponds, giving life to a thousand lifting herons

and hidden silver fish, woven into rush and salttings,
that ask the way back home, between sea-weeds
and marching dunes, till the creatures of the deep
complain of land between their teeth and gills and through
maps on night billows, toss up one lost man in tangled limbs
and fine wet golden hair, doublet, hose, buckled shoes missing,
a cloak that was brocade, and floats away in exploding light

A SEA CHILD

Our world lay on the banks of a far-off river,
We glimpsed spars and rigging from nurse's arms;
'Will you come into the family firm, son,
Chandlering has been our business this hundred years'
'No Papa, not for me, ask Simon or John,
I'll sail the seas or stay away, not one foot on land
And another, longing; forgive me father,
I was born to go to sea ...'
'Tis a hard life, my lad, take my advice,
And stay on shore. But if you must,
Learn maps and charts, pander to passengers,
Forget the night watches, no bo'sun son for me.'

.....

'I will' he said. Foolish boy. But that house stood on a river's edge

.....

THE NATURE OF SEA FOGS

A fine woman, they said, and a good wife;
Didn't know, such peace endomiciled—'Something in the city,
I believe,' they said. Chaste chill kiss, mention of lamb tonight,
Before his cab horse shaken up; giss—giss—

Early morning mist, elusive in the lightening;
Fair and foolish dreams half-caught. But land fogs hide in hollows,
Wisp about the reeds. Great glaucous gleaming dew-drops
Left behind to net the sun, drip, remorseless.

Little girls, they whispered, selling tea-bloom posies.
He slept some afternoons in the club, comfortably anent the fire;
But a quiet genius, members said. Soft as cumulus and moister,
The questions dripping; sea fogs screen and cover ...

His ambitions palled, some thought. And afternoon fogs are drear;
Heavy unwashed white, with light unspun; unwanted children
Bought and sold, petal pink children that never fell (or were they
Darker hued); whose souls are sanderlings—

Sea fogs unroll, like carpets to a darker room,
Placid, damping, passionless. Death-dimmed. A nature prepotent,
Yet complacent, spreading idly, fingers full; such fogs muffle, mute,
The creak of overladen barque and brig ...

The fog has smell. Night fogs specialise; sniffing
Of cold and loss and smothered sheets; till mid-morning hours,
Drowse reluctant to arise in such wealthy pampered
Chamber-maided rooms, truth-curtained beds.

Between club and perfect home, varied cargoes wisely
Chosen; his shipping line—he napped in shadow, never-mentioned
As combers scour and sweep, weighing decks, rotting cheap-jack canvas—
Sea and fog; too slight the measured space between.

‘Something in the city’, they said; a clever gentleman
Whose soft hands deal and cut; what this one knew, that one hid;
The way sea fogs come silently; one moment, an horizon spare
And clear, then dulled and lost; one cloud dipped too low.

THE GIANT PETREL: FRED

We fed him, that broken castaway, a fine young stinker,
Grey mottled feathers, bold eye, pinkish beak. We
Called him Fred. He gobbled, one eye on us, untrusting.
‘Fred,’ said everyone, ‘come on, Fred, eat, Fred, be quiet,
Fred, stay. Be our mascot in the storms, Fred.’ We grew
A little fond, as fond as petrels permit. And the ship sailed on.

He grew, larger, fatter, but still that wary eye, and his wing
Still trailed uselessly. He hopped the deck’s length, dragging
His own chain, convicted. We tied him to a stanchion, thinking
To spare his wing. Further north, and further. The sun grew larger.
He fluttered, held out his giant span as best he could, drooped,
Pined. Poor bird of the south, we carried him inexorably north.

He ceased to gobble galley scraps. He yearned, he faded.

Sick for home. He grew weak and weary. The rope which
Tied him to our destiny tied him to his grave. He failed to snap,
That ‘snow’-flecked neck lolled, that bold bright eye dulled, that breast
Lent on mine and died. We tied a pebble where the rope had chafed,
A storm-scoured stone to take him down. Poor Fred. Poor stinker Fred.

THE THROAT OF DAWN

Silver-emerald isles
Strung about the throat of dawn,
Gold-hinged, shining
 With a thousand wiles
 For any Crusoe, profligate
 And flush with dining
Turtle eggs, crabs, vie;
Fins, milk-of-nuts, soft tropic fruit
Pungent in their season
 I would list and lie
 Cornucopia’d till I die
 Softly lose my reason

AT THE MARITIME MUSEUM: A QUIET AFTERNOON

Wrecks and rocks and vagrant isles,
Not shown on Admiralty maps,
Charts and buoys and bottles—
 “Bottles? Oh yes, we’ve got stacks,
Purple, green, black, and clear; some get broken
 On the rocks, some come gently up on shore
—half a century later; sad, isn’t it ...
 This one now—coal caught fire in the hold.
Poor coots, caught ’em unawares—threw this out,
 ‘Help!’ it says, and their position, barely legible.
Twenty-three went down to Davey Jones that night.
 You could see it as their memorial, this old bottle” ...
We read the card and then move on ...

There was *Harriet McGregor, Ellen Stewart, Annie McDougal, Rachel Cohen,*

Ida N and Amelia J

Maid of Erin, Belle Creole, Queen of the South, Lady Nelson, Sea Nymph,

Waterwitch, Circe ... Enchantress ...

Amy Robsart and Amy Moir, Mary Smith and Mary Wadley—

But what of the *Mary Moyne*?

“In June the wreck of an unknown vessel of about 200 tons was discovered on the beach at Piper’s River. As it was buried in the sand it was thought to have been there some time.”

----- (1856)

Lights and lamps and narrow galley stoves,
About the mast, St Elmo’s Fire,
Sun and guiding stars and moon—
“Now this,” he says, “this lamp here”—
He taps a candle stub inside its lantern casing,
“They called it the Purser’s Moon. The profit,
You see, was in the corner’s he could cut; he’d
Have ‘em scraping out the grease, back into the
Moulds, new wicks, till the final drop was gone.
Best candles, of course, from spermaceti; cheapest,
Tallow from the boiling-down, smoked, smelled to high heaven ...
Now, these here shutters went over port-holes in a storm,
Called ‘em dead lights” ... we stop and look ...

There was *Harriet McGregor, Ellen Stewart, Annie McDougal, Rachel Cohen,*

Ida N and Amelia J
Maid of Erin, Belle Creole, Queen of the South, Lady Nelson, Sea Nymph,
Waterwitch, Circe ... Enchantress ...
Amy Robsart and Amy Moir, Mary Smith and Mary Wadley—
But what of the *Mary Moyne*?

FLOTSAM

Children going home by way of their beach,
laugh and poke the blob of jellied-brown, squeal—
where is his eye, where is his mind, his mouth,
and lift him with school shoes, a yard of flailing flight
and he falls, flump, and they lose interest ... another
wrecked thing upon the sand—what is it?
It’s like—nothing—we’ve never seen such gleaming
blue-black—blobs—are they feet or fins—and hair,

is it hair or kelp caught round and round,
and clinging shells not teeth, is it skin or decay—or a
cloak of diatom-gold, and quartz grains, now
turned to slime—run—run—
call someone, it's a monster, a creature never seen before
—call—call—

A creature quite unknown to science, *I* believe,
said one ambitious man. I will measure and photograph
—call my colleagues for confirmation
(and a gloat, *I* was first) ...
Reporters come. Children! Pose around it, front page for sure,
mothers say, stay away from that horrid thing—why, it might be
poisonous
—our children put at risk (the boys hide their stained shoes)—
and the curious arrive, singles, groups, lens-loads ... why! isn't that
a cloak tangled round a—a corpse, long dead, with plankton
in its hair—
Truck backing down, back, more, left hand down, a yard more—there
now,
we'll lift it on a litter, pack ice around—it must go to the museum,
no, the hospital, the morgue, the police, the cemetery,
the school of natural science, the aquarium by the pier ...

What was it, why will no one tell us, *we* found it, whatever it is,
merman or dead prince, dugong, fish of unfathomed deeps—
We found it, the boys kick sand—dead, dead, it was dead—
flotsam in a cloak, with limpets
on its legs, and sea worms in its eyes
and a curse upon its name

THE COLD LADY

My ears ache with gale/The moon comes up/Looks down uncaring.
Once, long ago, my language was tempered/My heart warmed, my soul
Quietened/By womankind. Now, cold lady, look down/With chalk
White breasts/And languid arms, carved.
Cold creature. Comfort me with light/It's all you have: faint light.
Faint reflections from my sea. Mine. Though you draw it/Forward.
Back. Your legs unseen but mounded white/Fair lady.
White damask held to—to/Your lips.
I'm here. Seated. Listening to my waves. Mine. Not yours.
Your push, your pull, is puny. You cannot own this world/Only lie

And look. Cold lady. But I? I can hold it in my hand/Feel it on
My eyes. Cold creature in a winding sheet/Your tides shape my land.
But you are nothing/Cold, white, milk. Faintly luminous, tideless.
Smell-less. White. White as the rocks where gulls/And gannets snatch
From/Raise their young. Cold lady. Lifeless. Womb-less.

Ebb. Flow. Life. Death.

FRITILLARY

Sweet bright grasses fringed about a secret cove,
With little rasping voices, softer than the waves that curl,
Softer than the winds that trill a harmony across the dunes,

Telling tales ...

Butterflies brown and white, with lead-light marks upon their wings,
With tiny cooing voices, softer than terns, softer far than dolphin gulls,
Softer than a million sand midges with their tiny beating wings,

Telling tales ...

‘We saw it there’, ‘it was so long ago’, ‘they passed the story on’,
‘Years and countless years’, ‘a hundred generations, *I* dare suggest’,
‘It flew, our ancestors claimed, like a thing possessed’

Telling tales ...

‘How it cried!’ — ‘like a beast bled, *I* heard’, ‘and all the while
A flapping’, ‘a noise, *my* family passed to me, like a clap of thunder’
— ‘In a summer storm’ — They drowded together, in lush seed-head,

Telling tales ...

Victualling: Mr. Philobert Jenkins’ Account

That picher, sir? A fine ship, she were, on the
Nitrate run a while—carried forty men—and Shorty Sloane—
I’ve been with the firm near forty years, seen the fam’ly
Come and go—but it’s the ships you remember—Yes, sir?
Biscuits?—Mr. Mullins will serve you, sir—It were port
Not brandy for Lord ’amer’s yacht—Beg yours—
Shorty Sloane? I remember ‘im particular—Brought bad luck,
The men said, casual-like—Couldn’t see it meself—but never sailed,
No sir—Salt, sir? Nine-and-sixpence that’ll be—
They paid ‘im orf, Shorty, left ‘im in this port an’ that—
Poor Shorty—couldn’t leave the sea alone—
‘e finally got a berth in ’obart Town—‘e loved that ship.
And Shorty weren’t a sentimental man—a perfect clipper—

Pine—’aven’t seen the ’uon pine, sir? Lovely yellow wood.
Made fine ships, that it did ... Loved ’er like a son, they said,
Went overboard one night, left a note—
To give the ship good luck, ’e wrote, poor bloke—
Quaffed the cap’n’s best French brandy, ’fore ’e done the deed,
No rum for Shorty Sloane when ’e set out for ’eaven, like—
And you know what, sir? Didn’t do no good ... that fine clipper,
Strong as they make ’em, plied the sea with perfect pitch, regal like,
Should’ve seen ’er, sir—and ran before the wind, straight
Into an open shore—some said it were the skipper at that
Fine French brandy—but that weren’t no comfort to poor Shorty—
... Now your rope, sir, ’awser-laid ... ’emp, sir, sisal or coir?

‘The way it fell, like a stricken beast’; ‘great gushing gouts, they said’,
‘Not a story for the young’ — ‘and cries’, ‘More a bellow, in *my* version’
‘A wounded roar, *I* heard, like a dragon stabbed’ — ‘Then the stalks broke’
 Telling tales ...
‘It had a name, they saw, in gilt upon its head’; — ‘S.S. Fri—l—’ — ‘It wore
 Away in time, a shadow of a name’; the fritillaries gather round wormholes
In the weathered wood; a faint fragrance still there about the worn-out
ribs,
 Telling tales ...

AS IT WERE—A LIGHTHOUSE

Turn, flash, reflect and flash again; a light above—
My eyes are salt sore, filmed. I see, I *think* I see—
My mouth cracks and whispers, flares red at the corners,
My skin, like tunny-scales, reflects the agony of solitude—
With manic force, the great iron hooves
Strike at the beams and struts of lonely stable walls
Rear and curl and fight in life-denying fury
Then break free—

A thousand nights with lowering light
By my elbow; and dark imps plucking at my
Other side; in solitude they expand and grow;
Escape a life’s conditioning; hard round the highway curves
Lean in to their great creaking collars; monstrous beasts
Midnight black; with threaded hames a-jangle,
Uneasy shafts ride up on rock-hollow sides
Eyes blinded—

A leaping carriage meanly clothed in draper's black
Its souls contained within, unsighted, sway and slide,
The faint whistling curlew cry of the devil's legion
In crevices of life; the beacon captures one pallid face
As the curtains shift and part, their tassels dragging wearily—
And still the great hooves thunder on;
The lash and crack of well-thonged whip, keening
High and fierce—

A cloak and mantle flung about; "a wild
Night," the Keeper says, by faint firelight, "and cold";
I have a fire, the Tempter says, great glowing boilers down below;
A quick leap—a soft-cushioned leap; do not stop to query—
It will come, I remonstrate, the quarter's ship; bringing oil,
Hard rations for the souls who warn the lost
Of great-maned beasts hereabouts—
Letters stamped ...

... Books in black bindings, yet untouched, and
New sou'westers, still with the smell of people caught within
Their folds; and thick grey jerseys knit by warm and loving hands;
Light dextrous hands ... The foam from tugging leaden bit
And striving flanks, the only glimmer in the funeral dark;
And the horses—oh, the horses, stamp and toss and steam;
Three months, their stance declaims, is but a minute
In a dream—

THE ISLAND OF JOHNNY ROOK

By day a sense of island, potent as sea sense, fills my soul—
I am that I am, and God is here, as anywhere, as fierce in stone bow
Hurling southern snow (so unlike the snow of home); where the
Sun shines in the north and the blizzard whirls across its face; a strange
And beautiful air where storm and beam tussle out beyond the bar—
He stood and pondered, found it good—and left it to the elements;
My little soul creeps to and fro, as soft and musty as wild rock cress ...
Its questing eyes ... and I and mine and land and is ... all mine
But when I wake in the early hours (the stars my clock)
My legs unlimbered by the cold, and fraught with misery;
A future that is bleak and black takes hold; my body choked on
Scurvy grass, sea cabbage, and purloined eggs—but it's not hunger
That drives the melancholy through my veins; no, it is the hour,
A hopeless hour; once so neat and nice, if not a gentleman, near enough,

And now I would shriek and cry, abandoned here, waiting for the birds.

The child who did as he was told (almost always)—were there nursery Threats? I forget—what became of him; small boys caught eels in the mud, Eels too large for gullets, where garden merged with banks and flats, Wound into estuaries—and the boy, that I, who lived where memory And delusion meet—that boy wandered in the garden, despising eels And urchins, in and out between the shrubbery and unscythed grass (Thought to absorb the stench so plump and rich from ebbing tides), filled To sickness with the names of foreign places, meals intangible, yet so Filling—and the urchins took the eels round to the kitchen door, “eels, Ma’am? fresh ’n’ fat”. I see them still, black and threading, twisting In one last puny hope; enter my sadness (for the eels or for that fading life?), Impotent at the last; where string and hook cried life—and fathomed death, That boy—San Francisco, Siam, Malabar; Recife, Tenerife, Newfoundland— That boy fattened, without eels ... this black mind feeds on futile echoes, These hands twist and fall to rub away the creeping cold, leave the mind At last abandoned to those nameless fears and awful pities; and no prayer, No fancy has the power ... I must lie unnerved and waiting; the body In the cold cold casket, tussock-woven, waiting on my mourners who come With harsh grief, slashing beaks—slurp, they merely say—like tides entwined With feasting—I draw my legs in tight, dark in shadow, curved as eels, Fearing hooks exploring—and hide my eyes—from Johnny Rooks, The phantomed urchins of my night.

THE SEA EAGLE’S FEATHER

And when I die, ragged and blowsy by the tide,
The wind will blow and sough (in eternal sorrow)
Maat, goddess with unseen scales, may she chide
A nesting eagle, one feather let me borrow
For this poor soul ... unprepared ...

No mourners here to build a tomb, set a stone,
The sand will sigh and fly (in eternal motion)
My soul, set free, at first listless, sullen, lone,
Weigh me, this shrivelled thing, its only notion
To find home ... remembered haven ...

Hymn of the gale, now sweet as temple-flutes, sings,
The sea will sate and break (in eternal sibilance)
And I will feel my lightness, grow great wings,

Lift me to that eyrie, nestle in soft down, by chance
I may hatch in other dreams ...

GIFT OF THE SHORE

Jane, with childish steps, ran from servant-hood,
of scooping sand and fetching sea in red beach buckets—
moulding *their* castle, *their* grand plans; but here were pebbles
speckled as plovers' eggs, here was sand and seaweed piled up high,
with tiny fat tan bladders she tried to pop, balloons beneath her feet.
She hummed Little Jack Horner, Sat in a Corner; she saw a roly-poly
boy with a fine sweet plum, *not* his brother, *not* his sister—let them build
their castles! The pale sun, still veiled, glossed the sand, where tiny
streams braided round storm-heaped stones, went this way and that,
shining spit-and-polish, giving the scene an unbearable sheen; she
lowered her eyes, took up a stick, drew stick birds with perfect curves ...
and did not see she had company, half-hidden in the dunes ... this world
briefly hers where the windrowed weed, like meadow hay piled in fields
they'd glimpsed from the train; where daisies and dandelions, loosestrife
and nesting quail, fell alike to the fine firm stamp of great feathered feet
... absorbed in sand, sleek brown sand, and the lines she drew ... "I see you
are an artist too" ... Old and faintly querulous, this disembodied voice.
Jane sprang up, her stick like her father's Malacca cane, fierce and fending off
(questions, never asked, never answered; he felt them) ...

Where was everyone, how could she have walked so far, never thinking—
one little Persephone-step after another ... walked into an old man's world ...
an old man with dusty dimmish hair, fluttering white about his jaw,
flesh, spiritless ... "I'm *not* an artist!" Not *not* an artist. "I'm not!"
(Artists, she knew, had beards.) "Don't be afraid, child, I'm ... "
What? What am I? If 'artist' cannot reassure one waylaid child. Or lost?
"I make pictures. I love the shore, the sand, the birds, the way the sea rolls,
such bright billows (I can't quite catch their hue), like ... like the wind in
harvest fields—did you ever see the grass bending low—Aeolus,
god of the wind, passing—Don't be afraid—"
"There's only one God. His name is God." Jane stood strong in catechism;
Papa never noticed fears or fantasies, Papa never noticed ...
"But he has many parts, your God, hot and cold, strong and tender, meek,
... good and bad," but he said that to himself. "He is the God of sparkling
streams, uncurled ferns, breezy days and perfect calm—the God of mud

and slime and crocodiles—”

She had thought to run away, her small feet across the dunes, calling Mumma! Mumma!—and now she stayed, undecided.

What would this strange old man with bird’s nest hair say next?

“Let me show you,” he said, “not my painting. I put that aside for the joy of sketching you . . . ” He handed her a book. She shifted her stick from hand to hand, not quite trusting adult assertions. But one peep.

A mermaid on a rock, a mermaid with her face, her hair not in short curls tied up in pink tussore bows; a mermaid whose tresses tumbled to her waist, a mermaid who wore about her neck a band of perfect pearls, shining, and little whelks, strung on plaited kelp; her tail curled round a rock and starfish with devoted doggy eyes genuflecting—

“I’m not a mermaid, I can’t swim”—“But would you not like to frolic in the waves? Ride on a dolphin’s back? Dive down to the deepest ocean where strange creatures have lamps for eyes—”

“I would get water up my nose.”

“Practical child! So you would—unless—”

Still unbearably small, but braver now: “Show me what you painted, please.”

He turned his easel, modestly. “A ship.” “But there’s no ship out there, none at all!” “I fear not, not today.” Not this ship of souls.

What a funny old man, thinking there could be a sailing ship at the seaside—all mixed in with bathing-machines and the naughty boys she’d been warned to steal beach balls, Putch-n-Judy, donkey rides—

“Then tell me—what do *you* see out there?” She thought there’d be birds.

Gulls, she knew, everyone knew, her brother said so, all-knowing.

This minute John was being a powerful lord; satrap, liege and lion.

John knew these things.

He drew seagulls above the waves just before they cast themselves, imploring, upon the beach—then withdrew, humbled briefly. “Now you see them.” She looked about. (Where had all the seagulls gone?) “No. Not just now.” “We can imagine them,” he said; there was a little eye that lived in people’s minds . . . “And it sees what we want to see . . . and, sometimes,” he went on, suddenly faint and cold, “it sees fearful things that are not there” (and I have no shutters for its fearsome glare) then he smiled, a sweet sad smile, that said such an eye was his and his alone. With it, you might see your gulls, you might make sanderlings run to and fro, guillemots, gannets, barn-acle geese . . . and with the ear that’s also in your mind, you could make the birds sing, sing and whistle (pee-ep pee-ep) auk-auk-auk—“Then—can it see, a little rowing boat—with my Papa in it?” “If you like.” She tried to describe the man to sit in it, a bowler hat, whiskers.

But he visited her, this absent father; this great black loss
Of a father at the oars, gone beyond the shores; too far to shout

She might be the mermaid there, the splash and frolic that sets the sea a-foam;
for one moment, swam far out ... "I think I'll go home now."

He insisted, this old man with paints and easel, in walking with her
(perhaps he craved a moment more with innocence); this failure,
this man seasoned to hard-turned heads, whispers (not quite nice)
whose head heard voices flung about like cabins in a storm; like wings,
beating wings ... A mother hurrying to meet them, her guilt and shame
tossed out—"Where have you been? Naughty girl! To go like that!"
(I aged ten years in a moment, my baby, with a tramp! Dirty creature—
did he touch her!) Jane walked unharmed (my baby! my baby!)
Alexandra came too, curious, finished; her lovely words strung about
a make-believe castle, like bright bunting in their street—
Mafeking is relieved! She'd decorated one thousand rooms; 'damask',
she knew, 'brocade', 'watered silk', 'linen-fold' and 'architrave' ...
'Kashmir shawl' and 'antimacassar', all from her store of precious words;
words unsaid in that house called home, where the air was chill with absence
and recriminations hid behind the doors; her words, her lovely words, saved her
till Jane should be old enough for tea-parties with her precious rosebud set
... Next year, Nanny said, before she was told to pack and go

They looked him up and down; neglect of body, if not soul, smells rank,
not seeing the hidden pain that sent him out to paint, every day,
ships that were not there; fine gallant vessels, afloat on sunny seas,
gilt and ebony painted neatly on carved prows; prows of sweet serenity
and everlasting hair; seamed and cracked (if you would look minutely),
a body soft and sinuous as thought—a ship with mahogany rails—a ship
with cargoes full and redolent ... Of course there was a market for
'Pretty Bathers on a Beach'. Mothers like this one, not rich,
but sharp with secret fears, turned inward,
who would put their children in nice poses and draw them to notice—
(See, Miss Sanders, she might say, see his children—would you hurt them—
would you—would you—) "Was he dear?" they would ask, those erstwhile
friends, those fleeting fluted aunts. She stood and watched Jane admire
the castle, watched this helpless man who said "I am an artist" (were there not
many arts, some black) ... just for a second there, she thought she caught
a memory ... was it the way he turned his head (his profile), looked out to sea,
absently, the everlasting sea, the sea they'd come especially, with trunks, boxes,
buckets, baskets, best hats, to see—When I was young, Jane's age, a little more,
Papa, Mama, firm as rocks, beacons, bulwarks ... there was a man who spoke,
who walked so jauntily, going to (I never knew)—and they said, *someone* said,

(the words that float past children's heads) "Imagine!" and "he saw the world" but "these things happen" ... and "wrecked" ... not quite a sorrow, a hush, an empty street ... "Tell me," she said suddenly, "tell us—did you sail—"

—the end—

Notes:

Stinker is a common name for the Southern Giant Petrel (*Macronectes Giganteus*) and Johnny Rook is a common name for the Striated Caracara (*Phalcoboenus australis*). The Magellanic Oystercatcher (*Haematopus leucopodus*) is sometimes called a 'black and white curlew'.

Quote on p. 25 is from *Wrecks in Tasmanian Waters* by Harry O'May.

BLUEBEARD'S WIVES

HIS STORY

The niches where they placed flambeaux,
darkened now and sooty—I had ideas for
modern lighting—I had ideas for—
caught me somewhere between
my heart and my purse—floors too;
the stones I thought to cover with glorious
Eastern carpets, jewels underfoot—
and chafing dishes and modern storage bins and mouse-traps
and rotisseries and piped water and conduits for steam—

My wives suggested—

little changes and I agreed, bowing over one small soft
dainty hand

after another. My sweet, I will see to it as soon
as convenient, anything to keep the chill
from your lovely self, your delicate self,
anything to make your sojourn in this gloomy place

a happy one.

I am certain that, in the end, they believed me.

Perhaps they understood me better than I knew myself;
that I needed to possess
—the way it overmasters me—

first I felt the overwhelming
need to say “this place is mine”—it came
upon me the dusk I saw its ancient corbelled towers
against a fading sun, castle and rock melded into one
and I felt that *frisson*. Its ancient power still undiluted
by time and change; I stopped and my baggage train
halted raggedly. Yes Master? I will have it—

Perhaps I said it aloud. Perhaps
they understood that gleam which overtook my eyes—
They may have mistaken it

for the last reflected light
green and grey and amber, darkening
dagger-sharp to ruby-red.

Not so hard to convince its
mouldering monks their time had passed,
that they might serve God better elsewhere,
that their time spent carrying
water was neither study nor prayer
nor praise
(their grumbling was deeply etched in old Greek faces—
I knew:
dangle the tempting trifle, clink, clink, its sounds alone,
crack the ox-hide whip, I played with the thing as if it were
second nature: take careful note of cracks in stone
and crumbling cisterns; exaggerate with studied gestures,
and the way I drew their attention, whilst talking of
other things ...)

Hah! If that is the contemplative life within the strictures
of unselfish service, simply-lived—

They fell over themselves.
Their eyes gleamed.
Pumps and wells and new-fangled ovens,
cell to chapel in mere minutes—they pretended
they did it for me, fawned obsequiously;
I felt my height,
fingered my beard with a lazy finger
as though, even now, I might
change my mind and look ...
elsewhere.

My women. I learned that three parts
apprehension, the sense of
expectation, a tinge of fear
well-mixed and leavened with a touch
of hope, a glimpse of greed (you, my sweetest honey-hive
should be decked in gulf-found pearls, lapis lazuli)
and a step that suggests ... my title mattered then ...

If I gained a castle of Levantine
labyrinthine complexities, for the so-said song,
I found they'd also left me much of their library.
I was surprised!
When they discovered they could sell
the smallest scraps of vellum
and papyrus fragments to eager
Protestant clergymen, rubicund and innocent
as they made their demanding way to tour
The Holy Land ...

(the work of packing, carting, the *work* ...)
“too late, my dear fellow,” I have the idiom
rather well, I think,
“my purchase
“lock, stock and barrel”.
Besides I think myself something of a scholar ... when the
blood slows down and leaves me space to follow
more cerebral pursuits ...

Something of a scholar.

At first I played the part,
my glass screwed into one deep eye-socket
as I leaned over fading sheets;
I hired my own tame-tutor (a redundant bear-leader; that type)
to refresh my knowledge
of oriental languages;
I sought out secret dyes to refurbish
the most hopeless palimpsests,
I strewed herbs and crystals
from an alchemist's 'never-fail' receipts
to repel insects and absorb
the damp that collects and meanders
down these walls in winter.

I excused my journeys—when hell unleashed itself at intervals
in half-forgotten lower parts

and tore the cerebral *gentilhomme* from his moorings.

The way the blood sank and gushed and whirled, a maelstrom
that drove me out of quiet candle-lit rooms
where scrolls and tablets lined the walls (my scriptorium)
and my timid tutor looked at me
and backed a step, "Sir . . ."
and found he could not go on.

I will be away some time, I said;

(Eustatius Livermore

but I never gave him his ridiculous name that sat
uneasily on a man who fell between the stools
of east and west but appeared to own no mother's tongue) . . .

I felt my power over him
at times; the way he sat and stared; I've seen
rabbits on Provençal lanes stare like that
when the lights of my hired chaise . . .
Mr. Rabbit, I've often thought to say and thought it
not worth my while;
he's accounted a fine man in ancient Greek
and Aramaic (I have a certain respect for—)

I collect. He interprets. I gloat.

He basks.

A kind of reflected glory.

(And here he has space and privacy; I do not intrude.)

His nose turns a trifle crooked, each time I take a wife

—to see his take-to-task look
(he would sulk *if* he dared) the observer would think
 I marry merely to spite the man.

My buying expeditions (I am well-known now to
 Eastern dealers; a hard man to cheat)

provide an ideal means to meet—ladies.

The bride price
hardly concerns me—the need to
possess can overwhelm all else.

The flesh of another, furtive mystery
linked to an unfilled mind and heart,
little habits, foibling fluttered voices
 (I do not encourage conversation)

I hardly notice—

But I am well aware

I must bargain for the sake of my position.

“I am taking your daughter off your hands,
an unwanted thing, a taker of food, a wearer of clothes,
a user of shelter, an asker of questions,
a purveyor of gossip—

—dismissive—I am the Lord of Favours Granted—

and they know it—

 They believe I am a little touched
by the Eastern sun ... never asking ... never knowing ...

Gad! the way it burns me up,
the waiting ... foolish bearded older men,
trying to convince me how they love, they *love*,
 and need their daughters
—do they think I cannot read their avaricious eyes—

This night is quiet. My beaded slippers
go silently along crusader halls,
the ancient tattered standards, still hang as rags
above me, too high for lazy friars ...
but their order, they stressed to me, was of
a contemplative nature ...
and someone said (a rumour merely in the bazaar)
that they walked always, head down,
because they half-believed
they walked on buried treasure; believed

in looted gold and jewel-encrusted temple vessels,
in a Frankish rabble burying—hoping yet to cart away
filigree Saracen fetishes, be-gemmed Hebrew arks.
They pretended it was the modest cast-down mien
that bespoke the holy man
whose life is wholly given up to god;
always minding for—the loose stone,
the false step, the hollow place in man-thick-walls,
cubits-thick-unmapped;
the message left there still among and between, if not
under rude crude Norman scratchings ...

It's gripped me at times; as if their certainty
still steeps this ancient place,
as if their whispered words
echo back. Treasure.
Treassshhhuuurre ...

Like blood at boil in my veins.

Small hunched men with shrivelled parts
frightened of the fairer sex.
Their archimandrite black-robed and bent dared
suggest I should maintain the purity
of this edifice;
“no woman has stepped inside
these doors in five hundred years”.
Not even mother, daughter, wife,
tire-woman.
“Secret lovers,” I curled my lips,
raised my gleaming waxed moustache
beneath an aristo nose (my father had it too;
like a scimitar; a family thing
and large dark dancing hands with curving pearly nails).
He thought to express his shock
then decided that my words were jest.
Hah! I knew he was the pettifogging sort of fraud
when I passed a miniature around
saying, “my dear mother, rest her soul”; saw them then
lean forward, hesitate to hand it on.

The worst kind of fraud,
the men who convince themselves (and others)

they are not like other men.
I took the tiny portrait back.

My first wife.
I was still a boy.

My father thought it might direct a certain ... shall we say ...
predisposition?
He found the girl for me.

At that age I would have preferred
the roughest dirty harlot I could find,
with stained petticoats, other men's leavings
stippling pleats and gathers,
and sweat cracked and dry between her breasts.
It didn't matter then if
the moment of possession
came a little *hard* with her.

I found I was deaf and blind to their outer selves.

As heir and son and man
first initiated into
his esoteric circles
I felt unable to say no;
besides—
she was a golden thing
sweet and pale and light.

I have her here, somewhere, still,
dependent on her golden chain,
the clasp closed up tight,
the tiny jewels a little stained with time,
her sweet face aureoled
with childish ringlets,
her lips curving in a maiden's pout
when she ... the way she looks out
with eyes so innocent of life and death.

My father looked at me,
I remember. Looked
and turned away.
A little family foible,

never said aloud; but I thought I caught an echo
of his thoughts, as he turned, ring out.

I had been about to say some words which might
be construed as regret.

She was so young ...

The lamps are lit each evening at the table as the sun goes down;
I know the endless corridors by touch and smell and their resonance
underfoot; the food comes up from the caverns down below
on special heated trays ...

(I was going to modernise,
I promised—my third wife
I think it was, Ahanila—)

But her nagging stopped ... a fishwife of a woman
though I remember the way her big body ballooned over me
as she lowered herself, the moment of impalement,
the way her mass of creamish flesh would quiver
and draw back; the way the candles would flicker
across the large round crystal balls of flesh—
but it was I who read her future in that gazing glass.

I should not think back. It is that which wakes the sleeping beasts.

Carafara, Zenodina, Ahanila, Barbalette, Fifarentini ... and then Fatima;
I swore she should be the last
I deliberately chose a woman with a brisk plainness about her,
a woman who thought her mind was of more use than
her soft woman's self; she looked bored when I flattered
and spoke to her in the myrrh of courtly compliments

“I’ve heard,” she broke in upon one honeyed phrase, “you have
a remarkable library” ... I merely inclined my head. I wasn’t
in the mood to speak of books; but this woman who surely
never thought to attract a man with her endless prattle about
‘the diggings’, ‘what my father found’, ‘this last set of
inscriptions is most unusual, I’ve been copying them before
we send them on to the

Ashmolean ...

Can you read ancient Akkadian?”

How do you turn
such a creature to the things of love and desire?
I let my hand wander across her tightly-banded breasts;
these women who can't forget propriety even in the desert,
even in the east where bloomers and corsets find no place
in a woman's world ... just the fall of cloth
about their legs before they entwine with mine ...

And then she must be telling me, at length, of the widows who
discovered their breakfast butterpat had come sat upon
a priceless palimpsest ...

I wonder that the monks of St Catherine's let them in ...
but then I know
the venality of monks
their greed
how easily they will sell their souls
for a mess of pottage

whereas I—I—I sold my soul long ago
and now I'm not quite sure what the bargain was.

Not immortality.
Not everlasting joy.
The promise of possession.
That I, in the moment of conjunction,
might absorb the soul of another—
take forward a dozen souls
into the world beyond this world,
be judged ...
as the Hydra-headed One lived
so will I die and then live on ...

I thought to teach this latest one the sweets of love
And for a moment there her gaze softened and her knees fell,
As though naught mattered any more but this moment of submission;

I thought, fool that I was for flesh, that this flesh would leave
Me cold; these ankles and calloused hands and firmly braided
Hair which she hesitated to take down, excusing herself;

I thought I would find the way when I laid my lips on hers,
Both pairs, one sweet with aniseed and the other with desire,

And her lids closed slowly over large blue eyes, a moment's cease;

I thought a little moan escaped her often busy lips (those endless Questions—as if I might care, upon my couch, how the Romans Built their porticos and colonnades; the only design I wish to know

Is that which makes a woman deep and hot and sculpted in a way I can use for the pleasures that promise much and within a fleeting Spark leave me with my desire tossed barren; the desire to absorb;

This desire that burns me inside out; to possess the essence of Another, the deep-down need that would make them melt, become As one; all this and more—they become separate too soon and open

Foolish mouths and prattle on of sons and heirs toddling on tiny feet Within my castle walls; and look up to me as if to say, praise me, That I am a young and fertile woman in which your seed will grow—

Do they not know, that a man whose pact with the Dark One was Signed and sealed before his birth asks nothing of posterity? Do they Never guess when my eyes gleam ruby-red and they watch me rear

In something that's more than lust, sometimes pain, sometimes More a bellow that would do proud that creature kept to devour Lissome maids and boys for tribute still unpaid; knowing there can

Never be a payment that will finally suffice; that what was given Up is comparable to the promise given; a bargain sealed in haste and Heat; a bargain in which I must become the one to lose, and losing

Take my loving wives with me. She has thick ankles, this Fatima, I forget that her real name is Eglantine; she thought to absorb the east But her wrists would hold a hockey stick, lace heavy shoes, tie a

Mannish tie above a navy skirt and thick flannel bloomers, more Than they ever learned the way a woman should caress a man and Admire what her soft touch can achieve; and wait in patience for

The moment when his pleasure peaks, admire then each harking Thrust that might reach both soul and womb; I feel a partial pity For one who knows so little of the arts of love—what was her Mother thinking of—but even she cannot drag this lust down Amongst the supposed joys of husband-let-alone-a-fatherhood.

She thought to demand she might accompany me
when next I set out, well-tended, on my latest
excursion to purchase for my library shelves; I laughed,
“My dear! No man takes a wife when he goes
to bargain over ancient crumbs of Hittite script!”
then I thought to bring down this woman who dared
to think she knew as much as me when it came to
books and scrolls … “If you will mind my things,
my love, my sweet, my amaranth, then I will entrust
you with my keys … ” I gave them up, great iron
things that weighed down her wrist; “all are yours,”
I said, “while I am gone, but this one is not for
you to use.” “It looks much smaller than the others,”
she said, fingering it with big blunt hands,
“Is it just a cupboard then?” “A cupboard, yes, the one
beneath the tower stairs, before you reach the balcony,
it is my private place; I do not want it touched … ”
I know women, just as I know monks and merchants;
they think they veil the thoughts that fill their eyes,
and by their veiling I look beneath and read their hearts.

It was dark when I set out, my men saddling up the beasts in time,
But this wife with questions—one last request—to bring her back,

Not myself, but transcription work to keep her mind refreshed;
I laughed, “My sweet, for you—but don’t forget your promise.”

I am a man who keeps other mortals to their words; but I am not
Constrained by promises; I live in the crease of one who wields
More power; my promise I gave, my promise I broke under stress
… But that is something needs no chapter, verse, or final signature.

“Come, Eustatius, it is time we were on our way.” He carped about
The wind that filled his cloak; why should he not stay close-wrapped
Around a cedar fire; did I not know his bones grow old. But I had left
My wife alone; alone in those shadowed castle rooms where ancients

Spitted rats and dogs for food and laughed with bellicose mirth of
Men they’d spitted with equal ease; I sometimes think I hear their
Voices round the towers on certain nights, when they caroused in
The name of saintly men and virtue was the last thing on their minds;

My wife alone, alone, except for my strong yard-men who have been
Given firm instructions; no one to come in, no one to venture out; and
I watched them sharpen hard blades over the turning stone; men, I've
Found, here, there, devoid in heart and soul and simple mind, of pity.

AND HERs

I have lived here now, Mother, Father, sister Anne,
Brothers William, Henry and Arthur, for years, as we map
These ancient Roman ruins; these towns and villages,
Strewed across the limestone slopes, mapped from one
To the next; it's been my life, I sometimes feel that I am
As much an inhabitant of these hamlets in their gleaming
Careless fall; I have lived them, breathed them, made up the
Careful drawings which show their connections, one to another;
I've sketched and measured, I've learned to use a photographic
Plate; I've taken out my watercolours and washed in a Syrian sky
Above and drawn the ancient olive groves; my father gave us each
Our role, our duty, our place in something that's proved larger
Than our sense of family ... and even when we're not working,
It's raining perhaps, or the *khamsin* blows hard and sharp, our talk
Is of the people who lived here a thousand years ago; though they
Took away with them their identities, only left their broken pots
And fallen walls, sometimes we feel we know them for the people,
The families that they were ...

At times I think I would like a family of my own;
But I am no beauty, wholesome my mother likes to say,
Not pretty like my sister Anne, but my mind, there's nothing wrong
With my mind, nor with my heart, which beats firm and warm,
And finds itself aching in the poverty that comes up and stares
Sometimes; little children, I sometimes wish I could take them in
And make them mine; find ways to clean and dress and feed
Them all ... but my father only laughs ... 'they are they and we
Are mere sojourners in their land ... and one day you will meet
A nice young man'. I don't know how, when the men he has in
Mind are so few and far between. I meet elderly clergymen

At times, but they are not what he wants for me; perhaps a young one
Will come soon; it was through one of these fossils, a Reverend
Livermore, that we heard of his master, one Comte de Barbe-Bleue.
He sang his praises, clean of limb and sharp of mind,
An aristocrat among the peasants; a man of discernment
And taste, deeply attractive to the female heart;
I saw my father's gaze rest on my sister Anne,
Then move on to me; I understand his thoughts:
Perhaps a husband *does* lie close to hand.

But my father takes no gossip and no rumour as proven true;
He asks, a question here, a question there, and he was told by more
Than one this strange and handsome man was curiously attractive
To womenfolk but not a scholar, no one thought him a true scholar,
More a dilettante. My father said "I know the sort" but I could see
He had not lost all hope; a man blessed with a handsome
Countenance and more money than is common
May not fully recognise that the fruits of scholarship
Are not won easily; he said no more to us.
But sister Anne and I, at night when we sleep
On hillsides bright with stars, we speculate:
Might one of us appeal to the eccentric count?
I knew if there was to be one it would be my sister;
Just briefly I wondered how it would feel in an eastern marriage;
To be one of four wives or more; Anne and I, we have always been close,
Ever since my father decided he was born to be another Layard,
That the east would reveal its ancient secrets to him if he were
To ask it long and hard enough ... we have shared our hopes
And dreams; but she sets her sights higher. I, or so I think,
Would be happy with a house and hearth and home; children,
Dogs and cats and hens, horses, a place where I belong. Here, we
Receive some respect as we set our empty towns into their niche in history;
Seeing a kind of country gentry living life, with certain advantages,
Against the olive groves; it influences me, I think.
I'd like to live like this.

My father in his quest thought to invite this man to visit us;
But we had no scripts to offer, no Roman codex, not a scroll; no slabs
Still clear with wedge-shaped cuneiform that would give up its
Secrets to his knowledge; no ancient books but those written
Into earth and rocks. He thought to meet him casually on his
Buying expeditions. I do not know why this one man seemed
To catch and keep his fascination. The lonely man. His castle.

And somewhere then he heard a rumour that the Comte was not
A man of long fidelity ... merely a rumour, he laughed it off,
It seems that the Comte marries regularly and then his wives die.
Castles are dank and draughty old places, my mother said, always
Willing to see the best in everyone. Perhaps he is the kind of man
Who marries frail beauties who cannot stand the rigours
Of the climate; perhaps, my brothers laughed, he is harder to please
Than most, and sends the failures home. Perhaps they grow bored
There, my sister said, as he sits in his room surrounded by old books,
And long for something more from life ... a handsome face
Across the breakfast table is not enough ... my mother thought
This an indelicate thought ... hadn't she always stayed,
No matter what hardships might come—though, to tell the truth,
She often looks a little pale and frail and sometimes I hear
Her coughing in the night ...

We heard it said, this was months later, and my mother had finally
Decided she should go home, seek out the best in doctors,
It was no more than gossip, my father thought, an eastern bazaar
Can be a place of far-fetched stories, but it gave us a kind of tingle
Up our well-worked spines. The wives, he said, do not last long.
What did this mean? Not sickness, not frailty, not boredom.
Did this man, so attractive to the gentle-ladies of both east and west,
Soon tire of them and—but our minds could not conjecture
Such infamy in one who seemed to have all a man could want;
It might be asked, why he came and lived his life here, so far
From home, but then some busybody people have been known
To ask that of us—and we dismiss the innuendo, with scorn.

But my father is not a man to let things go; he would ask, he said,
When he returned with my mother home; someone would reminisce,
Someone would know the scion of an ancient family ... he would
Merely ask ... a near-neighbour of ours, he might say, in a place
Where neighbours can be welcome. We saw them off, mother,
Tired and sick, father, brisk and hopeful of a cure. And about our
Camp that night was a curious insouciance;
The cat's away, the mice ...
Of course we had endless duties set upon us that my father
Would expect to see done. But hardly had he gone, than we heard
The Comte and his clergyman were passing not far from our
Current site. My brothers laughed and said, let's see, let's see if he
Is as sinister as repute makes out! But we have only just begun here
At Taqleh, my sister reminded us. We laughed; just a glimpse, I said,

And they agreed with me. We all took mules and rode down
The hills, all agog to see this man who constantly takes wives
And then they disappear. We were lively young things, not touched
By tragedy; careless of our repute, not believing that a monster
Lived in our midst. He and his train, all showing that the reports
Of wealth were not exaggerated, were put up at an inn.
Their beasts taking all the yards and stables.
We had to find a poorer place ourselves
But it seemed to suggest a man who travelled richly
Might do other things in ways beyond the usual. Even marriage.
We made ourselves conspicuous; we walked laughing in the streets,
We visited wherever we thought he might be seen and heard.

It wasn't long before we met him riding; a giant of a man beside
The local peasants and the passing bedawi; a man of substance,
Authority, a man whose beard gleamed blue-black in the midday
Sun; a man who dressed with confidence and walked as though
He owned the world. My heart was moved. So this was him!
The man about whom I'd heard so much.
It was not love but fascination
Gripped my mind that day. He smiled at me—at me!—
And my first inclination was to smile back but then I remembered
This is the man with whom no woman is safe and I merely inclined
My head and we moved on, my sister Anne and I.

But he made a move to find out who we were, where and why
We came; my brothers thought this an amusing thing,
These same brothers of mine who bestowed the name on me that
Now has stuck; Fatima. Fat egg. These brothers who call all kinds
Of pranks 'a lark!' And merely laugh and tease the workmen
And behave like young men everywhere.
(Eglantine for my father's mother; Anne for dear mama's mother;
I sometimes wish they had thought to name me after someone else.)
You can have our sister, they said, to this large gentleman,
As though they were familiar with his tastes; but not our pretty one.
He hated them for talking of me like that. But he said, all women
Have their attraction; I am a connoisseur and know of what I speak;
A woman, plain of face, may make a man weak
With the beauty of her feet; a woman with an unfortunate nose
May have eyes as pools of midnight pleasure; a woman with
Heavy hands may have the hair from which I plait a night-time bridle;
There are porcelain woman and satinwood women, there are chaliced
Women and gold-seamed women ... I have never found one who did

Not do the things that women should do for men.

My brothers did not know how to answer this; these callow youths
Knew nothing then of the worlds this man plumbed; they merely
Laughed and looked like boys. But the Comte said, "Your sister,
She is not bespoken?" And they laughed some more. "Fatima?
Of course not." It was their unkindness, I now feel sure, drove
Both of us into arms where we had no business to be. The Comte,
I thought then, felt sorry for me with such lively unsparing men
In my family ... and for me, it was a kind of foolishness and vanity;
He had asked for me, not my sister Anne, not the kohl-eyed beauties
He might find if he searched nearby and hard enough.
But I had a nobler thought.

If this man were to prove a monster from the deep, if he preyed
On young girls who did not have the life and learning my family
Had ensured ... might I not be the one who would ...

But I did not know what I might do.

Everything took on a life and sense of urgency of its own
After we had met. Sometimes, I did not understand. I would
Find myself thinking, why the haste, who knows when mother
And father will return ... I cannot think of anything before then
But the Comte came to woo, to court, to flatter ... is this me,
I would often find myself thinking and it turned my head (a little);
The thought that he wanted me. This wealthy, sophisticated,
Cosmopolitan man. And the reverend would marry us, there were
No problems with that. Or so everyone around me said.
Only my sister Anne was a little hesitant. As for me,
God forgive, I put it down to jealousy.
She would say, it's his beard, the way it seems to gleam,
Like a midnight sea, like the sky just before sunset, like fading
Tyrian purple ... like ... then she would shake her head;
It isn't natural, she would say, and I distrust him for it ...
But I reassured her. You can come to stay with us.
I thought I would like to show it off, myself:
Chatelaine of a castle, myself, mistress of a hundred rooms!
It all began to turn my head—and sometimes I forgot
My finest reason for marrying him.

"I want a wife, not a throng," my intended husband said.
And curled his lips (I found this inordinately attractive
In those first days—that sense of a man who has seen everything,

Who knows everything—I did not know that it would pall); “if Anything should happen to you, my Fatima, and God forbid that it Should,” it seemed to me that the world shrank back as he said God, The bushes along the path as we walked, the two of us, at Eventide, “then, and only then, might I think of sister Anne As my second choice.”

I did not need to be jealous but I was, a little, then.

We did not like the Reverend; we laughed at his silly sycophantic Ways, we found him dull and old and the world and all its religious Controversies had passed him by. He has lived with his head deep In a bucket, my oldest brother said, but he did not try to deter Me from this marriage; I was, then, twenty-three.
He said he could marry us. He said we need not wait For the return of my parents. He said he was always there If I should wish for advice and the chance to change from bastard French To rusted English ... he said many things that were vaguely comforting; It did not occur to me to ask why I should seek for comfort On the eve of my wedding day.

He did all that was proper; or I thought he did.
I signed the forms and had them witnessed by my brothers; The Comte kindly said he had no need of a dowry, not when He was a man of some substance. The way was open. I married In white silk, an eastern veil twined round my homely face; My hair tied up with pale pink roses; he did not offer Wedding meat to my siblings, saying he wished to make haste And return home; he said my brothers and my sister Anne Might visit any time they chose ... but that they would be Busier than ever now without my help in mapping each ancient town, Lying in its stark white stones upon the eroded hills ...
He had his servants prepare the room; roses everywhere, deep Damask hangings round his enormous bed, the castle corridors, Liberally sprinkled with attar of roses, in case my unaccustomed Nose should revolt at the stench of age and damp and sorrow ...

I thought I knew something of life, something of the natural increase That nature impels upon its children. I thought I would be calm And able to chat with sweet unconcern over our nuptial supper, Lit by candles and laved by fine French wines and other less Uncommon goblets ... I was unused to this way of doing things; I was unused to the silence that fenced us round; I was unused To a man who never let me go, held me tight with dark-rimmed eyes;

I knew myself then to be young and unsophisticated and wondered
Why I was here. He undressed me with a thousand kisses—
And if I felt his impatience I thought it merely the difference
Between men and women. He laid me on the swansdown bed,
Underneath the shadowed canopy; he made me hold him tight.
That flesh of his that burned that night and every night like
A thousand unbanked fires; I did not understand that heat
Was love and vice is versa ... an intimate heat that grew and thundered
Through the room ... I did not know that heat was love when
His blood burst through his veins and throbbed and yearned
And made him close his long grasping hands round my face,
My neck, pressing up on my bosom until it felt that it would burst
And leave my heart shining in the candlelight;
I felt him close around my waist
And draw my hips to absurdly wanton heights, I felt his lips
Push and rush and taste and suck in places I had not known
Were invested with curious desires ... I heard his words fly
By my unused ears, like a mighty rushing gale, and heard him
Gasp and gasp my own confusion that was fear and feast
And everything I had never known ... but never love, I never loved,
I tried to say the words, night by night, thinking love would slow
The desperate pace upon which we had embarked this boat of flesh
And fury ... but little did I understand then ... that he had hoped
I might ground the keel, leave it marooned on uncharted seas,
He wanted me because I was plain and he thought that
I would let him rest ...

No rest in that place, day and night, he would grasp me tight to him,
And I would know all rest was flown as I felt him even through
His robes, rise in massive fury and catch me where I had no lock
And key. My heart I closed to him. My mind I locked.
Only allowing my curiosity free passage
Round that crumbling hall; but if I'd thought to close
My secret passages to him, down he would have battered them
With the fury of a thousand men at siege.

When he said, "I must go, I have an offer of ancient manuscripts—"
Of course I remembered who I am, who my family, what I'd learned,
In years of study and recording. "May I come?" I said it very
Humbly. He was, I had found, fond of humbleness in certain
Circumstances; at other times he demanded a windswept wildness
Like clouds before a storm; the Reverend always looked at me,
When he found me in the dishevelled aftermath, as though he longed

And feared and wished and knew life would never offer anything ...
But I had no room for pity.

He had chosen to stay; I assumed the choice, not knowing what harm
Might befall a man who'd allowed his faith to become corrupt.

“No, my Fatima, you may not.” He saw no need to make excuses.
In this place he was king and lord, ruler, final arbiter.
He gave me the keys instead.

At first I was proud to be the possessor of entrance to all the
Myriad rooms, to go where I wished and when. I clanked them
Frequently but then I felt again that shiver that had come with his
Final words. Such a little key. Like the key to my heart,
I wondered what it would show if I were to enter it
Into that tiny lock—and turn.

And yet the rooms, as I passed into and out of every one, were
Unremarkable. Full of ancient things, sometimes half-hidden
Under dust. I thought of taking to my mind the process dear
To many wives; to see it dusted, cleaned and polished.
Would he like his place made bright
And shining; or did he enjoy this sense of age and untouched peace?
Some of these rooms, I like to think, had not been touched
Since Richard Lionheart came this way.

It filled my mind, the question why.
Why this one room. Did he understand that if he'd said nothing,
I might not even think to look. I had browsed in fifty chambers
And my curiosity was sated with keys and rooms. Just this one.
It beat down my resistance. A promise is a promise.
I couldn't see why he'd wanted me to promise.
And he was my husband. Surely between husband and wife
There should be no secrets. No locked rooms.
The thought made me uneasy. I had locked my own thoughts
Away. Was this room his thought, locked symbolically,
Away from prying female eyes? His place where he kept
Locked the world he never spoke to me about; the world
He had shared with other women. The women who found
No niche, no matter how small it might be, left in his castle
If not his inner home; no portraits anywhere, no cloaks left
Downstairs; no words repeated by his minions, no liking
Left in daily routine; not a forgotten pair of slippers, not
A whisper when he slept.

Sometimes in these nights alone I think I hear the ancient stones
Converse. I know it's foolish of me and yet, in all our years,
Upon the eastern hills among the standing and fallen stones,
I've sometimes thought these ancient walls and columns
Try to tell us what they think of all they've looked down upon;
The human dramas if you will; I think if people can hear stones
Talk, then I am well-prepared. Or is it merely loneliness?

I hear my steps echo during the silent days. Sometimes I say,
I will go out. Sometimes I say I need the air. But when I reach
The massive doors, my cloak and shoes prepared, my way is barred;
His servant says, Mistress, I have my orders. The narrow ways
About the castle walls are dangerous for a woman unchaperoned;
And I am straightly charged, not to leave my post of guard.
I hate the feeling, I am kept inside, every other living thing
Is kept their distance from the entrance in. I am a prisoner
In my home. So if I cannot go out ...

I walk often up those castle stairs; I lean over the tiny round stone
Balcony and see the world so temptingly laid out far below.
Ordinary mortals going about ordinary lives;
What do they know of men like mine?
And if I can never join them again ... then why
Cannot I have the freedom of every room? I ask myself this each day.
Ask and get no answer. But the message that floats upon the draughts
After dark, sometimes seems, or do I imagine in my solitude
That it carries the voices of wives who've gone before ...
Gone where, I often ask.
And that too has no answer. Does he keep their things
In that little room, the things that he might still sentimentalise ...
I cannot imagine it, yet the most refined and hard of men may sport
A soft and sentimental vein; young brides died young, what man
Would not mourn for sweet young love—

And if the room under the stairs holds his heart, then may it not
Be somewhere we could share? For in understanding him, perhaps,
Then, I would not fear this husband of mine. If I could see that he
Too holds back the flood of tears for loss, then I might forgive him
A strange and fearful passion ...

I come this way more often; I think, in there, may be little
Homely things; a comb still with a golden hair, a forgotten cloak,

Fur-trimmed, a bonnet or a shawl; a book or some faded letters,
Something which says, once I too lived downstairs,
Laid upon that great dark bed, once I ate there
At the long carved table that once saw monks at simple meat ...
I too ... wondered ... and when I think like this I am drawn to
This little door. I can put the key in, it turns easily, the door is low.
I must bend to swing it open. Such a little door.

The key to his heart. Is there such a thing? It creaks as it swings open.
It is very dark inside and I fumble to find my way through that tiny
Hole; and another door, aslant against a built shape; this opens too.
And then I struggle to feel my way as my eyes grow accustomed ...
A strange smell. And I am in a space that is like ... like what ...
A pyramid, I think, with bars across and shapes that turn softly
And bump against one another ... the faintest draught that has
Accompanied me ... and I reach out for them and feel my hand
Close around a woman's leg ... I screamed then!

Women turning in the draught, hung up dead and mummified.
In this miniature pharaoh's tomb, this charnel house, this terror!
This terror! I thought I had seen life and death in all these years,
Cruelty, animals mistreated, casual death, children with weeping
Sores and mangled limbs ... I thought I knew more than any
Sheltered sister I might have left at home ... and now I knew
I knew nothing ... I backed out ... I felt sick and faint ... I felt
That I had seen my future ... I felt ... there was blankness amid
The fear ... did I think ... now I know that terror is more than
Thought and feeling ... it is a death that leaves you hanging
Somewhere half caught between the human and the monstrous ...

I stumbled on the steep dark stairs; only finding thought enough
To lock that shameful door. I half fell, half walked, I found myself
In the miles of empty corridors and felt the sickness rise up
My gorge. His wives. His wives. Now I knew.
Now I had my answers. Now the key burned in my trembling hand.
Now I heard the faint far-off sound.
Of hooves and shouts.

Back! He seemed unchanged. He smiled and kissed me and I
Trembled at his kiss. *This man to kiss my lips!* He said, "A good
Journey. We will eat first and I will show you my new acquisitions.
Then, my dear," and his eyes seemed to glow with heat, "my very
Dear little wife, Fatima, you and I have time to be caught up; I have

Longed for you night after night but my daytimes have been
Filled with ... ” He never called it work and he didn’t now ... “Life.”
He raised my nerveless hand to his curving lips
Above his glowing beard.

“And my dearest of wives, my keys, give me back my keys.”
I left the table and brought them back to him.
There were things I could say but my mind was numb.
He seemed not to notice as he spoke of this place and that
But as he turned them idly in his hands I saw him grow intent.
“This one, my dearest little wife, this one,” he held it out, the candles
Winked a thousand lights but on it, just that one, they seemed
To grow dull and dim.

“It seems,” his voice sounded puzzled, as though
He waited for enlightenment, “a little stained. You haven’t—”
I was reared in honesty; not for us the ways of oriental dissembling,
The polite word above the honest word, but I croaked my lie.
He said nothing more, then; he even looked at me and there
Was something playful, quite unlike his serious mien, in his gaze.
“My little wife, we will rest a while and I must bathe the dust away.
And then, you and I, such sport, a famished man am I ... ”
And his eye took on a reddish tinge. Or was it the candles
Burning in their sockets ...

I heard him on the stairs as I tried to interest myself in some
Of the books and inscriptions he’d brought back; the hieroglyphs
Shifted shape under my nervous gaze, cuneiform and ancient Syriac
Leaped and swelled and changed its meaning ... but I was blind and
Deaf to the world I’d loved so long. I heard him on the stairs.

He said nothing when we met again that night.
But I thought I saw my foolish prints in that undisturbed dust
And knew ... he would know.
He would see the evidence bright and clear.
I thought I might yet be able to escape that night. Let him sleep
And I would creep downstairs, unbar the doors and flee into
The shadowed world that no longer held the fear of ghosts
And djinns. “My darling,” he took me in his arms,
Kissed me head to toe, while
I lay stiff and unyielding—he knew, of course he knew—and now
He played with me as the cat plays with the mouse until hunger ...
His hunger, that night, was fierce and all-consuming ... and he
Demandec to know why I refused to meet him half-way;
“My sweet,” his words caressed, “tonight you might be wood

Or stone ... lay down this stiff portcullis and allow your poor
Husband entrance to the sweets I know lie hidden
In your treasure chests ... ”

I could not say, it is you, I am afraid of you, I could not think ...
Escape was the only word that filled my mind and I dare not speak
In case he heard it echo among my other words.

“My darling,” he was lavish in his loving, I felt him hard and fierce
And hot, again and again, as though he knew I only wanted him
To sleep, “you thought to give me an heir, but no heir comes without
My presence in the places tonight you would think to close up tight
And lock with your little silver key ... ”

He knew, of course he knew, and I felt him press me
Against his whole great body, mouth to mouth and breast to breast,
I felt him everywhere,
There was no longer any place that did not smell and hurt of him;
The fierce heat that always emanated—tonight I felt it as the fires
Of hell, consuming what little power I had to withhold ...
My thighs were wet and worn and rubbed red-hot and still he
Demanded more ... would he never tire and sleep?

At last, I felt him ease and turn. I felt the fierce intensity grow less;
Soon, I thought, and felt my own weariness. Soon.
At last his breathing grew soft and slow and I eased myself
To my feet, dressed with trembling hands ... made my fumbling way
Down dark stone steps.
The door was locked and barred—that I expected—
But it was flanked too; out from the black nooks stepped his servants,
Well armed with their great scimitars ... “back, Mistress, turn back.”
I tried to reason, just a little air, such a calm and moonlit night.
But they were implacable.

All was lost. Suddenly I knew how other women had felt
In this place. I knew their cries now, I knew there was no way out.
But as I made my slow way back, wondering if I might still lock
And bar myself into an unused room—
A shadow stepped out, caught the faintest gleam
Of light through arrow slits. “Is that you, sister Eglantine?”
I gasped. A djinn! I wasn’t sure if I believed. When the sands sing,
My father always said, it is not the supernatural but merely
The heated grains growing cold and moving in the dusk ...
But for a moment
I set all reason to one side.

Then—"Sister Anne!"

I could not hide my joy. "Really you? Not an imagined you?"

"Yes, we are on our way to the coast to meet mother and father

Coming back; our brothers have taken the animals to find them

Fodder and drink ... I meant to come in, well-announced,

But saw your husband just returned

And slipped in unnoticed, hoping I would find the moment

When I could make my presence known." I hugged her to my heart.

The words fell over each other. My terror. My knowledge that death

Was in the air. "When will the men come back?" She thought

Tomorrow. I urged her to hide away. Brought her meat

And bread from the cold dark kitchens,

Found cloaks to keep her warm, told her all I'd found.

At first she refused to believe. Then she said simply,

"I wondered." I knew she had seen things I, young and foolish,

Had pretended could not be true. Now I felt renewed courage.

Together ... but if I went back to the nuptial bed ... there were still

Hours and hours between night and dawn ...

He enclosed me in his arms but slept on, the long journey;

And I gave thanks.

He woke in the early light and demanded more from me;

Breakfast is food, he often liked to say, desire is life and death ...

But today I feared it might soon be death ... he held me tight ...

"That little key," he said, even as his lips sought mine,

"That little key, tells tales ... "

I felt his breath hot and mingled with my terror—

His hands closing slowly round my neck ... I leapt up!

"Such a lovely day and so much to do!" I was cold and naked.

And my voice babbled unnaturally about our ears.

"There is no escape from truth, *ma petite*, no escape,

Together we will decide the ways in which

You must show your shame for defying your lawful wedded

Husband. I will call upon Eustatius as witness to your shame, he will

Enjoy the sight of my wife grovelling ... he has seen it all before ...

But some things never pall with men who are afraid of life,

Who must live their loves and sins vicariously,

Who must peep and pry and listen

Outside doors, bend their eyes to keyholes and gently part

The curtains that veil the world of love and lust from their narrow

Gaze ..." It seemed so much the worse to think that

The old clergyman was my other enemy, not my friend in need ...

But I said nothing.

If I spoke, this time I might give away my sister's presence.

All day he played with me, sometimes drawing the Reverend

Livermore into double-edged conversations and I knew the man

Knew, there was something about the way he

Constantly wet his lips. But there

Was fear there too; I wondered what hold my husband had on

This man, shrivelled down into a tiny soul ...

I knew my own life was forfeit, day or night, the moment when

My husband's hands would close around my neck ... and the thought

Of dangling inside that secret tomb ... I'm not sure which was worse,

The fear of dying, the fear of that eternal entombment far from love

And prayer and my family's sensible tears upon my grave,

Inscribed: 'to a much loved daughter, sister ...'

All day I felt my fear like a live thing in my throat, all day I thought

I saw a shadow flit from room to room, and felt that my sister Anne

Was watching over me ... but was it enough, dear God,

Could she be enough when I felt implacably

That death grew ever closer?

Night would fall. My husband would say, "My sweet, you and I—"

And there was no excuse strong enough.

But I could hide, somewhere

Among those many rooms—would he demean himself enough

To come and search or send a servant or say "Eustatius, my wife,

Do go and call her back, she must have forgotten how late

It's getting." Hide-and-seek among the treasures and the rubbish,

Among the dust and dim, could I keep it up all night ...

Until my brothers came in sight?

I saw a flick of my sister's gown as she turned up the steep

Turret stairs, would she see them on their way,

A dust-cloud coming ever closer—

Would they come in time? The sun was sinking in the west,

Out across the Aegean sea, just glimpsed from the highest places,

Half-hidden by the coastal towns and hills ...

All my life seemed concentrated into this time of day;

Once I'd loved the sleepy sense of campfires raised and mutton stew

In cooking pots, donkeys nodding over meadow hay and somewhere

In the distance perhaps a camel making its displeasure known;

This world that had been mine for so long; a hard day, bent over
Inscriptions, the sun upon our heads, the limestone dust and rocks
About our feet, another day as we pieced the puzzle of these people's
Lives, made their world into ours, wondered how they felt
Each night, saw the gnarled old trunks of olive groves
Against the setting sun ...

My world and now it was about to end—unless the men came soon—
Unless they demanded entrance; unless they refused to turn away
When my husband's servants barred them out. The Master's orders.
I knew my sister Anne had gone upwards but if I were to—what if
We both became entrapped; nowhere else to go—if only we had
Ropes, we might climb down ... my steps came slow and stumbling
On the stairs—Sister Anne, Sister Anne, are you there, can you see—
Would she answer, not knowing if I came alone, should she answer
My question. And then her answer, soft but clear,
Nothing, nothing yet;
Don't despair, they will come, I am here to wave and call,
Don't speak out loud—but how can I not cry out, I thought,
When it is my tender throat that I see between his long strong hands—

... “Are you there, my sweet, in the tower?”
I hear his voice rising up—and it seems,
Against my shrill and fearful tone, that he climbs leisurely;
That he has all the time the world can offer. “The night sky
Is bright,” I called down, “I could not resist. I will be down
Quite soon.” I heard him turn and his steps fade away.
Had he gone? Or was it just my fevered imagination thought
He'd gone? I called again, softer now, and my sister replied
From the shadows somewhere high above me ... “Nothing yet,
I thought I saw a movement on the horizon but it was merely
A shepherd with his sheep.” I cursed that poor shepherd, and stood
Another minute that seemed to be an hour. Surely he would grow
Impatient soon. My question again and again—she said only,
“Do not despair—I know they'll come—I will not fail you,
Sister dear,” and a short time later, she said as if she craned,
“Is that—no, yes, the dust rising, their silhouettes against the sky,
Is that blackness them or merely travellers coming innocently
This way?” and somewhere down below I heard steps again.
“My love, who are you speaking to?”
“Not speaking,” I cried, unnaturally high, “just the wind
Around the turrets, but such a lovely night, the breeze
Is sweet upon my face—a moment more and I'll come down.”

And then her voice, soft as sighs, soft as birds' wings against
High stone walls ... "It's them—go down, go down, sister dear."

I tried to stroll as if this was my every evening's walk;
One foot after another on those worn and narrow stairs
Which had seen armies—
"My love," I found him waiting, large and dark, his eyes surveying
Me as if he'd read my mind ... but all he'd read there was still
My fear; what were riders on the ridge beyond ...
They might still prove ...

Did he read my fear in my hands as he took them in his; did he know
That I delivered myself into his hands and hoped that my brothers
Would come in time to—but I dared not think—my brothers
Had their skills with sword and gun—but did they carry them
Or come thinking they might find their sisters wined and dined
And their brother-in-law his charming usual self—
How could they know
What I had found?

And then the clatter of hooves on ancient courtyard stones!
"We have visitors—or so it sounds. Are you expecting anyone?"
My voice asked a thousand other questions but he answered the one.
"No, my dear little wife. I expect no one. They may turn their beasts
And go away again. Hospitality is not something lightly given."
"Could it be my father," I wondered aloud, "come to give us
His blessing? I know the Reverend did everything that was proper—
But—" "I think not, my sweet, and it might be the armies of the night
Come with waving banners and sweet seductive promises,
For all I care—we have business down below."
We heard then the pounding on the massive door;
We heard the Reverend Livermore go down.
Briefly I was thankful for his presence; he would be no match ...
And then their words, then their pushing past—"Nonsense man!"
That was Arthur's voice. "Our sister would never shut us out!"
I hear them on the stairs. I try to go down to meet them,
But his hands close round my throat and my cries die hard.
Their spurred and booted feet coming up; my life being choked—
Now, so close to liberation from the toils of this monster
I had married—

"No closer," he said calmly, "till I take my revenge, take the last soul
Life will offer me—" So calm. So calm. It might be a page of vellum

He discussed, its age and meaning ... and then a banshee sound upon
The stairs and my sister flung herself upon him from behind!
Grasped his beard, twisted his head around, her hands
Strong from years of work ... and my brothers,
At first perplexed, now leaping
To my defence ... and he let me go, turned and ran, his feet light
Upon his castle stairs ... I sank down, my throat on fire,
And my sister held me tight ... but my brothers raced,
Their hearts aflame with anger ...
The clatter on the steps, like a crusading army come to life again!
Their voices floating down as they reached
The ancient balcony—and then a great long cry that died away,
Like a thousand djinns athirst
Upon the wind—and when the devil took his soul I cannot say ...

But I lived on, we lived on, my family and I, and we left that castle
for the wind and rain, its rumoured treasure notwithstanding,
for the bedawi and fat-tailed sheep, for the souls of all who'd fled
before me on those stairs ... Ahanila, Carafara, Zenodina,
Barbalette, Fifarentini ... bound together, evermore,
in that fear-filled sisterhood of terror ... and I say it night and morning,
God bless their souls ... but I can never bring myself to ask
forgiveness, pity on the soul of the man who gave me
this child, this child
which kicks so fiercely in my womb ...

Not yet, my little one, not yet ...

“I would write Amen,
not End ... ”

NOTES:

“The picture first projected of the dead Cities, by (Comte Melchior) de Vogue and the first explorers, of country gentry and great estates has now been dismissed. But the picture of country life that the new studies show is hardly less appealing. It is impossible not to be utterly enchanted by the dead Cities.”

For my version it was the 19th century view of the inhabitants and social order of these ancient ruined cities and towns in Syria which still prevailed. But Warwick Ball’s description in *Rome in the East* of the changing image of the society which built and inhabited these towns is itself enchanting. The Dead Cities are found near Aleppo in Syria and grew prosperous on the olive oil trade.

The two sisters who found a sheet of an ancient palimpsest under their breakfast butter at St Catherine’s Monastery in Sinai and then gathered up more vellum from a basket in the kitchen “the pages of which were so glued together they could only be separated by the steam from their travelling tea-kettle” were Agnes Lewis and Maggie Gibson. The book they discovered written under “a very entertaining account of the lives of women saints … probably A.D. 778” they brought out in 1894 as *A Translation of the Four Gospels from the Syriac of the Sinaitic Palimpsest* which has now been dated to the second century “perhaps even as early as 150 A.D.”. It caused a furore when published simply because the text of Matthew 1.16 reads “Joseph, to whom was betrothed Mary the Virgin, begat Jesus, who is called the Christ.”

A BOOK OF SEALS (FOR BRENDA DUDKOWIAK)

A BOOK OF SEALS

Why begin our tales with Dearly Beloved?
Because … all children should be dearly loved …
Yet not knowing each reader’s name, whether it be Mark
Or Jack or Jeff, Kate or Fee or Sue or—or—
And because (I don’t say this aloud) the lesser time
Together, the more precious, the more dear …

If you were to make a story *just* for me, no one else,

How would my book begin?
Would you like Best Beloved then, or Hello, Little Mate—
How're you going, you old devil, you? or Once-Upon-a-Time—
I think I'll have the last one you said, like a fairy tale.
I want magic—trolls, treasure, *you* know—and some real animals.

What kind? Wolves and bears or cats and dogs?
I think I'll have *seals*, maybe some whales and penguins—
So do you know things about seals?
I'll have to look them up. Seal books. Where shall we set your tales?
Somewhere far away, somewhere I'll never go, ever ...
We'll try the globe—shut your eyes and twirl—then point ...
Close them tight now, don't peep ... and so ...
Round and round the world we go, twirling faster, faster,
Where day and night are one, sunset becomes sunrise, vast oceans
Are blue blurs, mauve mountains over-master blank deserts,
Black nimbus names, and last becomes first and here we come
Back to out beginning—press down hard to stop it spinning—
See—you've found land in the southern seas—we'll pin
Our hopes it will make us story-lines—
Feel our brakes, now, open your eyes, see where—such dots
Done in white and purple, a speck *I* never saw before.

I can hardly see, even when I peer, I think it says South Geor-gee-ah—

So we made up stories night by night, steeped in magic,
Laughter, sadness, mystery, *brimming* with seals and sea-things
On this sharp island far away ... Big seals and small,
Ones with trunks, with ears, seals flecked and preening,
Fierce ones, slow ones, lazy ones ... on those shores,
Fathers, mothers, (all together—I sometimes think if we could
Share our little ones—would it *hurt* so much—)
Mewling pups with round dark eyes, soft whiskered chins, and the while
A thin southern sun with the west wind keening.

Those last three months I studied much about our distant isle,
More than its namesake ever did; I explored the Allardyce in snow,
And secret caves; I knew its reindeer herds (and gave them names
Like Jake and Finn), bedstraw underfoot, creeping clubmoss,
And tiny wheeling terns ... I smelled its abandoned whaling ports,
Husvik, Stromness ... dead with crumpled tin and rusting bars,
And make-do-birds ...
Places of lost stories, old sorrows. But if you'd listened in,

Heard my light narrations, right until ... when there was no surcease ...
Chronicles of love and hope, and funny bumbling barking seals
With fat and finny tails; the way they'd cuddle up—so affectionate—

*

That last night, I didn't know, not then, I'd a story of sailors
Who sprouted soft brown ruffs, found a taste for krill, and
Learned seal-talk; those barks and whines and funny whiffling sounds ...
I said small seals practise joyous words at their mothers' sides.
Words for play, for when the sun soars and the snow shines; unique words
For hide-and-seek round the grey bleached ribs of ancient ships,
Words for mermen and maids, for love and life, the way
To say that god is everywhere ... I don't know why I thought to say
That then ... it didn't matter that I couldn't think how to end ...
Because sleep intervened ... last gentle sleep ...

LATE AFTERNOON—A SEA WIND UP AND DOWN THE STREETS AND ROUND THE CORNERS CATCHES—

The breeze is up; white caps, the brisk break,
the fall, the draw, the breeze meets me sharp and white
and cool at each corner, and lifts the sand in rills along the broken verge
and foot-worn grass; cars parked messily across the esplanade,
reflecting sun and summer fun, the makers of ...
the measured pines bending at their tips;
just in to the corner shop for bread and milk.
A town aslumber, asleep, adoze, anap. Two doors down
there's kids with icecream cones
and the ever-present smell of fish and chips;
if there's sea-tang, then it's mixed like batter
with the deep-fry smell; all I carry home
is the idea of tang; strict diet, small choice,
lots and lots of greens. This is a blue town. A brown town.
I stand a while, the beach and kids, a stripy ball;
a dog running up and down, barking its head—not off—its chain
rattling against a camper van. The blue blue horizon. Gulls.
We must come again. I think like someone caught a year ago.
I could record the sounds of gulls and waves, play it over,
a refrain to natural life, ongoing. I think like
someone used to company—while there's life,
there's company; I'll have company again.
The wind waits stronger round the corner.

Brisk white-hearted wind.

The local history Soc., Soss we always said, not Sok, not snag,
with its home-made sign, hung crooked. The way we are here;
a bit amateurish, interested, willing. Try anything once,
we say. Like those old remedies, something in them all.

Eye of bat and scale of newt, or castor-oil in plenty,
a nice bread poultice. They've got old photos
of the district nurse in eighteen-seventy-three,
buxom and grim, in her pony-cart.

A small sign says, 'Come in and browse,
it's your history'.

I know there's talk of a database.

Weeds grow round their steps, sand's drifted in the gate,
across the concrete path, sun blazes all along its route.

They've a small section labelled: Maritime.

I've never really looked, not yet, not properly.

But then I didn't know we'd be armchair sailors,
armchair whalers, not the sort that kill and flense,
the ones that view-hallooo and yell—wow! and cool!

What a monster, modern Ahabs, I suppose, traded harpoon
for the latest lens from Japan. Will I take the time today,
open between one and four, it's not quite four ...

they took seals too, penguins in the grim old days, boiled them up;
there might be photos, mention of their breeding grounds;
I know they've returned, the precious few, round the islands.

Another day perhaps, the two of us, if, god willing,
There's a day when this can happen.

*

Danny left us, untrammelled, footloose, thought to make life
better for village people in Bangladesh ... last I heard he
was meditating in an ashram ... may put him in touch
with his inner self, slow the heart, prolong the life,
but it hasn't helped *us* much ...

There comes the moment when you wonder,
'is more better?' should we struggle on, knowing there
could be help and hope just around the corner ...
the pain, the shock to a frail system, the moment
when I ask myself: should I, should we, because it's
a journey we take together ... to fight back, never give in,
while there's life there's ... they look good on the page, such words,

they sound good, tough, brave ... once I believed in them,
with all my heart ... now I'm not sure any more ...

I'm not sure if I believe in re-birth, over and over,
in many forms and spaces, or here again, to return this way,
this little seaside town, I'm not sure ... Danny would say,
of course, there's reincarnation, I couldn't ask him how he knows
because he'd lecture on and on and at the end the only verdict
remains, I think—non-proven—perhaps—who knows—

The Path to Enlightenment is a path worth travelling,
of that I have no doubt (who wants to plod along in darker places)
but he made it all sound so dull; I wonder why.
Because it was essentially his way, no one else included,
his way, and there's a kind of self-centredness
that bothered me; we were three, not one,
and we would like to go together, sharing at some level,
loving each step of the journey shared.
But he chose his way and looked around and said,
this place—you might as well be dead for all that anyone
cares for the things of the spirit here,
the things that really matter.

The breeze fills out the jacarandas in the little park;
they shake and shiver boisterously, the wind flaps
washing still on a backyard line at three p.m.
A toddler runs after a towelling hat adrift and laughs
and clasps it to its romper-chested heart.
A small town, a small place, unremarkable.
But I wonder if you need to leave a place
to find your heart and soul.

COLD Language, HOT Language

The language of the deep deep sea
Is rarely what you and me
(I mean I not me, I should stop and think—)
Would use in a conversation about
What to have for afternoon tea.

We'd speak of hot scones, muffins,
Melting butter, a slice of cake,
A cup of chocolate or of tea;

We'd say things like I mustn't
Eat so much butter, it's bad for me.

But the creatures of the cold wet sea,
Who live so far below,
And only come up to breathe and see
What's happening where there's sun and wind
Have to have two tongues:

A cold language with lots of words
For cutting through the deep and dark we
Never see, and a hot language for what they find
When they poke their snouts
Above the heaving surface of the sea.

AN EVENING WHEN THE WIND IS FALLING AWAY

This place is too small, no room
to live out a person's karma; somehow
you don't think of karma in a seaside
town with pig-face startling on the baby dunes,
and bright shorts upon the boys

who play cricket on the sands at low tide
and where do we come into it? A family is not
the working out of the individual destiny but
a journey part way, anyway, together ...

I didn't understand it then, the search
for the state of enlightenment, the state where calm
pervades life and soul, where 'pick up your toys'
and 'eat your carrots' are not the words that
intrude; that the soul demands its full-time care
(like models for whom it's fingernails or hair—)
a moment's solitude that somehow grows and grows
until it's become its sole reason, not to be justified
to carping wives and pestering kids ...

I'm unfair, of course I am,
but when there's nothing but unanswered letters
from a man last heard from somewhere on the road
to Katmandu ... living out his karma in a place
that's geared to give him all the sympathy
he should have left behind like excess bags ...

I think that we un-enlightened ones who go

about our daily lives, making all the mess that's possible
in a human life, are nevertheless *here* ... here when
the family has a need, here when someone asks,
could I beg a favour, here for friends and parents
getting old, here to mind a cat or parrot, here to
'pop in', would you just pop in and pick up our mail
while we're away ... or water the garden, here to lend a hand,
there isn't much that holds out hope, just a kind
of simple nurturing ... but it wasn't enough ...
it offered nothing but a simple 'Thanks' ... and 'Anytime—'

I don't know if it plays out in the endless cycle of birth and re-birth,
I don't know whether children get in the way on a holy ashram,
I don't know whether there was room for kids when desert fathers
Sat for fifty years ... I never knew I'd feel this secret rage ...

Rage isn't enlightened, isn't cool, isn't uplifting ... it's just
a futile faceless *thing!* And I must compose myself again
before I reach my gate.

Tomorrow, I'll go to the library, look out books on seals;
and that will take my mind off karma ... someone else's ...

ELEPHANT NOSE ON THE BELLE OF THE SOUTHERN SEAS

It isn't delicate, it isn't discreet,
And no one's going to say 'How sweet'
I wish, I wish, I had a normal nose,
Just a little black and whiskered thing,
That snuffles fetchingly, instead of this great leather blob!
The way it overhangs and spoils my sweetest smile,
The way it drags my soulful eyes down by a mile
So I merely look as if all the world's a pain!
And all I'm good for is daily doom and gloom ...
If I *only* had a perter nose no one would ever dare to take me for a slob!

"After nine years with the elephant and fur seals at South Georgia, I ..." Nine
years, nine, the seals, the lives, our seals, South Georgia ... serendipity has been
hard to find these last few weeks; but I tell myself, picking up the book which
begins like that, just picking that one out from half-a-dozen books on seals ...
I tell myself ... sometimes myself doesn't listen as well as I would wish ...

PENGUIN PIE

Four-and-twenty penguins,
Eating periwinkle pie;
Their king was busy with his golden spoon,
Saying 'I was never over-fond of crabs',
Their queen was waiting for her turn,
Hoping cook had thought to add some eels,
The others waited anxiously upon the royal pronouncement—

When down swooped a hungry gull and gobbled up
Those foolish penguins' pie!

So sing a song of pebbles
A clacking empty beak;
Four-and-twenty penguins,
Silly-billies, now-none-too-sleek,
And saying to each other
We should have just tucked in
We should have ignored all protocol
Not stood around *discussing*...

Old Mother Penguin

Old Mother Penguin,
Went down to the beach,
To find her poor chick a feast.
But when she got there,
The whole strand was bare
And so her poor chick got nix—

Mary's Seal

Mary had a little seal,
Its hide was all a-glow;
And everywhere that Mary went
The seal was sure to go.

It followed her to school one day,
That was against the rule;

It made the children laugh and play
To see a seal at school.

And so the teacher turned it out,
But still it lingered near,
Honking sadly for its mate,
Its little mind full of fear

That she was gone for good,
You know what schools are like,
But at last she came out again,
And at that happy sight—

The way he curved and brayed,
You'd think it was a holiday,
Christmas, birthday, all rolled into one,
But Mary's teacher only said:
'Take that horrid beast away!'

SOMEONE TOLD ME OF A FRIEND WHO COLLECTS ...

She stopped me in the street; said she'd been meaning to say hullo,
(we live in the same street; eight doors apart)
she knew I had my troubles, in a place like this,
I guess word soon gets around, loops, curves back.

She introduced herself (I did too) and asked me was there
anything she could do. I said it was kind of her but I didn't think ...
it was partly that I couldn't think—*what do you ask a stranger to do?*
Mind your house? Do your shopping? Will she feed your guinea-pigs?
Pour out your heart and hope—and then I thought and said,
"We're very interested in seals, we're very interested in South Georgia"
... and I looked at her, just a woman in her fifties, a bit blown-about,
I hadn't really noticed her before today ... but then I've been ...
and I thought she'd say, "Where's that?" or "Sorry
to be so ignorant but—" or "Is that somewhere in the States?"

But she smiled and said, "Fancy that! I lived, many years ago,
not so far from there. The Falkland Islands. I always thought ..."
She shook her head. "But a visit wasn't possible, two small boys,
and it wasn't easy getting there—two friends of mine went
there in their yacht," and she smiled again, marvelling

at the wonder of a stranger's question, in a place like this,
on a Monday afternoon ...

"Seals? Why seals?" She put down her basket, leant against
the gap-toothed fence.

"Don't they attract you? The way they look at you with such soulful eyes."
I know it sounded a little ... I don't know ... sentimental, like seals
in knitted coats and pom-pom hats there, with the wind saying,
'time for me, time for me', or as I always think,
'sand in your tea', and the crash and topple of fair-sized waves
ran along the empty hall as we stood, as if we'd come to sit in each other's
threadbare chairs and chatter over tea and raisin toast; as if we'd
lived similarly; a noise that's always there,
I'd miss it if it stopped.

The Day the Sea Stilled. The Day the Waves Died. Not died, never died,
slept merely like the water babies, cushioned, fast asleep in the bluey bosom
that rocks and plashes all around but never breaks, never breaks ...

"I have a friend," she said as if we'd known each other at least a year,
"who collects penguins." She smiled again; I liked her smile
although her teeth were poor and her face somewhat weather-beaten.
"She doesn't live nearby?" I thought of us being invited to visit.
"Any time," she'd say. "Any time."

"I'm afraid not. But I have photographs—every sort of penguin;
stuffed ones, carved ones, glass ones, penguins on tea-towels,
lead-light birds and jigsaw birds, books about and cards and calendars;
I've often wondered if life would be a better place in a house
where birds, not bills, take pride of place. Would you like to see her snaps?"

"Would you mind?" Seals and penguins, gulls and terns and albatrosses,
somehow they always seem to get mixed up—all crammed
in together, a muddy little shore, amid the tussock grass;
all squeezed in around the fescue and the liverwort, squabbling,
there among the 'adder's tongue' and the 'alpine cat's tail';
not a bit like men in dinner suits, more a rugby scrum ...
and then I thought: it's all a façade, isn't it,
the things we hide, the things we show;
malice can be shared
over the dearest abalone, the most expensive lobster dish ...
and vice versa, the kindness when the bread's gone stale
and the tea's a tad too strong ...

We made a day: we'd come and see her things, her calendars

and books, her photographs ... I said we'd love to come, she said
she was so glad she'd thought to ask ... and then we went
our separate ways ... but things intervened ... pain and things ...

A NONSENSE VERSE FOR SEALS WHO HAVE NEGLECTED THEIR EDUCATION

The cat sat on the mat?
What's a cat? What's a mat?

The sea was me

And the sand was land;

They call it a nursery where the babies congregate;
And you wouldn't know what those little minds learn there!
The language! Dear me!

The what was on the cot?
The dot you said, the blot?

I didn't hear

The wind was in my ear;

The way they cluster round and listen in;
When the teens come there to hang around!
The ideas they bare and share!

The bad habits!
The sneering at their elders!
The smutty talk of sex!

No respect for their grandparents out to sea
Swimming hard, fishing fast, to keep those babes in comfort;
And then come back
And find their authority undermined!

That's life, say mother seals,
But there's parents known to shirk their duty—

I wonder why those words came to me—
(best *not* shared, not in that form, I seem to think)
Of course I know why
I only pretend, some nights, I don't.

A PHRASE BOOK reminds me: the Norway Seamen

I don't know if the men who knew how best to harpoon whales
should be invited in to tea; I don't know if there's any place
where we might find them congenial.

It was a job, of course they'd say; a harsh land,
So we turned to the fertile sea ...
But that is blaming whales for the faults of men,
you could have taken care to maintain
your ratio of children to the land;
the whales you know (I'd like to have said to them)
cannot come on land and harpoon your kids
to give them food enough for their little pod.

People are like that, I see.

Jobs for the boys, jobs for the men,
we'll cut down some more trees, mill them,
kill the possums, smash the baby birds;
leave the hillsides scoured;
our children must come first;
jobs for our multi-kids.

Of course.

But we can choose.

I chose.

Or circumstances chose for me.

If Danny had stayed ...

I don't know.

One child. If we'd had more
would he have stayed around
or still left me to cope.

One child. And me.

Soon there'll just be me.

Then I might go and march for the trees.

I might yell and scream;
and hit people over their complacent heads,
with my placard.

This phrase book;

I don't think I'll take it home today with our library-books.

Jeg er sulten: I'm hungry
Jeg er tørst: I'm thirsty
Jeg er trett: I'm tired
Jeg har gått meg bort:
I'm lost

SEALS HAVE AN EAR FOR THE MUSIC OF THE WIND (AND OTHER SONGS)

I thought I heard a song above
Whose sweet sounding drew me up—
But when I poked my head above the waves
There was nothing there but the sighing of the wind
As it played about the falling sheds and rolling drums—

I thought I heard a big bass voice
Like a marching song with deep drum roll
But when I swam inshore to hear it firm and close
It was just the mighty clash of reindeer horns
Up and down and all around the tussock plains—

I thought I caught the sound of bugle calls
But when I felt impelled to find out more
I was amazed to see it was the bright honk and bray
Of a thousand penguins marching up the pebble beach
All yelling out “Here I come, my pet, here I come again”—

My mother told me of times when melodies
Enticing her towards the lights along the bay
Proved to be the noise of men and metal things
But wiser counsel kept her far enough away so she'd
Live out the fearsome season, live for another day—

And yet the sounds above call me and I can't say no,
My mother, remembering the way it used to be
Says, don't go, my little one, stay firmly by my side
But I hear the sound of song, I hear the sound of music—
Yet when I look there's no one there—and I try to tell her so.

“The (elephant seal) pups are dear little things, with black woolly coats, rather like astrakhan, and large, liquid, red eyes wearing a perpetual doleful expression. They are as loveable as puppy-dogs and just as helpless, being barely able to move; when approached, or patted, they emitted pitiful barks and endeavoured to wriggle to the safety of the mother's side.”

(*Antarctic Housewife*, Nan Brown)

A DAY AT THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY ROOMS WHERE THEY HAVE SOME INFORMATION ABOUT THE OLD DAYS AND SEALS AND WHALES AROUND THESE COASTS ...

“We do have some old maps—and there's the whaling exhibition,”
and I say, “I'd love to see the maps, do you have a map of
South Georgia—” She looks at me. “Doubt you'd find any whales there,”
she says kindly, “probably peanuts—or cotton?”
“No,” I know it isn't easy, I'm not the first one to wonder
where in the world I should pinpoint *our* place, our secret sacred place;
“it's just a little island, far away—where the icebergs play

and they caught whales in far-off days.” They have a map upon their wall and I cut in, like the catcher coming up alongside ... I know its latitude now, its longitude ...

other mothers learn things from their children: I am learning *for* ... but it’s true I learn *from* too ... patience and courage, in the fierce face of pain, and I learn how tiresome, patronising, adults can be towards their young patients ... that jolly tone, that big white lie, ‘this won’t hurt a bit’; their assumption children don’t remember pain, their folly when it comes to hiding truths ...

I know. I’ve learnt. Many things.

But today it’s browsing through these old log-books that whaling captains kept, it’s looking at black-and-white photographs, it’s wondering where, in this monstrous open-air abattoir, I might yet find and set a story ...

She comes back.

“There is the Bayle Collection,” she says, apologetically, “early photographs of catching seals, rendering them down ... they bashed the bulls on their noses, made them angry, so the bull chased the men ... once in the sea again, they’d kill him and he’d float ... it saved dragging all that weight down the beach—I don’t know if that’s the sort of information you’re looking for—”

THE STOWAWAYS

It is a fact, or so I’ve heard,
That there exists a tribe of smallish
Very hairy ogres with the habit
Of stowing away on ships, unseen ...

*And so, yo-there-below, and away we go!
Down to the cold south seas where the great whales blow!*

I have also heard, although you
Can’t believe in everything you hear,
That it is the smell of blubber that brings
Them crowding in from many miles around ...

*And so, yo-there-below, and away we go!
Down to the cold south seas with seals asleep on each ice-floe!*

No one notices them converging
On the docks when the whaling fleet's
In port, but if you go down a dark side
Lane you may smell the strangest scent ...

*And so, yo-there-below, and away we go!
Down to the cold south seas where every seaman gets called Joe!*

It is the smell, or so it's often thought,
Which explains the excitement that grips
This clan of harbour-haunting ogres
Each time the whale fleet hoves into port ...

*And so, yo-there-below, and away we go!
Down to the great south seas, and sure we'll be off in half-a-mo!*

They gather in the shadowed reaches
Waiting for the moment when
The gangway's left unintended—then it's
'Last one aboard's a sissy!' and you wouldn't credit ...

*And so, yo-there-below, and away we go!
Down where the great whales blow and the great seas glow!*

All the pushing and the shoving that goes on—
The squashed and bloody noses, the broken toes,
As they fight their way on board and rush
To get the best berths on the first ship out ...

*And so, yo-there-below, and away we go!
Down where snowy birds float atop each great billow!*

And if you're thinking that those ogres
Bring their own luggage and carry on board
Picnic baskets filled with what-they-fancy,
Then I fear you've been quite misinformed ...

*And so, yo-there-below, and away we go!
Down to the cold south seas where the great whales blow!*

Not them, not those dirty little creatures,
Not a sponge-bag let alone a cake of soap,

Not even one tooth-brush between them
As they jostle down the bulkhead steps ...

*And so, yo-there-below, and away we go!
Down to the cold south seas, with seals asleep on each ice-floe!*

No one sees them, which is just as well,
Or so you'd think; who wants to share
A galley or a bunk with a big unwashed *thing*—
As they settle in and lick their nasty little chops ...

*And so, yo-there-below, and away we go,
Down to the cold south seas, where every seaman gets called Joe!*

As the sailors and the whalers come on board,
Somewhat the worse-for-wear, I fear,
They blame the shadows they see move, here, there,
Around the decks and underneath the cranes ...

*And so, yo-there-below, and away we go!
Down to the great southern seas, and sure we'll be off in half-a-mo!*

On the whisky and the rum they know they should
Not have drunk, and say—did ye see that, Joe,
Must be me flippin' eyes playin' me false
But thought I saw, lor' lumme, some kind o' beast ...

*And so, yo-there-below, and away we go!
Down where the great whales blow and the great seas glow!*

Yeah, says another Joe, me too, and
There's this god-awful stink in here,
Funny how you forget what the blubber's like,
The way it turns a poor codger's nose ...

*And so, yo-there-below, and away we go!
Down where snowy birds float atop each great billow!*

But if you know just where to look
You'll see that there's odd kinds of blots,
Shapeless in every nook and cranny,
Here a bachelor, there a family packed in tight ...

*And so, yo-there-below, and away we go!
Down to the cold south seas where the great whales blow!*

And it's a funny thing, I have it on good report—
That no matter how many ogres jump ship in port,
In Stromness and Grytviken, there's always more,
Waiting on another sailing, to scuttle on board,
Unnoticed, each time the ships return for food
And fuel, so what has happened to ogres lured—
Now there's no fresh supply of blubber waiting,
To get scaly taste-buds racing, beady eyes flaming,
Feet itching for that daring dash across a dock
Left bare a moment ... the flash, the bash, the toss ...

... well, your guess is as good as mine ...

*And it's no good us singing yo-there-below
Now there's no below but I'm so glad the great whales do still blow!*

WHEN WE ASK THEY CAN ONLY TALK IN GENERALITIES

That's the trouble with country towns:
no second opinion.
A bit tired, a bruise or two?
Kids you know. Why I remember when I was a nipper—
had scabs on my knees for years.
And if you are not reassured, what do you do?
It's treated like disloyalty,
asking someone else,
because, of course, word gets around.

The trouble with the specialist we found,
when we finally got that far,
he treated it like a war, not that we became
comrades-in-arms, the team, that we win or lose
together, not at all. He was big and bluff
and always spoke in rallying terms: the fight,
the assault, invasive, blast, kill, beat, no quarter given.
We were his battleground and we came away
Each time battered, exhausted, undermined.

The nurses were kind and treated us
as if we didn't understand.

Sometimes they talked over our heads,
sometimes they translated it into kiddytalk ...
and they were jolly too
and filled the ward with painted sunflowers
and teddy bears.
When we dared to say a seal would be nice
they laughed and said, of course, and got another bear.

We should have said enough's enough, much sooner,
but it's hard to say you're opting out,
when it's someone else's life. And they make
you feel you've made the worst mistake; you'll
have to live with it all your life and then you'll realise ...
To try to say you trust in God (if Danny's left
that simple trust to reassert itself) is the hardest thing
I've ever done—and they said, by all means,
but God rarely intervenes. I said, still, we're going home.

IN THE GREAT HALL OF THE KELPER KING

When a seal pokes out a whiskered snout
We shout "It means good luck!"
And if he puts his head down and dives again
We only say "he's gone!"

We never ask where a seal goes when he's gone.
We never know the great hall of the kelper king!

This place with its vast throne of crystal quartz
With the great mottled mass of the king himself,
Sprawling there, golden barnacles on his kingly tail
To show his world how many fights he won
Before his wisdom brought him to this hall;
This great creature always there when wanted
Like an oracle for lesser seals; for feuding clans,
Just a slow-eyed monster who brooks no excuse,
Asks the minimum; gazes down without a blink;
This being, who knows all before his petitioners
Can blurt it out, sees all before they can describe it;
Hands down judgement, delivers justice
From his bench, untangles kith and kin,
And lends peace to a complicated world.

But if you, humbly bowed before that throne,
Should stop to ask how it is he's always there,
It might be that you look a little closer at those eyes;
Think that beyond their calming glaze is something
That suggests cogs and wheels; that heart that pumps
So perfectly; that nose that never sends up bubbles,
That tail that swings so gently like a pendulum,
That body which, once parked so regally, never moves,
That voice which suggests a rewound sound;
You might ask, your excellency, is it really you,
Or do you exist for ever, pinioned here, to tell us
What we already know, to remind us to take care;
To be the very best seals we can, you never need to give
Your homilies; you are you and we take pride in your
Eternity; your steadfastness, your seat upon your throne.

If we see a seal pop out, we might better ask:
Not, What Luck! But I wish we too could visit
In the great hall of the kelper king—and he will
Answer merely, for you, there's only one way down:
Your ship must wreck and you must drown ... and then
He barks and swims away ... I think it is a seals' last laugh ...

TO THE BEACH ONE FINAL TIME VERY SLOW AND TIRED AND THE WIND GOT UP:

Sayings go: there's a silver lining to every cloud, a golden moment
to every hour; it's up to you to look.
Count your blessings, face your fears, you know the sort of stuff.
And there we were, on a windy shore.
There was a little man lying peacefully on a beach, not bothering
anyone—when along came a bully and
kicked sand in his little face! What did he do? Got up and bought
a chest-expander. 'Now, no one ever
pushes me around!' he stares out proudly from his ads. 'I am the
master of my fate.' The wind did blow
sand in our faces; gulls did come and squabble raucously over
spilt chips and two kids went head-to-head:
"It's my spade!" "No, it's not!" Beach theatre.
Chest-expanders only have so many moments in a person's life ...

THE FAIRIES OF THE FOAM WHO SEEK THE GOOD

The fairies of the foam,
The elves of the sedge,
The gnomes of the snow,
Happy at the world's edge.

The good, the bad, and the ugly,
But it's only us who think like this,
We want them to look like illustrations
In a children's annual; 'this is—'

But why should they? Why shouldn't
They be themselves whatever way
They want? Why should they conform
To *our* ideas—when they are they?

And we aren't even sure if that's what
We saw when we thought we saw
Something in the jacaranda tree?
Not sure? Never sure? Only thinking—sure!

They could be bright white like little snowy
Birds. They could be faint and white
And sitting on a buttercup like petal-folk.
They could be hard and nutty like

Weevils in your flour; or black and greasy,
That lump of gunk on the old fly-wheel.
They could be large as whales or small
As krill; they could be things you only feel ...

On days when reality seems too hard,
And your eyes are tired while your head
Seems over-large and you ache all over ...
Like a feather fanning you, while you lie in bed ...

SCHOOL: THE LAST DAYS OF—

We didn't know, then, that it was the final day;
some things are only known by looking back.

and some by looking forward;
the map and reassurance; to sleep and wake again.

I've never known how to ask (and no one offered)
how other mothers prepared their little ones
for unaccompanied journeys; vastly different
from school excursions; comfort in numbers.
like the children sent with tags and names; sent
far away. But this is a journey taken curiously
close to home; with infinite possibilities ...

I hope I've found the way to convey that sense;
that there's looking back and going on;
in the company of kindness in its many shapes
and guises; a company that's love in all its forms ...

THE WIND-SPRITES WHO PLAY GAMES ALONG THE SHORE

Down along the windy shore,
Up amid the tussock grass,
Where the blizzard howls in Jossac Bight,
And gales screech and scream and hurl away—
There, sometimes, I make no promises,
 You will find small creatures
Playing tag around the sleeping bulk
 Of moulting seals; smallish sprites,
Light and bright and full of fun, with wings
 And pointed ears, and the desire
To hide-and-seek, play tag and ball;
 A small and curious community,
All about *this* high—so—and with seagreen
 Eyes and riddles on their tongues;
Home-grown elves, a species native
 To this southern isle; been here since ...
And now you see them, now you don't—
 I would tell you more about them
Except they're not found in any modern book
 No one's ever captured them on film;
They might as well be black holes for all we know
 Of them ... unless you are a seal—and then—
You never have to ask “What was *that*? ”
 Because you *know*. It's those naughty sprites—

Whirring in your ears, plucking at your fur,
Calling you the most atrocious names;
Flicking sand too high, jeering at your sloth.

‘Whatever did we ever do to deserve these—’
They can never think up a word that’s bad enough.
So they growl and grunt and roll deeper in the mud;
But nothing deters a truly determined sprite—
After all, they say to each other, with wide-eyed looks,
We only want a game with you, *we only want some fun!*

“God has made the seal the loveliest of His creatures in the water”
(Rudyard Kipling, ‘The Conversion of St Wilfrid’)

THE TERRIBLE FIGHT, ONE SPRING NIGHT, WHICH DISTURBED THE SLEEP OF THE LEITH HARBOUR MEN

The problem with trolls is their temper.
They slip unnoticed into bags and chests and trunks
And if a sailor says
Mother-o’-mine—this weighs a ton!
They merely smirk and think ‘better you than me!’

And all might have been well—two foreign gangs might
Make common cause—

BUT

It started who knows how?
A stowaway troll came face-to-face with an imported ogre,
Both feeling their youth, their oats, after being cooped
Up on a long sea voyage. No doubt.

And then—I cannot say exactly when—
You’ve never heard the like!
The banging
And the bellowing
The blowing
And the blustering
The biffing
And the bamming—up and down and round about—
They went at it, tongs and claws,
The ogres and the trolls.

Some thought it was an avalanche!

Some thought the great ice shelves had snapped!
Some thought, cor blimey, our roof has gone!
And some that the boiler's blown its top!

Some thought they saw red eyes peering
In the frosty window panes—

And wondered if it could be an invasion of giant rats
Come south for the summer season—
Others said it's the station's cats,
Gone mad on whale meat, lost their reason—if cats have—
One man, still half asleep, mumbled, aye,
 That'll be those blanketty bats!
This and that, they growled and groaned
But they might've saved their breath, honed
Their explanations for a night back home around the fire—

Some cowered in their beds—some got up and prowled around.
Some thought they saw shadows leaping there beyond the town;
All agreed that *something* had leap-frogged to and fro among—
Tipping chairs and breaking plates—destroying peaceful slumber—

Some cried, we must call Bas Biggs, some said the Commander,
Some implied it was the cook, venting his displeasure for all
The grumbles he'd had for serving stew minus onions yet again—
Some said, it's just this place, the wind, the ice, the way it gets
On a poor blighter's nerves ...

They never knew, those puzzled men, that it all began
With the worst charge he could make—a troll said to an ogre,
You pong—and got the insult back two-fold, trebled even,
You freak! You sneak!—you blob, you slob, you know-nothing-nong!
(And other words I think, upon reflection, I won't repeat)
And once said there's no way back, but flying fur and broken
Teeth and scratches everywhere; you'd think they'd know
By now—these pointless fights on snowy nights—

IF ONLY IT WOULD RAIN SO WE COULD HAVE A GREEN LAWN AGAINST OUR DISTANT GLIMPSE OF SEA

Will we be going home again; will we sit along the pier
and watch the ancient ray that comes in close sometimes

and floats lazily down there between the piles, a bat-like disturbing shape, yet fascinating, while the water glints across his monumental back.

Will we be going home again; the question hangs like other questions life has thrown at us, like curly curving minkey balls that never find their goal but sail too high ...

Would it matter if we knew the answer in this life, or will they be just one more thing to ask when the chance comes up—somewhere else—excuse me, but I've always wondered—is that the way it's done, or do you put in for esoteric library books in the rooms of afterlife ... or find there's places where you can plug in and listen ... to the songs of seals and know their meaning, instantly, the songs of deeper waters, different ways of living life and playing ball.

Will we be going home soon, to the weatherboard house that's been home these years and where the geraniums droop and pine away and the grass lies brown and bare against the sandy seaside soil, and dandelions pant in the summer heat—

THE GUARDIAN SEALS WHO PULL THE CURTAINS AND TANGLE THE CORDS AND WIND THEMSELVES IN THE TASSELS AND COMPLAIN ABOUT THE NET

I have read you find loved ones who've
‘passed on before’
waiting there,
but I have this little prayer that there will be a place
where young cheery funning seals, full of games and life,
play over gentle sunning rocks where the sky
and land and sea meet and converse in kind inclusive words.

I like to think, of course I cannot know, what the path is like that is given to our children when they precede us on the way;
but I hope there's guides and friends to help them when the path seems too dim and the signposts not as clear as I would hope; kind guardians to wait at bends and curves ...

TO WALK BETWEEN SMALL GRAVES CHILD-SIZE AND UNLIKELY TO SUFFER GROWING PAINS

The way that each small soul moved on;

still clinging to the life known, then snatched,
the way that these small markers have a curious impermanence
as though, should I turn my back, then whip round

again, I'll find they've grown up,
all sprouted long and ponderous messages,
all gained a solidity, as if to say 'Here I Stay'
till Judgement Day.

But children don't belong in cemeteries;
their souls have journeys waiting elsewhere
and laughter caught about the sails;
they don't belong,
I want to cry it to the spruiking breeze,
yell it to the sinking sun,
cry it to the rising moon.

Children don't belong, I know that,
even if it's the only thing I know for sure—
everything else may pass away,
that new heaven and that new earth,
and when it reforms and renews like a shape
redone in plasticine; cow turned into ducks
ships into house and shed, my cry will echo still:
Children don't belong!

But I've done the unthinkable and bought a little space:
and if I cannot change the universe
then I will gouge and mould seals, cast them in plaster,
and seat them there for everlasting comfort;
until the place has ceased to cast its shadow over me.

A NONSENSE VERSE TO WHICH MANY YOUNG SEALS CONTRIBUTED

When white is black and black is spots,
When spots turn into curls and waffle
And we ask you to come and play because
We only have two little pairs
And you simply cannot toss foam balls
Unless you have a team of five.

We never found out why five is special,
It was handed down to us by the old grey seal
Of the outer sea, when he popped up one day
And said, my little ones, you've got it

Out of kilter, all your patterns
And your play; see your tumble bunce

That's because you throw once, throw twice,
And your balls all fly apart.
The magic number in these realms
Is the number five. If you think
That three or seven, ten or twelve,
Will do, I have to say

I don't know what silly sauce has been
Showing you the way to play.
You and you and you and you and—
We need another one.
Without the magic digit of the bounce;
You haven't heard that the world below

Is built on the waves of up and down,
Wheeee! Whoooosssshh!
Tush, tush, what were your mummas thinking of;
'tis the law of life where we find our truest home;
another lively one to make the magic circle;
—please, sir, does it matter if the shape

is a little different?
A little fat and forked about the tail, a little long and lean
Instead of round and sleek, and with a funny topknot
On its head?
Slip, slop, you silly seals—what are you thinking of?

**THEY SAY SAILORS COME BACK AS SEALS
I WONDER IF SEALS COME BACK AS SAILORS
(OR CAPTAINS BARKING ORDERS OUT)**

Unused titles, spare ideas, forlorn words;
you can't wrap them up for op-shop giving;
nor donate them to the poor;
they sit unnoticed in the corner;
waiting out their hour.

**WE HAD THAT DAY, THE DAY I WENT TO HAVE TEA
AND TALK AND SEE THE PHOTOS OF—**

Just sitting there, turning the glossy photos over,
strange how it offered a kind of peace,
not comfort quite
but a sense that in with childish things abandoned,
left, but not untidily, (not like my thoughts) piled and heaped
in a vacant room, there might be
moments come unbidden, when a smile creeps out,
to push aside the freezing tears ...
the way, she says, sometimes the sun would shine
right through a slanting shower of snow and sleet—
one blowing in from the south, the other firmly in the north.
Life is like that at times. Comfort creeps through the sorrow
Which invades the last moments of being together and embitters them.

I might heap seals around that little empty room,
with its sheets pulled up, velvet seals, and knitted seals, felt seals
flopping all about; I might ... I'm afraid, this afternoon, to come home
again from visiting, not even seals ... I just sit on that child-size bed
and the tears flow, the spring is under the glaciers and trickles
appear, find their meandering way, uncaring, between the clumps
and dainty mossy ferny things; I sit here and turn pages
slowly; the books she lent; old postcards of South Georgia ...

Sjølefant fra South Georgia, Fra Gryteviken, Fos ...
Flensning av hval ...
Oplemming av hval ... Pinginer,
Spackskjaering ... Rensdyr ... Sjølefanter i kamp ...
Grim sad cold old cards; black and white and furred,
to say to loved ones, far away, this is *our* life ...
maps with names like Enten Bay and Tonsberg Point
(if not Godthul and Schlieper Bay) among the English names;
it is as though I walk in places newly-found ... 'Because of the steep
mountains that surrounded it Leith Harbour was avalanche prone' ...
'It was the whaling station at Stromness, owned by Sandefjord Whaling Co.,
that Shackleton reached after his epic crossing of South Georgia,
May 19-20, 1916' ...
'Deutschland' (German South Polar Expedition), under the command of
Dr. Wilhelm Filchner, departed from Grytviken, South Georgia,
on December 11, 1911' ...
'A whaler's life at Husvik, in fact at all stations,
was not an easy one. In summer work was from six in the morning
until six in the evening, in winter as long as daylight lasted.'

These things now at my fingertips.

(“It must be terrifying to the poor whales to hear the throbbing of the pursuing boat’s engines and the lash of its propeller growing steadily louder and louder, and to know that no matter how hard and fast they were to swim, nor how many miles they gained on the boat, the time would come when the mighty muscles would tire and the boat would shorten the distance, until the high bows and murderous gun were only fifty yards or so behind, waiting for them to surface and breathe.”)

A hard drab life in many ways ... gay fiddles in the frozen nights
notwithstanding ... I never shared them but they stay
with me ... and the things I shared,
where are they now? ...
taken on a long long journey
and I can never know
if they might prove useful luggage ...

but I gather up these seals which have colonised this little empty room,
hug them to my heart ... and the room seems changed somehow

*

Notes: Quotes not identified in the text are from 1988 *Supplement to Postcards of the Falkland Islands: A Catalogue: 1900-1950* collected by Henry and Frances Heyburn, *Seals and Sea Lions of the World* by Nigel Bonner, and *Antarctic Housewife* by Nan Brown. Norwegian phrases are from the *Berlitz Norwegian Phrase Book & Dictionary*. Basil Biggs was the policeman on South Georgia in the 1950s.

DANAË OF THE HANG-NAIL

Παρτ Ονε

Day by day, the prison readied,
day by day this secret fear enshrined;

the way the words were given out as darkling echoes—
thy daughter, it was thought to say, thy daughter's son ...
beware—

But ... could it have been ... the wind rushing up the narrow cleft?

There are simple ways for those who heed: come hither my child,
have I ever hurt your hope ...
that filial love might wither and die under my unkindness?

Have I given orders that give you sorrow—

then you must not think ... that I am unkind ... my life is more
to me than you might understand in flagrant spring ...
my heart may burst by your absence but I will find my comfort ...

All day the workmen ready the chamber far below, the room
where beauty and careless youth must be confined to make
of the oracle a liar, a foolish prattling place.

The rough rocks replaced with beaten brass; only here and there
they let its nature thrust a headland through, release a stone that
might be called a couch; give out the dry cold soil that must become

 a bed, a print upon the ground for evermore

where one prisoner laid her head, let her feet feel the sand; hear
the soft shuffle of her movements to and fro; there she could sit
and lie, there she could reach and cry, there she could contemplate

 her face in crystal springs bubbling through; in faint
golden light that filtered down the central cracks that caught the sun
at midday, and wove the shadows round that central hope; the light,
the sun, the hope, sweet breath of day; and then the gloom, briefly

 banished invades the tomb again; and makes her stiff
and chilled and the words she tried in those first few days to say aloud,
grew cold upon her lips; and the long hours must be endured till next noon.
She sometimes leaned far out over the pool and wondered at the picture

 she saw there; me, she said firmly in the beginning, and
then, me, of course it's me, and then the curious sense that someone
else shared her solitude; a self that lived its life in deep welling waters
that rose and raced and disappeared again; and somewhere far away

 gave voice to all her unfilled longings, for home and hearth,
for love, for family, for admiration and glances that told her who she was
and what she meant and why she lived. Some days she traced patterns
in the fine earth carpet underfoot; some days she traced a hand from

 nail to nail upon the smooth brass surface, sometimes she used
her fingernails to gently abstract small stones from gaps and niches and set
them out in patterns; one noon to the next, she thought to count and then
wondered if it mattered; if I am to live here until I die, do the hours matter

 or is it best to pretend my life never moves, day doesn't follow
day but always remains, as if the sun stands still and merely covers its eyes
when it grows tired of beaming down; and directs a ray towards the stars,
bathes the moon in its unwearied glow. Today is today and yesterday is today

 and tomorrow will be tied up in today. Because if I think of
days passing, months, years, I will know that I change and fade and wrinkle,
and I know, like women everywhere, there's nothing else we can hope
to offer but the beauty of our eyes, the shape of a nose, the sweet curve

of red lips, the sunlight gleam of hair, an alabaster neck—
Without these what does it matter? Will my father at last unlock the door
when he thinks I have shrunk down to a small dry crone, when no one, not even
those who prefer my father's wealth to his daughter's face, would be

prepared to request something that rises up like the dead
from the grave, that has the stink about it of long confinement. I would say to
the slave girl he sends to slide in a bowl of food through a gap too small
to see *her* face (I waste my hours; but then what use are they, wondering if
she is dark and passionate or tall and quiet, if she is
misformed or round and sweet like a rose-cheeked plum); just her voice, soft
in the evening hour: 'Mistress'. I can say is the sun gone yet, is there a wind in
the trees, are there people still chatting in the streets, is it nearly autumn

yet—*what news?*—but she never replies. Sometimes I think
why eat, why stay alive? Will my father yet forgive me for being a
daughter, not a son? Will he align his life and mine—and say, perhaps
the oracle spoke the truth but I will accept my fate. No, a woman's life

cannot tip the scales. I sit the lonely hours away, plait and
coil my hair, unplait, uncoil, twist and turn it round my hands, lift it, let it
fall to my shadowed feet. I look at my fingers and the way my nails grow
longer, curve and claw and suggest to me the harpy's child; is this how

they found their true nature, sitting, watching, knowing
each claw made them less human than they still felt inside, more unlike
those who went about their lives outside; each claw that takes upon itself
a nature that is fierce and predatory. I pull them apart, I rub them, the rasp

of broken nail against rock and jagged edge where the metal
sheets were not fitted rim-to-rim for this grave; rasp and rasp, my hair looped
heavily over my ears; rasp, rassspppp, and sometimes I dip them in the
crystal pool and watch them wander and waver whitely in the ice-cold

water, and they might be fish, they might be eels or worms
or serpents growing from my weary fingers. And when I lift them out
they drop crystal tears upon the dry soil floor; their patterns of the same
mystery that some profess to find in piles of steaming entrails; what news,

I might ask them; what did the dryad of the pool say to you?
But they are mute and stubborn. If they could shake their heads they would.
Circles, they drip, and oak-leaves, pillars and coronets. Then they dry again
and I rub my cold water-soft hands together with a slithery sound, the sound

a serpent makes in early spring when it braves the faint
warmth and the grass slides away beneath it; I wish I could send out serpents,
know their language, say to them, wander through the world and bring me
news of my father (perhaps he's died and people have forgotten I'm still

imprisoned), of people everywhere, of people I knew; I'm
not sure I can say any more 'once loved'; see my fingers that turn you round,
say, that way, my friend, my soul, my messenger, and if you are a serpent

of the gods you will understand my words (grown rusty) and if you are
a messenger from the underworld you will merely hiss
and go away; your business not mine. See my nails, how they grow,
spray out from me; not beauty but with a kind of fearful fascination in each
and every one; and if I hold them up to the sun in that moment when it
bursts in—Apollo, I would cry, but he has no ears attuned,
help me, lift me up, show me the way you talk to trees and flowers, show
me your rippling gleam on waves, and subtle reflections on still quiet pools;
no answer—but they seem to reach, each curved talon, up toward the sky,
and I say to them, what message, sweet one (I have given
each one a name; I have little else to name, a rock, a curve, a memory)
what message will you send, and they rattle drily, like Pan playing in the
reeds; tell the world, yes, tell the world ... but if my father Acrisios does
not care, will anyone else in the world above, see the faint
pattern that reflects; perhaps it reflects on open meadows, perhaps it is
seen by feeding sheep or bulls; perhaps it goes all the way to fine white
clouds and says ... and says ... I don't know what to say ... my mind
grows sluggish, not like my nails, long and sharp enough to
scrape wounds in armour-coated men. If I hold them up against the light
I can make shadows on those smooth metal walls; strange creatures that share
my confinement; great dragons' heads, horses with wings and horns, faces
with hair like gorgon strands; strange beasts for which
I have no name, but I play with them by the hour; the long long hours
between my daily bowl of bread and olives, of ewe cheese and mutton
bone ... I say to them, do you have life behind this place, and they answer
back: the gods sent us to comfort you. Do I believe
their words? Is that the best the immortals can do? But I cling to a sense
of hope. Perhaps they know things I cannot know even though they live
my life with me, never allowed to see the world outside; some days they
dance, some days they tumble head over heels; some
times I pull them apart and watch them flicker and disappear; and take
pity on them again, my friends, and they say to me, watch the sun, watch
the golden rain, look upwards, but close your eyes, the bright light might
hurt your eyes long accustomed to the gloom and crystal
glimmers but not the light that intimates ... but when I demand to know what
they suggest, my finger creatures fall silent, droop their heads, bow their
knees as though it is a question too grand for little shadowed shapes.

The golden rain, I think, the golden rain, and it is like
a song, a refrain, a harmony, the golden rain, the dark soaking earth.
They bend, they bow, my little finger children, and I put into them
all the love I would bestow ... their little voices echo in my head but
there are days when I cannot tell which voices
belong to them and which to my rushing spring and its lapping eddies—

and there might be birds out there, there might be zephyr, breeze, or gale;
there might be people bringing in the corn, quite near, and that reminds

me I am human, that there is more to me than hair
and fingernails; that I have unused limbs, that I can smile, that I have
young breasts that droop and pine, that I have odd sharp bits like elbows,
knees, that I live with day by day but never give a moment's thought to;

those women bending in the fields, they know, oh, they
know each aching bit. If I put myself deeper in the chilly water, I feel
myself come to life, then fade away again in numbness—but I say, there,
I was alive, just then, that was me, that said ... but my knees do not have

the conversation my fingers have ... only two knees ...
it's not the same. But ten fingers all entangled fight like men with swords;
oh, they sound like orators in an assembly, they sound like patrons at the
theatre, they might be gulls quarrelling along the harbourside; in them

is the whole world waiting. Tell me, what was it
you were going to say yesterday, today, I forget when it was you promised
me you knew the future, you would converse together and tell me all
the wisdom, you as my oracle, that you could distill, one against another—
tell me—or I will tear you off again! Oh please tell—

Part Two

The way the sun falls like rain, pelting against my body,
falling all around my limbs, spreading across my exposed skin,
I don't know what to think of it, that it's summer, that the light grows
stronger, and yet the nights are cold; the days seem short, this light—
I shiver when it falls on me and wonder if it is more than light,
more than sun, more than the warmth that creeps up my arms
and around my neck, down my spine and settles somewhere between
my legs, that drips down my pallid thighs and catches round my feet
like strands of hair uncoiled and falling carelessly and I reach out with
my hands, my nails bared, and wonder what it is I catch them on,
and there is a sigh in here, a gasp, a ... groan ... no, I am imagining,
because I am alone in my cloud of golden light but my nails have wisdom
in their curving points and never tell a lie and if they say, you are not
alone, I must believe ... and all around are creatures known to others;
satyrs, nymphs, souls of men, even though my eyes are dim and dazed
and I don't know what to think of this presence that enfolds me day

after day ... I am not sure that my mind is clear; that sounds come up from the earth below of shades travelling fast on their downward way and I think I hear their voices, their last sorrowing sounds, and translate them into the world around me, knowing I will be one of them, someday; except that I have weapons now to hold off death, fierce weapons that any warrior would welcome like the springing of the dragon's teeth, that make my defence against ... but the shape my nails close around and scratch and maul is more a shape of ... it is more than rain and hail but leaves my skin shining in the dark where it filtered, I glow like cavern creatures; I do not understand what is happening to me but I feel sure it has to do with my self, that I am still a woman despite the months entombed, my robe and cloak are more than shrouds and bindings ... my gaze roves down my legs, up my arms, down my torso like the figures chipped in marble, and always ends with the knowledge it is to do with me because I am still a woman; and some times when the rain and light fall around me most fiercely I think I feel something that's more than a caress, more than the touch of hands (not mine which scratch and claw with power and hate) more than a deep sense that's somewhere inside me ... the rain not content to run unchecked across my skin, to touch my lips and close my eyes, seeks to enter deeper there, I might put my mouth up seeking the immortal dew and feel it run warm and sweet down my neck, I might bend and twist under its onslaught, I might wonder at its presence, I might cry out words that no longer sound like human words ... all these things ... and still my nails tell me there's shape within that cloud, there's body that closes in unseen, there's something there that's neither my imprisoned self nor my imagined me; and sometimes the cry that echoes round my cavern I am sure did not come from *my* lips ... and when I reach and scratch with well-honed nails I am sure that is a different kind of gasp I hear ... and then my poor nails bend and break against the air ... how strange ... and I forget that this is me enclouded and all I can think is that they, my companions, hang their sharp little heads in broken glory and ask that I tend them with loving care again, so I turn my back on sun and rain and cloud and light, and bend to their nurture, that my ten faithful friends may live and rise and reach again ... and that cloud rolls up, that bright light fades, leaving me to feel strangely bereft and dull, as we, my nails and me, contemplate the dark again ...

Παρτ Τηρεε

The hours we spend together are careless ones, not held and nurtured and enjoyed for themselves but curious in their passing; a minute might

be an hour, a day a minute longer, the months and phases seem to change

under the onslaught of something I do not understand;

something that swells beneath my ribs and makes me sick and makes
me hungry, so that at first I thought I'd pine and die and my agony would
be at an end, and then I thought I found life better, that all was not lost

and I could eat like a horse and drink like an ox and still

I felt I needed more, and some mornings I felt that I had changed and we
talked together of it all, its strangeness and its sense of hope, and they told me
they thought I'd changed, that I gave them less attention at times, and

other days we wondered why the light was faint and white,
not bright and hot and golden like the rumoured glare of lust, more like
mothers rising in the night to nurse ... or something ... I don't understand
why my world is silver now, why I feel alone and yet not quite alone ... and

we dispute like men in the assembly, boys around their tutor,
full of questions, full of all the mystery that is men ... like those moments
when you sit with your eyes closed yet knowing exactly how the room beyond
looks ... *and yet* ... when you first open your eyes again what you see is

unexpected; you can't think why, you knew it all was there.

Tell me, companions of my darkest hours, what is the meaning of these things;
I set them to anguished chatter: what will we tell her today, when she asked
the same question yesterday and a hundred times before ... will we say,

mistress, you know our answer ... or will we say—devise a
different answer to the mystery of life? And will she ask us the same question
tomorrow as she uses us to curl and loop her coiling tresses; as we touch and
travel down across her swelling skin and feel—something—beat within? What

answers can we give that will satisfy the one from whom
all life and goodness flows; the one who names us, needs us, loves us ... and
if we tell the truth; that a second set of nails, tiny curving whitely pink and
glowing, are sending up to us first messages ... will she say, how wonderful!

or that we speak nonsense ... or turn away in resignation,
disgust, despair, despondency ... this, what kind of life is this for the faithful
companions of my exile ... and we will say, see us, see how we grow despite
the dark ... and she might say, but you are faint now and pale and brittle and

I fear for you ... and then she will place us on her skin
where it rises taut and silver-veined and we will feel its many messages;
its life and sheen and tough veneer ... and we will talk among ourselves
while she sleeps again: what shall we say that's comfort, what shall we say

that's true ... and we feel a kind of jealousy that our
pre-eminence is under challenge ... that she will forget us when she sees new
nails curling soft and slow on tiny fingers, she will believe that they are hers
and forget that we are hers ... unless we dig her sharply each time she curves

her palms ... tell her we are hers and we do not take kindly
to second place. We are well primed to dispute and fight, we are the

companions of leisure hours, of sleep, but also the friends of anger, fear, and disputation; fierce foes of forgetfulness. And now as she grows sluggish

in the daylight hours and reclines against the brass with us held limply against her monstrous curves, we know that we have become the masters of her fate; that she is clay and we are swords and we can choose: to reach down in those final hours and ease her new life inch by inch

into this world or scrape and scratch and snatch and pull until it lies bleeding helplessly between her languid thighs. Our choice. Night by night, day by day, we argue the case for life or death; for help or hindrance; the final struggle each warrior must face, each half-human

thing must ask, is it life we want or death and final rest within the bosom of our mother who lets us, hard and sharp though we be, dissolve and slow and turn in lasting peace to earth. And the tiny cries seep up through unknown seas; love us, save us, let us free ... and we give

our final verdict. She lies and writhes and cries and moans, and we touch her with our knowledge, mistress, friend, and final slave, go on, we are here, we wait, we watch, we lean and touch the tiny skull and our touch is soft and beckoning; and we hold the slippery thing and let

it dry and cry and lift it tenderly to her swollen breasts, and we, one, two of us, take charge and guide that seeking mouth, three, four of us, raise that nipple, wait upon that careless hunger ... our choice, our wait ... but something has changed ... light enters the cavern, the

entrance blocks are torn away ... and loud voices, exclamations, wonder, surprise, all there! All beating round our tiny heads; and then she is lifted up, born away, her child asleep in her arms ... and anger, there's anger clashing to and fro. How! When! Where! Treachery.

But the stone we know has not been moved; we know the answer, we know how it happened, we touched and scratched the immortal form and knew its power ... but blinking in the sun we have no voice—only a kind of gnashing that's inaudible to these knaves around us;

she hears, she knows, but she is powerless to stop them as they shout: Look at those talons on her, the harpy of a woman, and then we feel ourselves cut and cast away ... and in the distance, nails on wood, fresh cedar wood, and then her fate, as she is grabbed and bundled, she and

her baby son, in to that deep and fragrant box and carried to the harbourside and set sail upon a different journey. Our voices are muted, briefly, but we are indestructible, because we are the gift of the earth; from earth and grass and meat and milk we came, to them we return ... and our

power to grow even when she dies, to grow and grow ... mistress, we are here still, all ten of us with you, and companions growing side-by-side but young ... and we hear her whisper against the rocking waves, don't leave me, never leave me, I need you all, you are to me what to others ... but then she sighs and sleeps and we wait and watch for ...

—Της Ενδ—

THE SPANISH WALK

(FOR BETTY, HELEN, MARIE,
AND LOVED HORSES)

1.

This is a modern tale, not quite a Chaucer's,
Set in motion by a little man, one Paddy Mahoney,
Often found around the saleyards, calves, pigs, horses,
Where he liked to buttonhole—not quite the blarney—

No, but a ready tongue for sure, and known for his 'good eye',
A gentle nudge, "now, have you looked in here,"
And before a person knew, they'd find themselves—"why,
Yes", or "No, not what I—", and that quick-witted seer

Would be moving on; "of course not—but I did just happen
To notice," his brow wrinkled as if in thought,
"along this lane, damn nice weaners in that pen,"

And so it went, as if he knew just what you sought.

He lit upon a woman, strolling, dropped in merely;
One of those women ‘a tough old bird’, people like to say;
“As if it isn’t!” he could be charming, “haven’t seen you in nearly—
What would it be, a year of more! Been away?”

“Getting on,” she sighed, grey hair bobbing, “without a doubt,
I’ve just got my bay mare now, my little Milly,
Suits me down to the ground—reckon she’ll see me out.”
“It’s true,” he echoed, sighing, “time passes, willy-nilly.”

But he thought he saw a secret rage, an ‘I’m not finished yet’—
She’d ridden round the shows for more than fifty years,
She loved the life, the sun and dust, ribbons, talk, friends met;
Inside she pushed, and yearned, and held those secret fears

Back hard; still hacked and jumped, showed the younger
Ones how to take a corner fast, judge an in-and-out;
He took her elbow, wise to that vague sense of hunger,
Walked her down the churned dust walks, turned about—

“Did you notice this big bloke, along this way, five,
I’d say, six at a pinch, he took my eye.
Was one of Benny Boone’s, heard he’d died,
Last of his team, I s’pose, might be a cheap buy—

I know you’re chancing an arm, with one of his,
But you can’t help admiring him, that neck,
That fine head, that superb rump—could quiz
Sol Dean, he’ll know what’s what—still, what the heck!

He’ll go for a song, whatever old Sol claims”—
She was tempted, he could see—that noble head ...
And hadn’t connected yet, those iffy names,
Cunning Sol, and old Benny’s team, best no more said—

He hid a little grin, an impish grin; saw she was hooked;
Not as if she was green, down in some recent shower,
Not her! Knew her neddies ... but ... “those hocks,”
The tempter came in close, not a spiel, not when the flower

Had budded, burst and bloomed; and who can say? He fought down

Any doubts—she's no spring chicken, wouldn't want
Her to fall, not at her age—if she should bid for Benny's crown,
The best buckjumper on the rounds; St Michael's Mont ...

Some called him Monty; some called him far worse things;
Dave Brown stayed on six ticks, Hank Lawson three,
While Monty reared and dived, fish-tailed round bare rings;
It's true, no one ever rode *that* horse on to victory.

She turned and smiled; “Didn’t strike me straight off then,
Those names, you know, but I knew there had to be
A catch somewhere—but you’re right, you’re so right when
You stopped me there, saw he’d suit me to a tee—

If an old biddy like me should go out this way, well, who’s to cry?
I know you’re an old con artist, Paddy, always were,
But thanks all the same, I’ll put in a bid, if he doesn’t go too high—
And blame you when—” That little imp doffed his hat to her.

II.

Every person worth their salt has relations,
Or so a certain family liked to say at times;

More than once, I’m inclined to think, in situations
Sometimes a little—tricky—and sometimes

A thing of comfort. A new horse unloaded
In the yard was a situation fraught,
When her niece came by and saw what boded
Ill for an aunt who by rights now ought

To be taking life a little easier; quite a bit easier, she said
There and then, and found her concern ignored.
“I’m not a dunce, Lucie-girl, I know my old bones, my head,
My hips, my ribs, are all breakable, brittle, flawed,

But cotton wool was never my way of living life, wrapping
Up tight, taking care, wanting only to make
Older bones ... not me ... not when I’ve got new plans mapping,
Tied around this testy bugger. So, for goodness sake,

Let me enjoy my life, what’s left of it.” Conversations,

Like this one, leave no one quite reconciled,
Not to each other, not to life and future falls; reservations
Linger ... and regrets ... 'if only she'd—' get piled

One upon the other; these women, blunt and brusque
With each other, but fond in absent ways,
And believing each knew best; in noon of life, and dusk,
Each seeing where the other failed, and amazed

That what she saw wasn't what the other saw, but then
Family feeling and family lore—family love, even
Attenuated, as it seemed, could blind the eye and when
It mixed itself with judging horseflesh, the leaven

Was the love. Neither ever mentioned *love* but temporised
And pretended to herself family feeling was best
Expressed in carping words of bitter-breasted size,
And harrowed up, and watered down, lest ...

The Long Way Walked

*That walk of Inés de Suárez—did she insist—that she not be left behind
When the mules and horses got gathered in, a milling train,
Held them there, the packing in, only half-acclimatised,
Weapons, far sight, hope, a last benediction,
The way the exiled leather creaks ...
A walk that began in halfcharted, deeply wounded places,
Peru, they called it tentatively, Cuzco ...
Or was it love, pure and tender?*

III.

“You’ve named him, auntie, then? Not his long-time
Name but something new, something he’ll
Never answer to. Well, you know best, but still I’m
Surprised you didn’t keep to what would make him feel ...

At home.” “And since when did you ever care what I
Named a neddy? Let alone want them all to be—
At home! When, for two pins, you’d have me horseless—by my
Lonesome in one of those *Retirement* Homes, with me

Stuck in an armchair in front of the daytime soapies,

And nurses saying, now dear, we must watch you,
See you're not *overdoing it* ... what's IT? Not poor dopies
Like that row parked day-long round the TV room, who rue

A gentle walk. IT! Gaw-strewh! Might knock a week or two
Off a useless life, give the planet breathing space,
And you'd have me one of *them*! Lucie-girl, you'd do
Me a favour if you'd stop your fussing—"Just in case

You've forgotten, I only asked if you'd changed the poor
Brute's name? Nothing more." Aunt and niece,
They had this way of turning questions into something more
Akin to war, sometimes truce, but rarely, fully, peace.

"But as you've asked—well, I thought I want a name that's
Simpler, shorter, tougher, better. St Michael's Mont!
Something wrong there. Half French, half C of E, like a Tatt's—
Drawn once and never said again. No thanks. I want

A name that's right for him, right for me, right for public
Life." And when he throws me to kingdom come,
I want it done in style, no fusspot name. He came—one flick
Of seasoned heels—he saw, he conquered. But mum

Is the *only* word where that girl's concerned. She needn't know
This bloke's got an awful past. She'd have forty
Kittens on the spot and I can't stand the ... "I thought I'd go
With something to suggest this fella is all male, haughty,

Arrogant, machismo I believe they call this quality, not that
I know much about the Latin man, but I thought
Of Conquistador and Amazon, Bolivar and the bloke that sat
On a mountain-top, can't think of his moniker, sought

The Pacific if I remember rightly—a poem at school, Keats,
Wasn't it?" Lucie shook her head; she'd preferred Art,
Drama, Music. "So what did you finally settle on? Not Man Meets
Sea?" She smiled and waited. "Or Inca Gold or Ocean Chart?"

"You've got a better imagination than me! No, I only
Thought of the common things, and I s'pose, well,
This one's common enough but I just don't see me, endlessly,
Wanting to repeat it for those who never learnt to spell,

And there's quite a few of *them* around! I don't know
What's happened to teaching kids the three Rs—”
“You've said all that before—and I'm still waiting, so—
“What's it to be? Pedro or Pancho, Pilar or Parse?”

“I don't know if that's a joke or you know more Spanish
Than me—but then I never was much of a swot,
Just two and two, and keep it plain, but if you can manage
A Don in front, we're just about there, thank God.”

“Don Pedro? Yes, I think it suits him fine. But his name
Isn't really why I came. I wanted to come and see
That he's got no bad habits, no nasty tricks up his mane,
Just a good ride. A comfy stride but not *too* free—”

The Way of the Desert

*The way the wind frets stone, and the smell of sulphur in the air
And salt lakes held as inverted shimmering seas, the soft-bed salars
That stretch whitely, far and far, shining in the sun;
The lack of ambush, the fear of thirst—
Or the fear of ambush and the lack of drink
As they moved south, the Atacama route
That blew them from the north upon the superheated air
And left them with leaden feet in the frozen nights ...*

IV.

‘Phew! I don't know which was worse—reassuring
That girl, with my tongue between my teeth,
Or wondering what will happen *when*—always assuming
You will let me get that far, a tricky feat

I do not doubt. But I've been warned and you've been
Rescued from the tight tickle of the flank rope—
So what comes next, eh Don, remains to be seen?
But we'll get you lungeing well, and we'll hope

You know which side your bread is buttered on,
Because the fate of has-been saddle broncs
Is a dog-food can down a short short track, my Don,
And I'd hate to see you end as bite-size chunks—’

The way within the Whiles

*Don Pedro and Doña Inés might ride companionably side by side
In this world where lovers tarried and chaplains rode ten paces back;
A precious space that's rarely in the world but walking at its edge
Between the moments designated Conquest merely
And those designated Love and Universal—
But history books are silent on some things.*

V.

It has been maintained that wet Downs soil is akin to
Stiff black glue; I've now noted it can be so
Myself. And it gathers round the feet till a 'snowshoe'
Is a walker's set of nether wear. From observation I know

It has a certain clinging power. So I'm not surprised
That the choice to mount up a certain horse
Was taken after a decent fall of rain. I was apprised
Of the event because, not being there, of course

It was assumed I could soothe wounded pride but never
Say 'I told you so' and 'You should have listened'
And 'I knew this would happen, I just *knew*—' Severed
Limbs I accept and broken bones; tears that glisten—

*Ways Unpaved and Waiting; God Willing,
She wrote with someone else's heart ...*

*In a world where the feel of saddle leather against my legs
Is gone for ever, unless I sever all unearthly ties*

*The way he was solicitous and kind enough
But I came I often think, not for the love of man, but so
I'd be 'la primera mujer española' to see those ways a little like
The colonnaded roads of home, with snow-capped peaks instead—
Not the harsh dark sorrowed ways of remembered plateau roads
We were the dust on the horizon
Unwanted yes,
But familiar by the time we traversed the arid space between.*

Ways of God and Sorrow

*The Diaguita women here look on with impassive dark
And thoughtful eyes*
A woman, perhaps they say, when we've shambled past—
A woman! And they shell and turn the summer's corn, a woman like
A man in mail (heavy helmet on my head, heavy blade in my hand,
When I need to fight; they fear me then ... but days I ride
And there's nothing asked of me)
Sift and save pale seeds for grinding,
And wonder when we'll stop and where we'll say 'no more,
The end of the world comes nigh'

VI.

'And can it be said, O mate o' mine, you've got a *mouth*?
Don't need a mouth, living that sweet life of Riley?
Fella with a rope in one hand, the other waving north 'n' south,
Testing the breeze, and heels scouring, wily-beguily,

Neck to flank? O yes, I know all about *your* old habits,
Done a bit of asking round; up and over, I hear, when
You can't dump men in simpler ways. One jab and it's
Ooh and ahh, and he'll kill a man yet. No wonder Ben

Boone instructed Sol not to bother looking for a private sale.
He didn't want innocent blood on his grave. Folks
Saying, 'he *should've warned*'— And so he should. A frail
Old fool buying the Don—I hate to think. Pigs in pokes

Are all very well, but not when it comes to horseflesh.'
She slipped the bridle on, adjusted both cheek straps
With care, let him champ the unaccustomed bit, the fresh
Sharp metallic taste on a sleeping tongue. 'Perhaps ... '

She took her time, 'you'll realise balanced bodies beat
Two bags o' spuds jouncing, bouncing, putting you
Off your stride—wouldn't you prefer a pair of hands, a seat
That's still and light and deep, a touch from one who,

If I say so myself, has a lifetime of experience and
Isn't solely concerned to stay aboard and rise higher
Up those Rough Rider ratings, a tough young band,
And brave enough, but casual when it comes to nicer

Points of equitation. But enough of chat. Let's see
What you have in mind and whether I can still
Stay put on a horse which unlike Milly has a nasty bee
In its bonnet when it comes to jocks, even an old Jill

Of All Trades like me.' She took her reins in one hand,
The stirrup in the other and nimbly mounted up.
The horse stood astonished for one brief moment, a stand
Of shock, outrage—then leapt forward, a mighty buck

That rattled her teeth and lost her hat, but at its farthest limit
He found she still sat there, deep down, patient,
Waiting, ready, soothing in her words, as if he'd mimicked,
Merely, a horse more fearsomely reputationed.

So it went, all morning. She clung, unashamedly, glued to
Pommel and reins, only afraid of that posited rear
And back-throw. But he seemed bemused by the lack of cues,
The noise and cheers and spurs and rowdy jeers—

She'd chosen to ride him in the wet bottom yard,
Harder for his meteoric lift-offs, softer too for
Her falls. And she stayed on (though I must record he jarred
Her seriously) and, even though it stuck in his craw,

He finally agreed that a brief step forward, a short
Walk sideways, was not defeat but made a kind of sense
In heavy mud that clung like Tarzan's Grip and brought
His first fireworks to a squibby end, and hence

Set a certain tone to their future relationship—
Which is not to say the Don gave in on the spot.
Not him! But a kind of guile, next time he let it rip,
Marked his style and showed him what was *not*

The way to go. Unfortunately. His twist and rear and throw
Left them both on the ground and her first hopes
Shaken—oh, and Lucie spitting chips. But even with this blow
To her budding plans, her mind said simply, 'Coax'.

VII.

Lucie found herself finding reasons to pop in often.
“Can you use—” “The family’s coming for lunch.
Join us—” “Just on my way home—” Anything to soften
This secret fear, that she’d find lying there, a punch-drunk

Aunt of maturer years, an indomitable but foolish
Aunt, an aunt who refused to say enough’s enough;
One determined to go out, Maranoa-boots-first through this
Curtain that hangs between life and gentlest puff

Of telling wind that marks the entrance to eternity.
(I should know.) Her aunt said “Tosh! What’s a fall
Or two? Even Princess Anne comes a cropper frequently.”
But in her heart she felt a tinge of gratitude for each, for all

The see-through excuses. Lucie, unlike those American
Sit-coms, would never say, “I love you, auntie,
Do take care.” No, just a flying visit and not a hint of ban:
“I utterly forbid you to throw your life so carelessly

Away and all for the sake of a sour old gee-gee which
Hates the idea of giving in with a speck of grace.”
Or even playing skillfully on the strings of guilt, pitched,
A siren call, around the neglect of Milly, a good case

For being content with one sweet-natured mare. But Lucie,
Despite her apprehension, understood this affray was a
Struggle to the end. Only one victor. But unlike, gruesomely,
In the amphitheatre, both would live and love another day;

Two sparks that were meant to flash and burn together.
“I know you worry, Lucie-girl, and I don’t really blame
You one bit, I have my moments when I think I’d best sever
This connection, let him go, and in the blanky name

Of all that’s wise, I know that commonsense and dreams
Don’t mix. But there’s something there. He was *born*
For *haute école*, for the grandest of the high school airs, it seems
To me, or am I merely fooling myself because I’d mourn

His going? I could turn him out, keep him for another pet,
Like Bindi-Boy and Tam; let him run with the agistment
Stock. But I still believe we can survive, we can, even yet,

Find the way to partnership. Come to some agreement.”

VIII.

I needn’t take your time with blow-by-blow descriptions
Of barely-tenable moments that might, just might, be called
Progress; of falls, of heart-searching, of doubts, prescriptions
For hope and the downfall of despair; of two in thrall

To something that lies deep, deeper than surface acts might
Suggest. A kind of pride. A mutual pleasure that I think
Has never been delineated because it understands that pride
And spirit and curiosity run hand-in-hand past the chink

That opens on a deeper glimmer into different ways of seeing
Life. Portentous? Yes. But those glimpses, too fleeting
To deserve a name, are part of never giving up, of being
Sailors in the storm, who yet envisage calmer waters sleeping

Beyond those fearsome narrow gorges; who set a compass course
And if they waver still find their direction swinging north
As though something beyond them will not let them pause
Except to gather breath and courage before next setting forth ...

IX.

Lucie came on Milly, a timid rider, more at home with
Saanen goats but fond of that neatly-stepping mare,
And rode alongside an uneven snorting Don, miffed
That they went sedately (a canter was for that gentle pair

Their sweetest pace; Lucie and Milly, a twosome suited—
And yet they acted as a form of restraint upon
The fiery Don) and he could curve and root, but muted
Now; and the summer evening and its magpie song

Gave Lucie hope that the worst was over, that if there
Were to be more falls they would be less fierce;
And her heart sang. Not that he could be said to care
For the niggling bit, the pressing legs, the aids to pierce

A lifetime’s habit of forward rush and sideways leap
And backwards crash, the erupting space between

Chute and cheers, but every so often she felt him keep
The sense of falling into a balanced stride, the lean

Into a well-flexed turn, just a flash, and then he was
Fighting her again; the never-ending arms-full.
Lucie was lavish in her praise; they both were, “because
He’s improved no end in just a month, push and pull,

But I really think you’re winning … ” “I *know* I am,
But there’s days when I wonder, when we seem
To be right back at the start, when I wish I didn’t feel so damn
Old … That’s my bogeyman. I wake up feeling like a team

Of leaping llamas has been landing thud! on me all night,
And not even a Radox bath and a long lifetime
Of working hard can stay the fear of getting stiff and tight.
My poor old muscles. I pretend. I say I’m fine …

But … ” Lucie nodded, yet knew that sympathy was really
The last thing wanted. “If it was the next Olympics—
Okay—I’d say stop dreaming, but you know you’re dearly
Wanting just one last chance to show them all, hicks

And highbrows, that you can take him in to a dressage ring
And both acquit yourselves with style. That you can turn
A horse people knew to be a rogue and outlaw into something
They’ll wish they saw first and didn’t laugh and spurn

As being a waste of time, a horse gone beyond the pale.
You know I’m right, of course? It’s not the Grand Prix
At Sydney Royal, it’s the people who have said, mainly male,
But some women too, “thought you’d given up, that you’d be

Retired by now, thought you were taking life a little easier—”
Small things like that, well-meant no doubt, but they got
Your goat, didn’t they? You have to prove to him or, worse, to her,
Doesn’t matter, that they didn’t know the real you. Not

The you that’s terrified of feeling it’s no use, of being
Put away, fussed over by younger women but forgotten
By the people who’ve been your real family now for nearing
Half a century.” She fell silent. She’d never cottoned

The reasons why a woman, stunning in her youth, had
Chosen not to marry. Was it horses, was it the sweet
Independence of the farm, no Mister Right ... a sad, bad
Throw of the dice? She'd sometimes wondered when she

Thought upon the question. She'd never met anyone that *she*
Fancied since Brett had gone and her children grown up;
But that was different. And now she saw it as a life lived free
Of that particular agony. The partner, the pair, the loving cup,

The mutual passing of time. And here was a woman who'd
Found that friendship was all she wanted and found
It in abundance. But, now, with all the talk of aged care, a mood
To suggest anyone over sixty must be armchair-bound,

Pensioned-off, a drain on society, she felt this secret fear
That what she had might not stand the test of time.
Don Pedro was her love—no argument over that—but here
Beyond the said and seen was her way of saying: *I'm*

Still worth something, *I'm* still tough, don't count me out.
They rode on, not talking any more. What more

Was there to say, when they understood each other just about
As well as any more usual twosome, married in law ...

X.

She bent over show schedules; to enter Milly for what?
Lady's Hack of course, a couple of novelty
Events for the fun of it. And the Don? She bent to jot
A very different schedule; that from the date he

Caught her eye to his initial ride beyond the yard,
From his first flying change to graduation
To a double bridle—'It's as though, onward and upward,
We're flying, making up for lost time; the way-station,

The tiny steps with a young horse, are not our path.
Our journey is Paul Revere, the Ride from Aix
To Ghent, the breathless rush ... is it really just last
Summer we began this strange journey, this play

That's destined, like a panto, for a certain season.

Only ten months?' She put her pencil down.

'But, alas, that doesn't answer my toughest question:

To take you with me and Milly when we go around

The summer shows? Tie you up, let you enjoy

The noise and bustle, ride you gently in when the ring

Is not full of children on fat ponies, girls and boys,

Some skilled, some starting out, kids careening—

Space we need; see if you behave, see what memories

Resurface? I know Lucie will say, O gosh, not yet,

But there's no point in wrapping you in cotton wool, to ease

You in so quietly you don't realise ... because I'll bet

You think of what's in store the moment I load you in

With Milly in the double float. But there's no harm

In taking you along to watch horses which amidst the din

Retain a modicum of manners, of obedience, of calm.

No harm at all. Except for a certain apprehension

On my part at least. But then I'm old-fashioned, and *I*

Have a hard-won reputation. It's beyond my comprehension

Why people put clothes that cost a fortune high

Upon their list and the way their horse behaves beneath

The figure they think they'll cut. I remember how,

Long ago, we flew around the ring, the Bareback Hunt, a feat

I wouldn't want to try on these pampered creatures now,

All oats and vitamins and short-cuts and oh-so-smart

Appearances and not the horse you'd ever want to ride

For comfort or utility. It's the money, I fear, puts the cart

Before the blinky horse. Or am I just a little snide

Because I feel I can no longer compete, not money-wise,

Not with all these new techniques in training

The modern horse, these new pills to stuff him with, in the guise

Of science; not with the thousand dollar gleaming

Boots, those perfect-sculptured jodhs, those snowy stocks

And well-cut coats from classy Sydney firms,
I'm not in the race. Envy? Or is it age that makes me mock
The things that others see, or seem to see, in terms

That make me cynical? We'll go, we'll let folk know
There's a new name on the circuit, and we'll see
How you behave when the loudspeakers blare and sideshow
Alley roars and chip-packets crackle and—if you flee

Those dagwood dogs makin' an' bakin', or stand and absorb
It all as though it's life and you haven't been yourself
These past quiet months, as if you've grown staid and morbid,
Not half the Don you thought you were, a mere stuffed pelt—

XI.

Lucie wasn't given to chewing nails down to the quick,
A calm woman, she thought, an earth mother type,
But these last months since the show season began—a sick
Sense of unspoken fear filled her on the days when, alive

To all the possibilities for the Don to churn his heedless
Way through hapless showfolk, those small children

On ponies, babies in prams, giggling pony-clubbers careless
Of reins and stirrups, eating fairyfloss, gathered, kidding,

Feckless, foolish ... Lucie saw accidents waiting to happen,
And was never comforted by her aunt's reassurance:
"The Don? Like a mouse, all a-quiver but really, a dab hand
At taking crowds in his stride, an old stager, a flick and prance

At his first entry into the ring by the formal gate, a puzzled
Glance around, a root for old times' sake, really nothing more,
No drama, so give over worrying, girl, cease looking frazzled,
We'll get by ... and I know now when something a little raw

Is in the offing. He drops his bit when he thinks a rear
Would enliven life, I feel him lose impulsion,
Feel his unschooled thoughts click into a different gear,
And I'm ready, waiting, I understand that old compulsion ...

Catch him in that second before thought becomes reality—"

“But—it’s too risky—honestly, it’s not worth the chance
He’ll catch you when you’re just that minute, absent-mindedly,
Well, I don’t know—thinking what to cook for lunch—

Maybe—or see the mailman coming—or the windmill needing
Turning in—*something*, anyway—and you’ll be off
And hurt—lying there, something broken ... ” “O, and bleeding,
You mustn’t forget the blood and gore!” Her aunt just scoffed.

But it’s no laughing matter. Lucie put in worried nights
Yet knew better than to beat her head against a brick wall;
And the Don—she watched him develop, reach new heights
Of equine grandeur. A blazing sight! But the falls,

The falls, they loomed inevitably, and she wondered if
The other side of the coin sufficed for every payment.
He walked in her sleep, the gleaming curve of neck with
Powerful reaching stride; as if the curtain were rent

Between sleep and waking, hope and fulfillment, what
He could be if the past should not prove too strong.
The call of something wild. Could the present hope to blot
It from his mind or would it lie in wait, a siren song—

*The niños gather round; see us, wondrous and peculiar, not a
Threat, strange creatures from a place apart ...
Ask and we cannot catch their words, say, caballero, say animales,
Say burros from the greener parts, take down our sun-dried meat,
Lay out our blankets under desert stars ... and smell the dust ...
I would love a child but ...*

Figures in another world, that so loved their horses,
Watch over, I can tell you that, I know it now—
And rode relaxed, their chosen path, part predestined courses,
And stay on, in a shadow world, asking that God allow ...

*I love, amor, amor, the sense of space unfilled and angry
carping tongues left far behind ... I am, I am, a woman of the wide
wide land, where harsh thorn scrub gathers in around the precious
water, and strange branched cactus ‘candelabra’ reach up waiting
arms ... not left complete, not with our inquisitor, Marmolejo, in the
pack; but he rides slow and cautious, his eyes darting everywhere to
find idolatry not yet rooted out of dark evading Aymara hearts ...*

I was there, riding well out front, when we entered a different world, tinged with green again, and mountains that hover blue, azul, azul, the haze forgotten, the coming waters fresh and bubbling with a bird-song day, a day when the gritty land no longer flings itself, a swirling taste like the dry-dust djinns of a departed place, creatures that begin and end in secret unspoken worlds, waiting, waiting, always waiting, that the traveller ...

XII.

Between the world of the showground and unflinching

Work, hard work, there was that moment when
Aunt and niece reminisced; “all of forty years since
The word dressage entered our vocab; so foreign then

And said now without a thought; those Austrians with their
Military minds; precise, ordered, conditioned, just so—
Took us from our hundred-acre-worlds and confined us fair
And square in a roped-off-yard and expected us, yo-yo, go-whoa,

To canter on the spot and still they cried ‘forward impulsion’!
We thought they were asking for the moon, us there like crabs,

Like rocking-horses, or shadow-mounts, no compunction
For their shape and size; horses were never meant ... and they had

Us turning tighter than we’d ever thought ... not even when I
Campdrafted in my early days ... and our neddie’s knees higher
Than the best of harnessed hackneys ... ‘collection’, ‘aids’, ‘light
In hand’, ‘elevation’, and all their French, long words to tire

My poor old tongue—but we saw it work, we saw it make
Our horses better rides, more flexible, saw the ways it helped us
Bring out the best in horses we’d dismissed, for heaven’s sake,
Like my favourite—old Dan McGrew—poor Dan’s been dust

These twenty years but I took him from a knacky horse around
The place to a horse people admired for his extended trot,
And first tried with him to see if I could reach the stars, found
We could Spanish walk and trot, do a half-decent piaffe, the lot.

I think I’ve still got some photos put away somewhere, the two

Of us. Old Dan was no oil painting—roman nose, ewe-neck,
Roach-back, pity that, but a nicer-natured horse you never knew—
Pity I can't combine the Don and Dan, but what the heck—

You can't have everything.” ‘No, you can't have,’ Lucie thought,
And poured another cup; ‘the knowledge gleaned from working
Dan and horses since finds its apogee just when the body ought
To take life a little easier, but there are always imps a-lurking,

Those ‘best laid schemes’; youth gives us energy, feckless courage,
And age the wisdom to nurture them when they’re failing—
That’s life and reconciling them is always hard, that secret rage
I sometimes feel when I come in here, that futile railing ...

Is it ‘the human condition’ to know we’ll never have it synchronised,
Or is it the sense on which we base the best we can achieve,
The qualities that reach for that image of perfection, the Christlike,
If that’s the word I want—and I see it as me-and-mine, perceived

As human interaction—and she as something in the space between
The human and the creature world; where the non-human mind
Leaps a barrier to respond yet keeps its sense of self; still green
In the ways of humankind yet with constant twitch of ear, entwined

With thoughts and moods and the ego that’s hidden from the world
But felt by the horse-self we only vaguely understand;
That what we decry as mere instinct is a fine tuned sense unfurled—
A sixth or seventh sense that apprehends a slightly other-land ...

If we overlap, this time around, as only sight and sound and smell
And demands upon each other, matter upon matter, how might
We come again, reborn, renewed, evading the clasp of hell,
Let along the hope of heaven, a limbo place, a shadowed site ...

We interact as soul and soul, collective soul of horse, soul of me,
Soul of everyone since time began who has loved across that line,
Interactive souls in another world—I don’t pretend to oversee
A creed to bring us back in equine shape nor one to see the divine

In the guise of centaur or the goddess-mare—but I’ve come to think,
I’m not sure why, the world beyond this world, *worlds* perhaps,
Share a deeper understanding with what we’re barely on the brink
Of seeing, in the sense of sharing connection with, a maze mapped

Where we meet at the sense of the single cell and verging on infinity.
I can't explain, I wish I could, this sense of mystery ...
Every time I ponder on this universe of ours; its febrile oddity,
Its might and power, its beauty and its ugliness, and now its history

Of aunt and horse, experience, exuberance, will and other's will;
They hurt me in some secret inner place, their lack of time, the way
Age fights them when they think it's each other's stubborn stand, ill
Suited to this last fling that keeps one and saves the other, the fray,

The fight, the tussle of two strong minds is heartening, yet I fear
In some deep cleft there is no happy ending'; so Lucie sat and ate
Sponge cake and thought and felt the poignancy of her self as seer,
And hoped she had it absolutely wrong, no inside track on fate ...

I watched the church processions, the newly solemn priests, the well-blessed—and I the woman who had offended a world, a king, that made the woman virgin and slave; I had ridden, ridden, alongside the man those months equal upon equal, my blade, my horse, keeping pace, my horse—I'm not sure that where we set our cities should be where we set our hearts, or know our inner selves; this solitude ...

XIII.

Lucie set her busyness aside, briefly; horse sale day today.
“A moment”—and “I know I shouldn't when—”
But she felt it draw her in. “I'll just pull in here, stay
A tick.” Semis, floats, farm-trucks, horses, ponies, men.

She heard the auctioneer, felt a moment's pity as she, like me,
Saw old unwanted nags hunted through. A voice
At her side said, “After anything in particular, my dear?”
She turned. A little man. Wizened. Nut-brown. Hat poised.

She dredged up a weary smile. “No. I really don't know why
I came. A passing thought. It was here my aunt bought—”
She felt it a faint relief to tell a stranger. But his Irish smile
Dropped and died. “Not that bloody horse? I knew I ought—”

“Was it you, talked her into buying him? Mr Mahoney, I think
She said—” “Fraid so. Too much for her, I suppose,
Though it wasn't me, not really. Sold himself, that old rat-fink

Beggar of a bucking bronc—knew he'd keep her on her toes,

But should've thought more before I spoke—" Lucie in her
Gentle way reassured him. "Not your fault. And it was heart,
Not horse, that took her out. He did her proud, still a learner
But she had offers from all over, people asking her to part

With him for largish sums but she always said if they'd come
This far in two years—then where might they be in ten years'
Time—" Lucie felt the sudden tears well up. But she forced some
Few words more up her aching throat. "All my fears

For her were groundless in the end, she died as she would have
Wished—with him—outside—always taking the tough
Road up—and the way the two of them—they both had fire and
Iron instead of gentle hearts—but they loved, they huffed,

They fought, yet did things I could never do—" She undid
Her bag, took out some photos, showed them to Paddy Mahoney.
"Well, I'll be—" He whistled to the wind, felt the past amid
The present's grief. "What a sight, you're right, you're so darn

Right—made for each other—" He shook his head in wonder.
"And now? What now?" Lucie put the pics away again,
Said, "I've got them both, Milly and the Don, and so I ponder
What's best for them. Milly, I can ride, she's right as rain,

But the Don frets, misses her, I don't know what's best to do."
She thought of that day, of finding the figure lying
In the yard, of the Don upset, of the rush and ringing, and ever rued
The fact she'd arrived too late ... but then dying

Just like that was probably what she'd wanted; no slow slide,
Just the moment's sharp pain and then merciful oblivion.
The books and notes she'd left still on the table the day she died;
"The elevated airs"; 'legs must come down straight'; 'the Don

Has done his first Sp. steps today—not quite a journal of his
Progress. Reminders. Notes. Pride here, a setback there.
And the words, 'I feel my age, I wish I'd found him six,
Maybe seven years ago.' And back a page or two, 'Not fair,

Perhaps, but Lucie will do what's best for the two of them.'

“I wish I knew,” she said aloud. But “These things take time,” He let his smile break through, “and it wouldn’t surprise me, ahem, If she’s not hanging around a bit, you know,” he mimed,

Something overhead, “a strong-minded dame, wouldn’t let go Easily.” Lucie nodded. She’d sometimes had that feeling. “I know. But I’m not sure if I find that comfort or a bit, you know, *Eerie*. But I must be on my way. I shouldn’t be here, stealing

This half-hour out when, really, there’s so much still to do.”

She hesitated. Had the two of them known each other well? “If you’d like to come—the funeral’s today at two.”

“I might at that, thank you, my dear, and if you ever want to sell

Your aunt’s horse, just the thought to keep in mind, I’ll do

My best to find you someone who’ll do you proud.”

She wasn’t sure whether to take him at his word. He was a man who Thrived on the bargain sealed, enjoyed the cut and thrust, touted

Business for the fun of it; she wondered if any money Was involved or if he did it, in his declining years, Purely for the enjoyment. “Thanks. I know it sounds a little funny But maybe we were meant to meet today? Who knows?”

XIV.

*Who knows, who knows ... quien sabe, O quien sabe?
This world I cannot leave but neither am I given
More than the occasional unattended moment by the ‘window’
When I can shift aside the curtain; entertain the view ...*

*As then when I felt an anger, not my own, that wouldn’t
Let me go; my own experience, when all else failed, just one,
With that brave and loving heart, and loyal soul,
Still impinges like the wind of change that blows*

*And time is rent and centuries are made meaningless;
And we who loved those creatures who bore us, who felt
Their sweat and knew their stumble in every weary bone;
The way their ears would droop and their necks would drowse*

But still one foot after the other when we asked; their hearts

*Were never tainted by the call of church and fame; their names
Never listed in fading registers as due respect, never seen
As immoral and painted woman, but the soft nose nudging*

*And the low voice whickering; and when we were not there
They looked for us, they watched and waited; as now I watch
And want a life for each condemned—and if I nudge horse
And woman—means disregarded—I have paid my dues.*

— FIN —

Notes:

In 1540 Don Pedro de Valdivia and Doña Inés de Suárez, along with 150 Spaniards (including Gonzalez Marmolejo who became the first bishop of Chile) and hundreds of indigenous men as porters, set out on a long journey of exploration and conquest from Cuzco in Peru, down through the Atacama Desert and northern Chile. They founded the cities of La Serena, Santiago (now the Chilean capital), Concepción and Valdivia. It took them a year to cross the desert. She later married Rodrigo de Quiroga and died in 1576. He is remembered in the names of the port city of Valdivia (ostensibly named for his wife, Doña María Ortiz de Gacte), the Valdivia River, a province and numerous streets.

History books attest to her courage: ‘While he (Valdivia) was away, Native Americans attacked Santiago on September 11, 1541. There were only 50 Spaniards in the town but under the leadership of Valdivia’s lieutenant Alonso de Monroy they were able to fight off the attack. It is said that one of the major reasons for the victory was Inés Suárez the only Spanish woman in the colony and Valdivia’s mistress. She is reported to have slain six captive chieftains single-handedly and thrown their heads back at the

attackers. She then led a counterattack by Spanish cavalry dressed in a knight's coat of mail.'

(*Explorers and Discoverers of the World*; ed. Daniel D. Baker)

But there are no monuments to Inés de Suárez.

'The Spanish walk, the Spanish trot, the school-walk, the passage and the piaffe are the principal artificial airs' ... 'These artificial airs always exert a peculiar appeal on the adept of school-riding and are particularly fascinating on account of their brilliance.' ... 'In the Spanish walk the horse must lift each front leg in turn and fully extend it in front of him at the height of his shoulder and for a moment hold it out horizontally or even rather higher than that. The steps must be even and of equal height and length, with the moment of suspension definitely marked. But the most important, and incidentally the most difficult part of the air, is that he must put down his legs perfectly straight and without bending his knees.'

(Henry Wynmalen, *Equitation*)

MANUAL FOR THE TIMOR PONY

By afternoon we could not see ourselves;

the dust ...

the milling herd ...

the sun.

A fire somewhere in the distant ranges, adding smoke.

The ponies sweated, flies braved the red-brown-yellow grit.

Steam rose. The humans had coated faces. Stockwhips cracked.

We ran each animal through the makeshift race, built

for this ... the final muster,

this last herd, hidden here in an unmapped Kimberley gorge.

Alongside our tiredness came exhilaration.

A little in-bred maybe but good stock.

Wild, tangled, scared,
but with infinite possibilities—
We discussed each one. Confirmation, health, size, sex.

Two prime stallions we hoped to find
and ten to twenty mares;
and those we rejected ... the last long journey
to ... we regretted that but the slow work to clear
feral stock ... and this is degraded spear grass land ...

This: a labour of love. To send, after a hundred years,
ponies, home. Best toughest healthiest; new blood.
It is our contribution to a new country.
But, strewh, we'll be wrecked tonight. Aching
Tomorrow. Good deeds weary. None of us getting younger.

This niche project: strong ponies for work, packs, ploughing,
carting. A manual of basic horse care; diagrams, tips,
all to be translated into Tetum; illustrated with the training
of our chosen few. We've raised money, got 'horse people'
on board. But this last week ...

the long trek out through the grey box plains, round spurs,
down gorges, skirting rocky outcrops, all our camping gear;
our horses; vet supplies, and the truck to try and rendezvous
when we find the fabled hidden gorge, said to contain
pure ponies; not bred and bred again with abandoned station stock ...

It was something we'd talked of doing in the years when
there was no guarantee it would ever come to fruition;
when Timor was a closed and terrifying place ...
Ponies! We only talked of ponies when other things
were done ... a dream ... from when we'd first heard ...

years ago, a rumour, a fable, perhaps a myth ...
These wild horses waiting somewhere beyond the sweep
of cattle stations, beyond irrigation schemes,
beyond tourists seeking somewhere new, 'off the beaten track';
our plan ... these mysterious creatures ... like unicorns ...

We wondered. But we did our homework well;
in between the other things, letters, petitions, vigils, demos,
raising funds; the three wise monkeys we sometimes

joked; except we knew evil in its every guise;
just the ponies—*were they real?*

And now we're here; but as the day wears on into purple dusk
it takes upon itself something of the unreality of our plan ...
The fierce red rock cools and changes hue;
the shifting clamour of iron-hard hooves
on packed soil and turning gravel quietens slowly ...

We've got thirty-one animals confined. The whole herd?
We've picked twelve out for style and confirmation;
another five as possibilities. A satisfying weariness.
Tomorrow we'll herd the rejects, the long trail to loading,
to death; we're tempted into sentimentality ...

but there's kindness in our choice. Too. The old,
the bung-eyed, the broken; this is hard country
even for Darwin's 'fittest' ... and we put aside
faint twinges of regret. Then we'll start the handling,
the breaking; simple words ... it reminds me,

suddenly, of all those books: getting the most from—
your PC, your microwave, your chain-saw, your—
We camp, sit murmuring round the campfire;
our local companions, custodians, owners, cheerful
now we're all here ...

we're all happy, satisfied. Resolution.
Someone has brought out a mouth-organ.
The soft song, the tired tune, the shift and snort
of horses putting aside an age-old fear ...
We smell—to them—to us, even after dipping ...

The pools still clear and calm beneath the cliffs;
still frequented; even though the land around us
radiates heat. Another month and they'll shrink
away, the last water hidden beneath the overhangs;
known still to horses, birds, everything that can smell water ...

Strange that ... that people cannot smell it ...
new rain on dry earth; the smell of rain on hair and feathers;
of rain on wood, the smell of mud drying, of a sea tang;
strange that ... we cease talking of ponies, of land,

of these ancient sacred places, of mystery figures

Painted where the sun never enters ... As the dusk deepens
we hear dingoes far away, an eerie howling, that rises,
fades, grows again ... the ponies droop and sleep ...
We talk, quieter, slower, it seems profound as the wood
smoke curls around us; as we listen, as we share ...

and someone says: will they miss ... home ...

We turn as one, the sweat-steeped leather in our noses;
home. That age old question. Home. What is home?
An acceptance of life. A sudden squeal from the temporary
yards; and a question we cannot answer; what is home?

What they carry in their genes, what they pass down generation
to generation, what they see when they wake; the place whose
scent is imprinted at birth; the sounds they hear, the meaning
they share from birth to death, the language without sound;
the smell of boab and native plum; or a deeper fainter smell

of sandalwood, palms, betel ... We might be talking philosophy;
or something stranger, harder to grasp, what is life, what is memory;
we fumble with unfamiliar words; plain people, practical,
get things done; that's us. And our darker companions;
fumbling with a different language, foreign words,

to explain something felt but rarely shared except
in simple passing references to the Dreamtime ...
beliefs trivialised ... and now we're caught by the place and time.
Do they carry with them, these hardy animals, ten,
twenty generations, transposed, something ...

We speculate; what of what is carried bone-deep matters?
What was shared before we each branched; took our
place upon that tree, that ancient tree, huge boled,
slim dry branches, large nut-flavoured fruit;
is it the ponies close that drives thought—

or the land itself, seeping up, enclosing us in semi-silence,
cooling now; land existing—and if we sit or walk on it,
stand, stare out, feel it enter our pores, our thoughts,
our hearts, our very being, will we be changed?
And if we remove the herd ...

For a moment there we wonder what right we have;
good intentions set aside; to cut whatever thread
may link the soul of place and creature ...
A question too profound for us. An owl hoots ...
Tomorrow, new lives begin, lives linked, lives documented.

We turn again to the vexed question: a Manual for an Unknown Future—
(Breeding, Nutrition, Training, Harness—)
and then we stretch and yawn and say, tomorrow, an early start ...

GHOST TOWN

PART ONE

Asteroid, megaloid, megapoid, oid, doid, a satisfying sound;
what he saw through the smeary window—
caught in sunlight bounding off the hard-glass cliffs and old iron roofs,
and plastered paint on dry-rot boards, cut palings
at the half-way point, chopped crooked edges—
he put in pictures, these portraits of a dying town;
he called them, who knows why,
megaloids.

He must have been seventy, at least,
with white stubble round an underfed chin.
My home. He stood there at his window looking out.
My town. My place. But the ore ran out,
(so they said), and people went,

by ones, by twos, by families.

But he stayed, this old man, an affection hidden in his gaze,
finding expression under strong brush strokes,
and those odd lop-sided shapes he chose to frame,
and the pictures framed in peculiar shapes
were then framed in old wood window frames, and dirty glass
and framed within a view out over the clustered town
with the slumping shapes of belts and hoppers and drums
and sheds and the narrow-gauge line that ran
from the mine to the crushing plant ...

He caught the rusting iron in strong thick colour,
a pipe clamped between his teeth and adding fragrant smoke
to an old man's world; with its ancient biscuit tins,
and unsold paintings from when Cobb & Co came through town;
and men with cork-bobbed hats and slinking skinny dogs behind their swag;
he encapsulated in his paintings times past and times present,
but no whiff of times to come;
that was left to others.

He was like a history class rolled up—
with palette, and an enamel mug steaming gently at his elbow,
and a wireless which played what people listened to ... a while ago ...
a kind of tenderness in his care for buildings and fading signs,
sun-bleached, that hung above the premises along the town's
main street (he resisted the temptation to turn it into something
a little whimsical, a wild west town, or women, time-warped,
with bonnets and parasols against the blazing sun,
toddlers in floral things, heads cocked, dimpling, to one side)—
it seemed he was dedicated, his life attuned, to painting it as it
truly was; the view he saw each day from his large front window
(of course it might've helped if he'd cleaned it now and then,
added a sparkle to his scene ... but old bachelors ... this
assumed because there was no sign of relict-women; no cross-stitched
apron upon a peg, no sepia-tinted wedding day in a tarnished silver frame;
not that kind of frame in this house;
not that much of the house was on offer,
just his 'studio' which seemed to serve as everything, even
his single cot with frowsy pillow, a dented shaving mug, and a khaki army coat
thrown across the chair ... an old man does live here ... the framed picture
of the artist at work shouts to anyone who might step in ...

He used a palette knife with skill, the way he laid those harsh
outback shades; the reds and browns, leavened with a little straw,

a glow of tin, a tinge of haze, hard bright blue to ground them
against far hills; even against that window where
a generation of dirt grit has drummed against its surface and left the history
of a thousand dust storms; there was still an intruding
sense of town; but a silence in the room itself,
(just the murmur of the radio; those modulated voices the ABC
once broadcast to the country folk.) And yet ... and yet ...
there was something about the town shown off there ...
the way it was framed so squarely—was that why he turned
to other shapes, to express his uncertainty—that made it
like a ghost town shifted and rebuilt in a fun park
somewhere else; ride through the old silver mine, a notice might
blare; and people rushing through the tilted dark would come away
half-convinced they'd seen *the real thing* ...
Was that his purpose in this untidy old-fashioned room:
to recreate a town that's long since died?
His people, those who'd climbed into trucks and trailers and old
lumbering cars with running-boards, and gone elsewhere, re-done,
re-touched, re-lived, as they go
about their day's business on veranda-ed streets with timber signs:
Higginbotham's Hardware. Pickering's Pool Hall. (A favourite with the
silver-miners.) Dr. D. B. Throstle. St Barnabas' Church of England.
And the pub with fine iron lace and an imported name: the Cock and Bull.
The signs, like the people, have a story-telling air about them.

He can see a lot from up here but not everything he's put into the
paintings that line one wall. They have a sense of perambulation.
Did he walk around the town with easel under arm,
paints thrust into an old knapsack ... or did he cart his memories
back and recreate them in some comfort, with steaming pannikin
at an elbow ... and if he did ... did he get it right ... or did he
delve into a well-heeled imagination, a lifetime of remembered things,
people, places, the arrival of the stage, the first shaft dug; the swaggies
hoping here they'd strike some form of luck ... are his pictures real?
Was the town ever so clear and bright, so vibrant in its raw burnt
paint? Did it hum with busy people living lives that offered
them a sense of destiny. Was there hope and vigour ... and if there *was*—
what happened when the silver just ran out ... did it run out ... or is
this the secret he conceals somewhere, darkly, in each frame;
the sense of a town betrayed.

PART TWO

A cascade, flummoxed where hard rock intruded,
bent here, threatened there, kick-backed over there.

The vein,
the star,
the thread.

The knotted ball, that drew a boy to tease
out curious strands and write it up;
the Lone Ranger lode he decided to name it;
he felt an affinity with the masked man;
Heigh ho, Silver! It had lodged somewhere
and found its mark in long solo walks, a sense
of importance contained in a mildewed saddlebag,
with maps drawn, a small pick (much loved for its history)
to nip out rocks and study them, magnified—

Are you in there, John?

The temptation to sit in silence. Important thoughts in train.

Yes, mum.

Homework done?

Yes, mum.

Then come out and have your dinner.

The door, the passage, the smell of chops and cabbage.

The Lone Ranger didn't have a mother.

Tonto wasn't pressed on sums and essays.

He puts his books away and turns to his pleasures;
the video of the masked man, the thunder of Silver's feet;
the calm assurance Tonto always carried with him: that
all would be well eventually; the town with its
sheriff's office, the assay place, the hint of trouble at the mine;
the long trail—I'd like a horse of my own but what about
a mule? I think I'd like to try a mule, see if it would still be
stubborn with me or if it'd like to come out into the hills
as we search for a new vein of silver to save the town ...

I'd like to be able to race across the country like that, those
strange buttes and mesas, the sagebrush, all those things,
that wild land, not like staying home and going to school ...
I wish ... I wish *I* could find a silver lode ... somewhere in
the cliffs above the town, somewhere there around the rock pools,
I know mum doesn't like me climbing up but how else am I going
to find the silver mine that'll save us all ... I wish we needn't always

talk of saving, I wish the Lone Ranger would come to town and tell us where the ancient map is hidden, the one stolen by the Jedwell Gang when they terrorised the land and the sheriff got up a posse but his posse wasn't any good and it still depended on the Lone Ranger and Tonto to save the day but just when they'd got their map back and should've kept it safe those silly people in the town, came calling round, and went into the saloon—next thing, just when they'd been saved and the Masked Man was gone again, they lost everything—and I'll *bet* it was that mysterious woman that was in the saloon that day—if it was me I would've demanded that she turn her room out, I bet the map was hidden in one of those weird hats she wore ... and then she moved on, said she was going to sing in the next town, this piano was no good, and away she went and there they all were, clucking round like mum's chooks ... if I'd had the writing of this story I'd have done it better ... and I'd have been out into the badlands with my trusty mule and pick and everything I'd need and made my campfire right on the spot beside the rocks and secret caves and cliffs and I'd know where to dig, course I would ... and they'd say, Hey, look what he's found ... and for sure the Jedwells, by then, would have escaped from that stupid sheriff's jail, and they'd be after me ... and I'd think my last moment had come, I'd never see home or school again—but!

Just in the nick of time (I've never found what a nick of time really is) I'd hear the faint pound of galloping hooves—I'd know! And if I could just hang on long enough, even though they were threatening to string me up, hang me higher than the last one got in their way—the pain in my hands, my wrists—courage I'd tell myself, just hang in there, I can hear the hoofbeats coming closer, closer, closer, the beat and beat of Silver's feet—I like the sound of that—and knowing they'll save me, the map, the lode, the town—and then they'll ride off again—saying 'take care!' and with a grin and a wave, they'll go the way they came and I'll be the hero of the hour ... and no one will bother me with homework any more—they'll ask me, maybe, to be the mayor, the president of the silver corporation—and when my little mule dies, they'll stuff him for the town's museum, take my pick, my trusty pick, and mould it in silver and display it where everyone will see it ... I can't wait ... how I wish ...

PART THREE

The virtuality of one world closed down with rusted iron
that rattles in an unreal wind and grit that's not quite grit but has
its sound as it flicks against a heavy helmet worn in a darkened cubicle
and almost *tastes* on the tongue and passes unchallenged
through time and space, but it's the smell of the pipe that lingers.

Slow voices, a little slower than real life, and with that hint of
twang DJs affected years ago under the shadow of western films,
to discuss silver prices and the richness of the lode that hangs
over the town like an imagined beckoning star, a will-o-the-wisp
hope; like the sound of boots or canvas rattling overhead, an echo
that interacts with people who give every indication that they belong;
the rolling gait, their bronzed skins and tipped hats and jeans
round legs that gripped their virtual mounts; that might have
known silver as a name or wish; it just depended how the viewer
tuned them gently, fingers delicate round a combination lock to open ...

*

‘I can’t imagine how they make it seem so real—I really thought in there—I was *there*—I opened my mouth to ask a question, then remembered ... though I’m not sure about the smoke, if it was real or just a squirt of something ... and the steam, amazing really what they can do these days ... but I feel a bit queasy now, as if I’m not sure—’

‘I know what you mean—in there, that’s real—and out here you know it’s not and yet it was ... weird ... I’d like to go back, pay to see another character, I’m not sure which one ... but I’m like someone just got off a ship and the land feels like the sea, funny, isn’t it ... but it makes you wonder what they’ll think of next ... I really thought that was me,

saying ‘have you done your homework?’ and it was like looking over someone’s shoulder, seeing in their mind, knowing what they were thinking ... and now, when I look around, see other people going in, to choose which one they’ll see ... go in ... I don’t know, I do feel strange ... like getting off the ‘octopus’ ... is it you or the world that’s

going round ... but this is cleverer than anything I’ve ever seen before. And if they can make me believe I’m there, I’m seeing, I’m feeling, hearing, tasting—’ ‘Don’t forget the smelling’ ... ‘I know ... that town, it’s like places we’ve driven through ... it’s like places, I don’t know ... maybe it’s us in twenty years, this town, packaged up and carted round

to other places for people to pay to see what became of us—I don’t know that I like the thought’ ... ‘better than to die and be forgotten, but I know what you mean, it isn’t just that the virtual world makes you *believe* in there it’s the *only* world, it’s that feeling that we’ve seen our future and now we know we’ll only be remembered if someone thinks we’d make a ‘character’—

someone worth punching the button for, I’ll have the painter, the mayor, the schoolboy, the drover, the town drunk ... ordinary enough, I suppose, but I’m not sure ... I think I’ll just sit down a minute more ... get my balance back ... I don’t like the thoughts I’ve got ... just let me get my bearings ... and then, what say we go up and watch the ring events ... ’

*

BRAM’S BEACH

My editor suggested a story
‘The Virgin of Bram’s Beach’;
with nothing sympathetic in his tone.

“One of those stupid stories the public loved twenty years ago—
so this’ll be Madonna-and-child two decades later.
You don’t remember her? You wouldn’t have been *compos mentis* then.”
I was a baby then. His inimitable sneer won’t go around ‘baby’.
I agreed. Of course. And got out files and asked people ...

I drove a half-hour north to the beach. It’s an estuary with dunes and grass, odd little headlands, runnels wandering vaguely through a wide plain of coarse sand. Inland the beach gives way to mud, then a tangle of reeds and grey scrub.

Someone wanted to ‘develop’ it. The local bird-watchers stopped him.

A rare wader nested there, along those waterways, and nowhere else.

There is something eerie about Bram's Beach.

A kind of haze which lies over it,

composed of flying sand, low cloud, spume ...

no, I don't know what it is, but I am practical, I seek everyday explanations.

Still, it is a strange place and the woman at the heart of that
'miracle' story is stranger still.

She came north with others; they wanted to start somewhere uncompromising, start from nothing, not somewhere pleasant, fertile, not another Nimbin.

Bram's Beach offered ... fish perhaps.

They made little sandy gardens up the estuary with rotting seaweed in trenches.

They combed the beach for driftwood, odds and ends.

They fished. They wove small grass baskets for sale,
'brambaskets' they called them.

They tried to turn sand-grass into paper, offered it to our local newsagent.

They managed for several years, living in shacks like mia-mias ...
then they gave up, went away, all but Mina.

Mina and her baby daughter stayed.

The story broke when she went to a doctor; she was about seven months pregnant. He said, amazed, "But you are a virgin."

She said in her simple quiet way, "Yes, I am."

She would say no more, she wouldn't name a father.

The doctor went public. It was, he said, the first case of intercrural pregnancy he had ever seen. A frenzy: other doctors with other experiences, other children paraded.

But it was something about Mina which made the story,
something glowing yet remote,
uncommunicative yet tender.

I can't explain even though I'm expected to know words,
to use them with exactness and facility.

When I met Mina for my story I understood why people ...

Mina lived on the beach. Tucked in against a sandy bank
was an odd little house, made out of—
old boxes, half-sheets of tin, flattened drums, tattered canvas,
even a half-tyre sitting on its roof.

I hardly knew how to approach, where to knock.

Mina appeared from nowhere. "You've come. Shall we walk."

So we wandered towards the close-by headland, a strange outcrop of sand

with a wind-beaten tree leaning down as though in supplication.
The tide was out, we seemed surrounded by a vastness of sand;
even her house, when I looked back, had disappeared.
Low cloud enveloped but did not, quite, extinguish the sun.

We walked in a pale glare.

Her feet were bare and very brown,
Her hair, long enough to sit on, swayed gently as she walked;
a dull brown cloud with tangled gold in streaks.
The sand grains were heavy, unbearably so, under my shoes.
My camera, my tape-recorder, had taken on a weight of their own.
I hoped she wouldn't want to walk far.

We reached the headland.

“See the layers of different sands, aren’t they beautiful?”

She reached out a long brown finger and a rill of sand drifted down.

“Red and brown and pink and ochre. I believe,
if you put them in a jar, they will settle in different coloured layers,
each colour being a different weight.”

“Have you ever done it?”

“I don’t have a bottle.”

“Tell me, how do you manage to survive here? Money-wise, I mean.”

“I don’t survive. I live.”

She had long dark eyes, like an Egyptian portrait, wrap-around eyes,
and a long pale face, its paleness surprised me, above her brown body
in a ragged grey shift, fashioned perhaps from a torn sail.

“But you would have expenses—your daughter, schooling, books, clothes.”

“I don’t have a daughter.”

“I thought you did.”

“It’s nice to think a lot, isn’t it. Thinking is a fascinating way of life.”

She turned, looked out over the sea which now appeared a great distance away
but can only have been forty metres or so. The sky and land and water
somehow merged together and I said on impulse:

“Do you find this place beautiful?”

She smiled. “Yes, the hand of god is here, don’t you think.”

She lifted her own hand and seemed to reach out towards the place
where a brace of rivulets splayed out. It was a hand.

At that moment it was a hand which reached out to us.

“How did you feel when you had all that publicity years ago? Was it intrusive?”

“I’ve forgotten. The past belongs to the person I was then.”

“So you feel you’ve changed a lot since then?”

She reached out again and took a small handful of sand
from the bank and held it cupped in her palm.

“What a pity you didn’t bring a bottle.

You would have something to take away.”

“Could I take a picture of you—there—against the bank.”

She posed and smiled.

But my pictures were a disappointment. The setting must have been incorrect even though I was careful and used the light meter. It might’ve been at fault.

I remember the pictures taken twenty years ago were also very poor.

“Will you take a cup of tea?”

“Yes. Thank you. Where do you do your shopping?”

“I don’t. Ti-trees.”

I looked forward to seeing the inside of that gnomish house.

We walked back across the sand and the house materialised.

“Did you build the house yourself?”

“I don’t remember now. I expect it just grew. Sand is strange, isn’t it?

So many unexpected qualities.”

She withdrew a screen and we stepped inside. I was surprised to find

I could stand up. From the outside it looked so *low*. We sat on the sand and she handed me a broken-handled cup. I could not have said what the brew tasted of, a hint of mint, a faint tea-flavour.

It made me a little light-headed ... or it might have been the smallness of the house, the smoke rising through the gaps in the roof ...

“Would it be possible to speak with your ... daughter?”

I hesitated over the word.

“I am alone today. Do you ever feel that, the delicious sense of aloneness. Yourself and the spirits of those who came this way. They leave something behind, not their petty everyday concerns ... ”

“Not really, no. Do you get many visitors to the beach?”

“They come, certainly. They don’t seem to stay.”

“Do you go out fishing much?”

“The fish come to me. Some days.”

She leant forward and touched my cheek gently.

“Come now, you’re feeling the heat.”

Outside there was a first hint of sea breeze. It stirred the sand grass

and sent little shivers across the quiet waters;

the cloud now lay in slow dull streaks.

“Could you stand beside your house for a picture.”

It should’ve been wonderful: this primitive woman and her makeshift house.

Instead they all blended together so that it became a soft abstract of browns

and ochres and tans and fading indeterminate colours.

We stood there and I thought of my list of questions remaining

and I understood why other reporters went home and made up stories.

And as I looked out over her landscape I saw our footprints in the sand.
Mine, heavy, definite—and nothing where her feet had trodden.
I thought we had walked side by side but perhaps I had stepped
on her impress ... or she in mine ...

HAUNTING

The girls who work in the shops nearby
hurry past; 'that place—gives me the creeps'—
That place; they sneak a glance in where the wall
is cracked, a fallen tree; look in through iron gates;
roofs and gables rising above dark dense trees;
ooh-ooh, they say, to rhyme with took;

I'm glad it's not me,
I'll bet there's some weird things go on in there ...
and the people—I'd hate to meet them on
a dark night—I wonder if they escape, sometimes—
Don't say that! It'll give me awful dreams—
Sorry, Sue, but they probably tie them up,
it's not like they get left free to roam about ...

* * *

The keep, the keeping.
A colour that's institutionalised;

Cream and sour and sooty on massive walls,
Lysol-haunted corridors, the ring of iron stairs;
Up, down, the manic ride.

The mind that fed the lust that brought him here
Convinced in youth the devil drives below the waist;
Denies the heart, bedevils unsure minds
And fights for seating in the ultimate
Assembly hall. But with one terrifying slice
He altered the question that fired his mind.

If it was not body then it must be soul—
But if this is possession it can't be soul,
Of which everyone possesses one;
Spirit then, the spirit of the dead who died of lust
And cannot rest; the phantom rise
And fall. Spirit. Soul. His head on fire.

Words. Names. They gave them different names,
He could muse when quiet reigned; because
They knew they meant different things ...
But the words entangled in his mind,
Turned over, floated back; he tried to grasp
And felt them evade his flailing clutch.

He cried after them as they bounced and tore
And teased and called from everywhere,
Their echoes tangling up; his head between
His hands, never turning fast enough to catch;
And they were somewhere inside his skull, battling
For supremacy; bursting battered up against rods and cells.

He refused all medication (take this!) knowing the question
Must be answered, before his mind could offer
Him surcease; he spoke of his torment in holy words
And saw middle men in white write 'another Christ!'
And he knew then they didn't understand the least
Of this world that demanded answers before ...

If soul is all; the resurrection of the dead, then
Why does this spirit torment me, my soul, the eternal
That touches all, knows all, is all, a fragment of the divine,
Then why does spirit drive me to constant harm

Within the temple of the soul? They shook their heads,
Looked wise, advised sedation, wrote 'interesting but—'

'Always the hardest nuts to crack,' they smiled
Over tea in a grim room downstairs, where calls
And crying came muted down the cold stairwells;
'The metaphysical questions ... ' 'think they're God,
And wonder why we're in charge ... ' 'they skimped on
Padding—and it's the devil getting blood off bricks ... '

But if he was truly God, there would be a different pain;
It's not that kind of never-ending wait; born and lived
In eternity; but the terrible simplicity of the mind's
Refusal to understand the semantic fusion
Where soul and spirit live in disharmony
In one mind which in self-harm knows no peace ...

But if numbered denials make men holy then he
Is well along the way; deny the way meant for decent men
A thousand times, days unnumbered, in these endless years;
But who looked down and counted calmly and said,
You've denied me sufficiently, now rest and know my
Words again; leave your head alone, just let it be ...

'He's giving the old nut a fine going over today,
His brains must be well and truly scrambled ... shouldn't laugh,
I know ... but what else can you do—' 'I know,
They've tried ... but come on now ... tea's on ... '
The sound of soles receding.

*

The safe, the keeping safe;
What they, brick and stone, built so safely for;
In places high above the roofs of town;
A gothic tower that suggests the screaming
Well kept in, confined in time and space.

With a mind that knew the lust that sent him wild,
And hunted down the children round his neighbourhood,
And sent him up the tower for good, (ill too)
And promoted all those stories of lives—

He ought—he might—he was wild to lead,
He jumped up, down, yelled blue murder till kingdoms fell—

The way their voices echo in his head until
He cannot hear himself and he bangs against the wall
Till those other people moan and turn and slink away;
Or drop between the gaps that leap between their words
And catch him napping and he falls down between the cracks,
An endless falling ... and at the bottom, breaks.

It might have been his mother and it might have been
His father, turned him into the son who hates his lurid self
That springs, lewd and large, from flesh and indigestion
And hurts his view of what a man should be;
Or it might have been a childhood catechism;
The quick and the dead, they said, and he caught the quick—

One awful slice and held it bleeding; they couldn't then
Confine him with the other men who'd devoured
And left the innocent to bleed; he'd punished
The self that had horrified the world and held it aloft;
Like a banner hoist, a pennant, a petard he cried;
No one in that place understood what he meant—and didn't ask.

He said to anyone who'd listen; they told me to!
These voices in my mind that never give me rest;
My ... he stumbled over the word, sounded like 'mother'
But might've been an 'other' uttered wildly by a man
Devoid of rest; my soul, he gargled as they injected him.
Carried him, tied down, and left him in that upper room.

Where he could come back to life and spend the next
Fifty years in contemplation of an absent part,
A pink puckered groin, a foolish scarred missing cry;
And in the absence of more pressing needs
He turned to the demanding voice of an unseen
Soul, all-powerful, all-pervasive in a room with nothing else—

But it was his private time-share demons kept him company
Most days, and gave the men in stained-white coats a reason
To mount the stairs and say 'an atypical manifestation'.
One or two wrote long reports and learned articles without

The least bit understanding that a soul (his) and a spirit
Were, to him, occupying a space where there was only room

For one; and the simple solution to overcrowding was
Denied a man denied a knife denied a reasonable
Place and time and artifact to slice would be a man
Who hurt his head and hands and legs and threw himself
Around; always hoping that the hurt would separate
The questions he asked himself unceasingly.

The ugly bump and rush; a raised voice, ‘My God,
My God, why hast thou forsaken me—my evil I have
Repented in blood and pain—and it was not me that sent
Me out that summer night to stalk in the wilderness of lust—
You know my heart and mind better than I ever can ...
And you must know how I can cut it out and throw it—

It’s there, I see it, like a glowing snow white heart within
A jewelled box, and the hounds snarling round it, spirits
Plump and healthy, growing all the while, unchecked,
Let them take and eat, this is my body and you will see
Me offer it with love and generosity but don’t hold them
Back, snap their leashes undone, and let them sink their teeth ... ’

‘He’s at it again—do you think we ought—’
Faces at the small aperture in a reinforced and studded door;
That plea that finds no answer in a place geared to different ways;
‘No point. Come on now, must be time for tea ... poor mug ... ’
The sound of soles receding.

*

The assurances that wrapped the place,
In gothic turrets from a nineteenth-century magnate;
Re-done to serve a different need;
A saving to the state; modestly refurbished,
To hold in those whose questions differ.

The grey-faced man against the stained scarred walls,
Beating up against the harbour wall, safe moorings,
Pulled himself apart when the place stayed sound
And stone-ground firm; the storms that throw their white
Caps up and over, in salt-stained fury that’s more than tears,

Less than release, a world in which no harbour's ever safe.

No child, no innocence is ever secure; even minded from home's
Front window, watched along a small town's uneven paths;
Round corners, cross roads, in yards; mind children plaited
Out in cotton bows and cotton socks in buckled sandals;
Mind them round the ways of two streets out and three streets
Back; and the highway through; small and safe, its people thought.

And didn't know they harboured a monster until it was too late;
Because there was no one in whom he could confide; knowing
They'd say, 'Nonsense! You've been having bad dreams—get
More sleep!' Something simple enough, foolish in the face
Of a nightmare life—and when it came they'd lynch him
Readily, cry shame, not 'why didn't he—' Yes, why didn't ...

Why didn't he—and always knowing there was nowhere to turn
To admit the truth too terrible to be enclosed in everyday words
And syntax that says, go on, and you're not making sense when
You speak, and the words get caught up in spit and shame and the
Inability to say the words that make it real—I am its captor, I am
Its prisoner—nonsense, man, don't relapse in to melodrama now—

Keep it calm, and you'll soon see you've blown it out of proportion!
But its proportions grow and bulge and steal the blood I need elsewhere
And when I try to close the channels with a burst of shovelled mud
To turn and re-route the rushing stream it catches barriers and tosses
Them aside as though they're nothing, the muddied earth, the flooded
Land and all that's left is me, tossed about behind my—you say—

It's nothing—but what do you know and when I've done what I couldn't
Help you were first to cry foul and I fixed you with tormented eyes
And watched you play the innocent—but you never understood
That I was not in charge—you had me packed and tied and sent
Away before the wailing died away ... and then you forgot me here;
And if I did what you should have done in sterile cuts and chloroform—

Then I am the doctor of my fate and cutting, slicing, is my only way
Of amends and you never cared that no one came to reassure me there's
Answers to every agony—you didn't care! Never cared! Just played the
Bewildered shining knight—if only he'd—you never listened out for
Words unsaid, words unsayable, and now I'm left with the fury of the gaps
Forever gulping, black and fierce, and spitting fire when my mind is denied

A key to unlock safer places, a moment's hope when I was small, like my Little kiddies with smiles upon their weekend faces ... my youngsters, I have them here, with faces gone from hope and smiles to terror, Tears and cries and I'd crush them in one last swirling blackness— While you sat in your big brick home and took tea with local dignitaries; A shocking thing, I'll bet you said, you hypocrite, you pharisee ...

You hippocratic toad, you tithed-out excrement! I needed you, And you didn't listen close enough to find the words that dropped Between the lines, fell into gaps beyond full-stops, ignored each pause; Pretended I was the one who must understand and diagnose and treat— And with one fell slash I did what I paid for you to do, and I bled, I bled— And when they came for me—I was nearly done, all that blood upon

The floor. They complained, damn, damn, damn, more work, get mops, Get buckets; more work for them; one mighty slash—they didn't know Knives can be sharpened against the unyielding brick, till fine serrated Edges leap up at me, and I crush my thumb against the cutting edge And watch the blood well up, dark blood, black blood, Christ blood Trickling down—and then I knew my time had come ...

‘Don't know what he's gabbling but he's got himself by
The short and curlies again, sister, he'll have himself bald
By nightfall ... see if he doesn't—’ ‘Can't be helped—and now
It's nearly tea—I could murder a decent cup ... come on down.’

The sound of soles receding.

*

The place, the places available
Within the places, the choices made under expert
Guidance, the lack of choices for a population
Not much cared about; and monsters excite
No pity, not when choices must be made.

A brief moment there when all life hung in the balance,
Between fading Victorian certitude and the new sense
That all must ultimately go down before the juggernaut
Called scientific method; case-books of failure, mention
Of trial and error; men referring to their practice, but
Disliking any suggestion of practicing upon those whom

The state sends up for incarceration; consulting is a nicer word
CI is a word kept within itself, setting men apart although it might
Be said, there's infinitesimal degrees between those here and
Those who live out there, the difference of a knife blade,
A gun barrel; but few of them made their instruments
Of death but bought them from a solid citizen who later claimed—

‘How was I to know?’ But it was a living and I will not have it
Undermined. I will not absorb a smidgin of the guilt; he bought,
I sold. Where would society be if we were to undermine free trade?
The questions hover, those final reports for the courts; to be taken
Into consideration, but they have their own agenda, a life that
Lives within the fading pages; ‘of course you couldn’t know.’

But if no man is totally the self untouched, untrammelled spirit,
Then are there threads that connect him with the evil other men
Lock away and cover up and pretend they never had the thought—
Or is it a continuum, a degree, a moment when all was lost and he—
But psychiatrists are clear that it is the lone man they’ve come
To treat … society and its beliefs are not their territory …

The state has no policy on what it wants at the end of the line;
Let him out? Nonsense, man! He’s a danger to everyone around
Him. Cured? Well, he may be cured but there’s room for doubt.
But that doesn’t mean we’ll let him out. Reintegration? Not him.
Asocial from go to whoa. But if he feels some guilt that’s fine,
Let the families know he’s capable of remorse. Just don’t let him out.

The question is irrelevant. It’s been years since anyone enquired
About his fate—asked even if he’s still alive. If anyone was curious
They’ve had decades to forget and if anyone wondered why it was
A lad like that … they’ve long ceased wondering and focused all
Their indignation upon the next crop of monsters from the younger
Generation. Old sinners, old crims, old men who wrecked the future,

They fade, they pale, they retreat down dim corridors and towers,
Get lost in the space between the bricks, their paperwork
In faded pen and the signature of men who’ve died since then …
If anyone forgets it is the world that shouted loudest for them to be
Locked up, for the key to be thrown away, and the only people
Who know—are those given power over, and they are busy folk …

‘He’s going to be a mess tomorrow—do you think

We should ... I mean it's grim up there ...'
'You'll get used to it, soon enough, treat it as just a job ...
Nothing more. Is that the time? I could do with ...'
The sound of soles receding.

*

A name upon a board outside; before streets—
Gracious living founded upon girls in attics,
And a man in the cramped dark space over
The horse-stalls; up before dawn, scrubbing late.

On this as on strong foundations ...

And the foundation upon which men with notes built,
Dismissing concern at what a boy was taught;
Imbibed with his mother's meals ... and talking of
Other influences; sex and mother-love and wondered
How that might be seen to apply 'in this case'; it came
In capitals and with a kind of disturbing glee, this case—

It drew men from the fledgling science to discuss—the mother,
And no one finding anything remarkable in the mother,
Took second best and looked at the father and found them both
Too respectable which was the only fault to be found
Within their little family—and dismissed the libido as
Insufficient for the horror, dismissed Sunday school and all

Its implications and what got taught and how it was explained
And what stayed inside the mind of a boy waiting to come back
And haunt when he was given time to recant, all the time
In the world, with nothing better waiting than to be kept safe;
And kept safe he hurt himself so horribly they were inclined
To think it was remorse and that release might someday be

An option ... but then they forgot him. New cases. And
Someone made the ponderous statement 'in this case' and
That case was finally forgotten. He's safe. That's the main thing.
Society is safe. A touch of religious mania. Believes himself
The Christ ... there's worse things he could be ... and if he wants
To rave about spirit and soul—well, modern psychiatry doesn't

Need to know. Pity about the mutilation. Interesting case but—
Soul and spirit and Holy Spirit and demons crowding and

Possession by the spirits of the dead ... it all gets rather
Confusing. Don't know how and when and where that became
His bête noir but no doubt his thoughts keep him company.
Otherwise his health is quite reasonable; pale of course.

Too much trouble to bring the worst ones down, walk them
In the grounds. Besides, people don't like it, convince themselves
It's only a matter of time before one escapes. And it's not as if anyone
Sympathises with their fate. Got what they deserved, these
Creatures of the night. Sex crimes. Evoke no sympathy, no
'There but for the grace of God' ... not much grace in this place.

Our share of religious nuts; every asylum ends up with a swag;
Odd that. No sign when some come in, not a word about
The Almighty when we unload and process them. Must be
The solitude. Keep a man in solitude and he begins to keep
Company with the unseen and soon convinces himself they
Are real, more real than the people he hurt in normal life,

Out there. Keep some in dormitories downstairs, the ones who
Show no signs of hurting anyone, selves included, but the hard
Nuts ... and we're responsible to the state except the state has
Long forgotten and has to be apprised of our existence regularly.
Allowance in the budget, 'tight this year'; it's always tight
When it comes to places like this and refurbishments—for *them*?

'Well, now you know what to expect here,
We warn all our new staff, it's no picnic and it's cold
Up and down these stairs; wear warm underwear ... I do.
But I'll fill you in some more over tea ... it's time ... '

The sound of soles receding.

*

This place, the way it rose, filial brick and stone,
Above the planted elms and larches, the circling drive,
The way its front door held out promises
That no one would come out who was meant
To stay cooped and closetted within.

Every year the small town paper thinks to do an article
To remember children who would be old if life had served
Them otherwise, and sometimes there's blurred photos

Of faces looking out untouched, sweet in their ignorance
Of what their lives will hold, and some years there's a weariness,
Life goes on; it's so long ago ... should we ... maybe it's time ...

And a picture of the monster who preyed around the twilit streets
When children set off home a little later than they'd meant, than
Mothers had reminded them, don't forget ... but friends and play ...
The only place where he's still remembered—and that with the
Fading knowledge that no one would recognise him now if he should
Return; that face that's young and unformed in its boyish stare—

But isn't there something in the eyes, the shape of the head,
The way his ears are set too low (are they set too low? They look
Pretty normal to me)—if people had known they nurtured an
Aberration in their midst they'd have warned—of course they would,
Wouldn't they—but they didn't know the words to warn of danger
Lurking inside neat serge trousers; a very neat nice boy, well brought up,

Went to Sunday school, got his lessons right, they've kept his slates
And books somewhere in the station—or did the men in white coats
Take them—there was a flurry of interest in what made a young man
What he was—all sorts of labels flying about like a whirlwind round
Our ears—when all we wanted was to forget he'd ever been one of us!
Good riddance! we all said. Day in. Day out. When it was much too late.

Drummed the family out in the wake of the black maria that took him
Away to city justice; leaving us to lick our gaping wounds, throw
Stones at the neat suburban fence with daisies bursting through
Raw gaps and splintered wood, and spent grass and the little board swing
Still undulating faintly in the dry droughty wind that remained to tell
Us all we belonged in dust and hate and sorrow—and a need

For revenge that's never faded, quite, never gone away, unrequited,
But the families have gone now, other children grown with children
Of their own, and the little ones lost all those years ago, fading shots
In the paper's morgue ... should we ... this year ... once more ...
One more time ... lest we forget ... but places must forget eventually;
Sixty years of pain centred round the figure of a creature, half man

His outside maybe, half minotaur, in the places hidden from our view—
May he rot in hell! Hidden from the eyes of decent folk, for ever,
No sun, no flowers, no normal human talk, may he rot in living hells,
Until the day he gives up the ghost ... then we all, at last, can forget

The name that placed our small country town upon unwanted maps;
Made people point and whisper and drive through, a sick voyeurism ...

May our name, the name of each small victim, be printed on his brain
In indelible inked-in words writ large until the day he dies, if such
Can die, rather than be grasped and whisked away in the thunder
Of fire and sulphur—a brimstone blast, a fiery pillar—they still can,
All these years, be driven to a terrible hyperbole—there were no words
To describe such a man—like a rabid dog, like a hydrophobic *thing!*

Should have taken out our three-oh-threes and shot him for the beast
He was—the only justice fit for a fiend like that—have done
With him—not grant him a life to be lived in comfort at our expense!
Yes, one more time. Hunt out the photos from that misbegotten time.
Print them on the front page. The day our little town was turned
Upside down, the day he gave himself up, the day we lost our innocence—

‘Poor sod! He’s really going to town upon his head
Today—there’ll be blood and hair all over the wall—’
‘Can’t be helped—I’m not going in—and he’ll be
Quiet and sore tomorrow—come on now, it’s nearly four.’

The sound of soles receding.

*

This place that rears its head,
Above more ordinary mortal minding;
That gleams on days when the sun is strong,
Up and down the heavy sweat of confined humanity,
Fills dim corridors, rises, floor by floor.

That’s what people say: don’t give publicity;
Because you can’t remember the victims of a fiend
Without the monster’s name re-kindled in black letters
On a pristine page—and placed there, stays around to taunt.
But that’s the price memory must pay to keep its nature true.
Him and them, confined forever in the corridors of mind.

Him and them—and they’ve lost the sense that made them
Mortal, that gave them names and places, fitted them into
Families and asked them to do their little chores and dream
Their little dreams ... and took them away in little coffins
And placed them, after the knife had done its final declaration,

In soil that's arid-brown and hedged around with weeping trees;
But his spirits, he swears, are christened legion and huddle
Here upstairs, crowded round—to give him wakeful nights,
When he asks them are they holy spirit or holy soul; never called
Beatie or Betty-Lou; never come when called, but hover
There somewhere beyond his grasp, with staring eyes
And ghostly clinging shapes; kids were taught he knows,

They never come singly—but is this what I mean when I say
The spirit is come upon me, Christ's spirit, like a dove about my head,
Pecking and beating my aching head with hard feathery wings,
Leading up to somewhere there above among the cracks that cross
And twine the plaster ceiling, create a figure always staring down,
Clutching with fingers too large for mortal man so must be god—

(I will lift mine eyes—) And drop them down again; pluck them out
Before they look upon the holy; slice off the hand that did—that reached
Out and caught and clung; and when I've done the things he asked,
Then I can turn to every other part that might misbehave
And undermine the perfectness of god's imagining; slash
And burn, and hoist out the tower window to the slavering dogs,

Except they keep the window closed and pieces of me putrify
On the window sill and they use this as their excuse not to come in.
If they would open windows out to the heavens and the sun
And wind; I might find my soul waiting there, only demons
Like the dark; spirits live in light and revelation; this place
Must send them mad, the nature of its silence, the shadows

Of its heart and mind; long shadows that cross the floor
And leap elongated up the walls when they flick switches
Far from my grasping fingers and the shapes that come and crawl
Out from nowhere and infest my walls, are spirits of the fallen
Angels; not the spirits that fight for space with soul and jockey
There for running room ... they taught us then, space is always

Waiting to be filled; there is a space too swept and garnishèd;
They took mine anyway and left me with nothing to inherit;
The wicked shall not prosper; someone cried it in my dreams,
Or it might have been outside—before—when—my dad said,
No son of mine—but the blood of ancestors courses in my veins;
Back, back, to the allowance made for rape and pillage—they skipped

That information in history books; let us believe we came as
A presence long required upon the soil of ancient lands and might
Do what we will, I lived too late to fill my destiny and they always
Said ... I don't remember what they always said ... but it had
A flavour that was about the persistence of Godliness in us and ours;
Salt of the earth, can do no wrong, but I was pulled this way, that—

'I don't mind how he treats the shadows in there,
It's when he gets back on to himself, that's when
He's a gigantic pain ... I sometimes wish he'd ... s'pose
I shouldn't say it, we're here to ... oh well ... come on now.'

The sound of soles receding.

*

Built firmly, upon this mortar and stone
Society can rear its bombastic head;
All that makes its mark upon
The history books and stays to hold them in;
Mere numbers in a census now.

They discerned the value of incarceration;
When they gave up trial by red-hot irons, and used
Men to build in monumental style and grandiosity;
But he came too late for that; this intake now, if they'd been
Around a hundred years ago; a day chained by the ankle to quarried
Rocks; that left men too tired to let another self unchain, devour

The innocent; gave them fresh air and exercise; these namby-pamby
Men of this age, all neat and nice, not much difference between
The saviours and the to-be-saved; all pale and clean with no dirt
And stone-dust under finger-nails ... this place was built to hold
A family of ten (plus maids and hangers-on; poor relations,
Black sheep) ... well-built but we forgot that in the building—

It's what I always say; there wouldn't be a problem with
The young if we could find things for them to do; but since
The slump ... not work enough for men with responsibilities;
What can you expect of the next generation: boredom, futility,
That's half the problem ... a good war now, that'll soak them up;
Too late for our current inmates—though I often think, why keep

Them safe, and send our best young men off to die? Now if we
Could drag this flotsam out into broad daylight (not that I'd want
To arm some of them but a duty could be found; making, mending,
I'm sure there's ways they could be put to good use; that generation
Had its uses and the next thought there might be factory work
That could be farmed out to institutions; and the next had thoughts

For medical experiments; why not, and seeing what happened
When ... there was talk of radioactivity but the staff ... and then
Companies were offered guinea pigs to try out new shampoos.
It took four burly men to get the stuff on to some proffered heads,
Though we keep a weather eye out for lice in long-term men—and
Scabies ... of course the rep was kept downstairs, and results

Passed on; it made the inmates feel they had some use; those
That retained a critical faculty; others ... well ... though
Listening in to endless gabblings you wonder if it all was
Preceded by a thought or just fell out like noise from a broken
Pipe in a downpour or a loose tile in a gale; makes them know
They're still human, noise, talk, gibberish, is more than monkeys do.

Old files and reports taken away on trolleys for storing in
The cellars; a minor problem with damp, but then it's not
Likely these old pages, neatly written up, so many pints and
Ounces delivered into so many mouths and veins per day, per week;
The justifications signed off; the sedated minds that occasionally
Reared up and claimed a human word and sank back again ...

‘They took fifty years of files downstairs yesterday;
Said no point in keeping them upstairs;
Not as though there's the likelihood of change; he's still
At himself; to and fro, like a bear I once saw in the zoo—’
The sound of soles receding.

*

Stone and mortar have a certain sense
That time runs slower here;
The blink that means a year elsewhere,
Might take forever here and hang like
One last grain in an hourglass ...

It seemed to run forever; those moments when he was on

The lips of the entire populace; a name, a look, an anger
That this should rise up in all its awfulness in the Sunday
Papers' struggle to catch the eye of passing people, leap out
From under newsboys' arms, the ferocity of crime and the way
He looked angelic, made people wonder about their best-kept sons.

But angels don't survive too well when walled up in places
Never meant for love and happiness; but patriarchic tendencies
Are resilient and the paterfamilias that built this resplendent pile
Was not concerned with inspiring love but didn't mind a little fear
And awe expressed in lowered gaze and prim 'yes, papas' and 'it is
As you say, Ebenezer' ... or a name of that nature; Hiram perhaps.

And if the scriptures were read here it was to remind his dependants
That misbehaviour is a sin and carries heavy penalties; no harm
In letting people know God is round about and carries fear
As other people carry letters home or call with patent medicines.
But it could be that unforgiving nature spread a miasma through
The upper corridors and infected everyone since entered here.

The lack of visitors bringing a bright light whiff of the outer world,
Like wattle blossom on the wintry wind, is unfortunate but it
Doesn't surprise anyone. Not really. The place, its inmates,
Is not a place to say 'we'll pop in on Saturday, see how he is.'
Even staff are sometimes chary of saying 'I work at—' As though
The world is both curious of what happens behind harked-at walls

And a little dubious of those who make it their life and career.
But they at least are spared the grimdest passages in God's holiest
Communication and can amuse themselves by sharing experiences
And the strange cases that fill the books that sit around the rooms
Downstairs, human oddities, like collections of cigarette cards
Or the 'cases' written up by Doctor Watson for the delectation

And amazement of readers whose lives border on the humdrum;
Odd remarks and that ever-present titter over 'got four Christs
In residence just now, always seem to have one or two.' How odd!
Is it ego, is it comfort, people laugh but never know quite what
To ask; should they take it seriously? Does everyone believe in
The Christ within but it takes madness to allow them to claim that

He has taken over? A difficult topic this and rarely taken
Seriously by men in white who are inclined to see religion

And belief as an aberration, a sign of weakness, an inability
To engage with the world without the comfort of this opiate,
This crutch, this crumb of comfort, this idea that Christ and man
Are one when the outer barriers are dissolved, and good and bad

Engage in a battle royal within the tender kernel of imprisoned
Soul, finally leaving him rent asunder; much better those who find
In it the ultimate comfort of unassailable belief. I am that which
Is most sought, most revered, most loved, most pretended to be
Sought and loved. Most saved. Truly saved. What lasting comfort.
But some unfortunates are condemned to a different track.

In them the words which have inspired scholars to ponder,
Agree, disagree, fall out violently, wars fought over a minor
Means of interpretation, the bloodshed contained within a wafer,
The fury of the symbolism of blood into wine are denied
A benevolence; 'my son', I say, 'my son, my beloved son' ...
And then there's the chance to sit unmolested in the TV room.

The terror felt within is equal to the terror expressed without;
If the inner workings of the holiest of spirits and the immortality
Of the soul are bound up in the final fury of a life forever damned,
Then who will reach down into the maelstrom of the burning mind
And pluck the new-born phoenix from its funeral pyre and set it
On its way—and call it a dove, a flame, an opening into hope.

Not him. Not this man who has grown old in the mire of
Unanswered questions; dragging here behind him, like a cloak
Invisible, with which no educated man has engaged; blind
To the damage brought unseen through all the years of
Unexceptional obedience to all that was required of him but
Gave no indication of what might happen in those crucial years.

'They blame it all on testosterone these days, I believe.
Too late for him, poor sod, when he was young, all that energy,
And it only drove him to—pity, but there it is ...
Don't know what you do, really, can't go round castrating ...'
The sound of soles receding.

*

The tower, the turreted, keeping, kept.
Dim lights filtered in;

Pale and wan and somewhere between grey and grim.
The smell that suggests confinement,
To and fro, the words that chain.

The mind that fed the lust that brought him here
Convinced in youth the devil drives below the waist,
Denies the heart, berates the mind
And fights for seating in the ultimate
Auditorium. But all it takes, one lightning slice
And the quest that fired his mind is re-aligned.

If it was not body then it must be soul,
But if the mind's possessed it can't be soul, of which
Each human's promised one. Spirit then;
The spirit of the dead who died in lust desired
And cannot rest, the phantom rise and fall.
Spirit. Soul. His head on fire. Words. Names clutched.

Different names and what is which, he mused when
Rare quiet reigned and set himself afire again. *They* knew
They meant different things ... but words got tangled in his mind,
Turned over, floated upside-down; he tried to grasp
Their sense and felt them evade his lunging clutch.
He cried after them as they bounced and tore his space apart;

Teased and called, from everywhere, their echoes
Overlapping, his head, switching round, never catching, for
They were there inside his skull, battling for supremacy;
Bursting up against his cell membranes. The answer—it must be
Disentangled, before his mind could find surcease; he spoke
Of this torment in holy words—‘if soul is all, the resurrection

Of the dead, alive again, why then does this spirit catch
My soul, my eternity, that touches all, knows all, a fragment
Of what is God—why does spirit drive me to constant harm
In the temple of the soul? True God must define true pain for me,
But the awful disharmony of warring words, where soul and spirit
Fight each round within my gaping wounds and grant my mind no peace ... ’

‘He's at it *again*—should we try to—’
Wardresses peering in. The comfort of wire-embedded glass.
That wreck that finds no grounding shoal. ‘No, poor bastard,
Come away, it's nearly tea ... there's nothing ... ’

The sound of soles receding.

*

The last place left, the encroachments,
the implosion of a place that's had its day
and been replaced by euphemisms;
several of them.

A giant hole has given way to poured concrete,
steel rods, churned clay, men in hard hats;
pleasant living, ten minutes (nearly) from the CBD ...
They argued over to or from and the going away
won the day.

But the small grassed place next door with routine stones
still attracts girls from nearby shops and agencies,
with lunch. They sprawl about, liking the soft spring of grass,
careful of their clothes, soaking up the strong midday sun.
The stones are worn. Their names going the way
of most earthly fame.

They sometimes look and say; I wonder ...
I wonder. They don't really.
Just a natural kindness,
forged in sun and time away from clients
and customers.

This one. Toby Tuke and over here, Noble Dunn—and what about—
Arch Mottram aka William Judd aka James Calfrey—
How come: they speculate.
Didn't they know his name?
Didn't he know his own name? Changed it because ... A split person.
Three ways split. JC at last. Who was he ... and when?
Their young voices rise and fall.
More names. More pseudonyms. And why? The shame.

They must all have lived next door—and they turn to look
at cranes and trucks,
concrete delivered in a puddling rush—
One of those.
Even now it's gone the asylum still casts a sense of shadow
on this space remaining with its rows of cheap grey stones. Job lots.
's'pose,' it's what they think, this place to eat their lunch,

and ponder, ‘they’ll put apartments up here next.’
More pleasant living, only ten minutes ...

The excavator disturbing the coffins, the shrouds, cheap pine,
the souls, the ghosts.

They crush lunch-wraps, suck up juice, brush crumbs,
and rise. ‘Time to go, worse luck. I like it here.’

So do I ... me too ... and me ... ’bye Mr Also-Known-As. Sleep tight.
They laugh and turn and walk away,
their next words drowned out in construction noise.

~ The End~

‘In one case, which came to light this year, a man charged with murder in 1927 was found to have been detained in the Ararat mental hospital at the Governor’s pleasure for 56 years even though the charge against him had been dropped.’

The Age. 30 August 1988.

Notes:

Longer versions of ‘Seashores’ and ‘The Spanish Walk’ have been printed in booklet form. ‘The Castle in the Sand’ and ‘The Sea Eagle’s Feather’ have been published in *The Famous Reporter* magazine. ‘The Castle in the Sand’ and ‘Bram’s Beach’ have been read on Radio 7ZR. ‘Bram’s Beach’ won the short story at the Toowoomba Eisteddfod some years ago. ‘Fritillary’ won the 2003 Tom Howard poetry competition and appeared in the anthology *End of Season*. A slightly different version of ‘The Chalk Man’ was Highly Commended in the 2003 Henry Savery short story competition and won the Lake Macquarie FAW short story in 2014. The title poem for ‘A Book of Seals’ was equal second in the King Island Poetry competition in 2003.