SAMPLER

Horse-Man
Also by Em Strang

Bird-Woman
Em Strang

Horse-Man

Shearsman Books
# Contents

Memory of a Boat Before I Was Born  11  
I.M. Big John Chang  12  
The Lamp  13  
Dark River, Dusk  15  
Two Cows  16  
Most Beautiful Bull  17  
Talking Meat  18  
At the Delicatessen with Gaping Wound  19  
Slaughterhouse  20  
This Dog Barking  21  
Elegy  22  
Bus-dog’s Lesson on Grief  23  
The Art of Emptiness  25  
Capreolus Capreolus  26  
Passage  27  
Old Photograph  29  
Voice  30  
Bog Iris  31  
Daily Bread  32  
Peony  46  
Leveret  47  
Loneliness  48  
At Stoker’s Cottage  49  
Sometimes a Blackbird Flies from an Oak  51  
Fieldfares  52  
Crane  53  
On Waking  55  
Stillness  56  
The Kindness  57  
Self-Portrait with Snow  58  
The Foal  59  
Because the Moon Is Its Own Bright Country  60  
Horse-Man’s Long Dream of the Moon  63  
Petrichor  64  
Horse-Man Will Not Ride  66  
Horse-Man Says Yes  67
Horse-Man on Harris 68
Horse-Man in the Dunes 69
Horse-Man at Callanish 70
Horse-Man and the Aspens 71
Horse-Man and the Oak 72
To Lie Here in the Dark 73
Horse-Man at Crotha Bothy 74

Acknowledgements 76
For Horse-Man

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The heart that loves me is a wound without shield
– Jalal-ud-Din Rumi

Yet earth contains
The horse as a remembrancer of wild Arenas we avoid
– James Wright
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Memory of a Boat Before I Was Born

I pray all day alone in the high mountains, sitting or lying down in a dark cave, where goats sometimes sleep and give birth. At the mouth of the cave, tall grasses grow and a sweet, wild lettuce that goats love. I am not the oldest animal in the cave, but it takes the sun a long time to filter in.

As night comes, I climb down into the valley, to the dark shore where the boat bobs. This is an old lake with bright fish that sing, and its water is wide and open. Old friends have met here, and lovers. This is a place for all kinds of lovers.

I stand still for some time, perhaps many years – while the lake empties and refills – and then I step carefully into the boat, let myself be carried out across the water to the place of my birth.
I.M. Big John Chang

I knew Big John Chang from the time he was young and fit, and full like a well-loved dog.

He had a face that shone out – lit up our faces, us brothers, even though we weren’t his real brothers and I was a girl.

He wore the same blue fleece jacket for two years solid and a pair of trousers that were older than him.

I knew him before the drowning: sun for a face on weekdays, moon for a face at weekends, the kind of sun and moon you could rely on for brilliance. I’ve said that already.

If I knew him now, I’d say, ‘All your light won’t fit the boat; it’ll spill out from your clothes, your eyes, your skin, and the whole lake will blaze and pulse from you like ripples from a rock.’

Maybe I’d say that.
The Lamp

The lamp is hot and white and almost sings
as you scrape a tiny hollow in the snow.
The light streams out towards you from all things.

You're bigger than you thought with arms like wings
that quiver in the space and seem to grow.
The lamp is hot and white and almost sings.

This lamp is like a drunken eye that swings,
pointing out the night you think you know.
The light streams out towards you from all things.

It's when the fox comes out that night begins
as in your heart a red wind starts to blow.
The lamp is hot and white and almost sings.

You cannot know the morning, what it brings
until the fox has melted with the snow.
The light streams out towards you from all things.

You gather up the night beneath your wings
and let it stab your self from head to toe.
The lamp is hot and white and almost sings.

When the night has passed, the cold air stings
and somewhere in a pine tree sits a crow.
The light streams out towards you from all things.
You didn’t ask for this, such tender skin
with a newness that was born so long ago.
The lamp is hot and white and almost sings.
The light streams out towards you from all things.
Dark River, Dusk

White bull on the riverbank
leaning its bulk weight
on a steep, perpendicular line
to the water.

It slips slowly in
or the river sips and laps the bull.
Its white rump burns out.
Two Cows

Where the sun comes in across the grass like a snake comes, silently, smoothly because this is its habit — two white cows.

The cows stand with their hooves on the earth like the feet of great tables.

Their backs bear the weight of unbroken sunlight from beginning to end.

Their bodies carry the myth of light long after dusk.

They stand and stand.
Most Beautiful Bull

Disciples must make up their mind to overpower the bull; that is, they must learn to control the untamed, brutal, violent force of their sensuality so as to make use of its strength. To overpower the bull does not mean to kill it; if you kill it you will not be able to benefit from its strength.

—Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov

Most beautiful bull, you stake out your place.

When I listen to you
I hear patience, deeper

than the field’s furrow, but not by much.

You roar here at the hedge. brown bulk, small pig eyes.

Most beautiful bull, you wield your girder.
Talking Meat

I’m quite still. I turn to look
but it’s too dark to tell the time
and I’m smaller than usual.
I have, in fact, no body at all.
At the bottom of the bed, joints of meat
laid out from right to left
like stillborn infants in an ante-chamber.
Massive legs of lamb or pork or beef
with the skin still on and bristles
to remind us of animals.
‘It’s OK. Don’t be afraid!’ they say.
But I am afraid and there’s a rattle
at the back of my throat, a low growl
like a starving dog with a femur.
Even without eyes, I have a clear view
of each cut. Even without a nose,
I can smell the fresh high scent of death
as though it were my own. Each limb
is dripping, tepid in the breath of the room.
I reach for something – water, daylight –
but there is no reaching, only someone else’s fingers
like a rack of ribs off a palm.
At the Delicatessen with Gaping Wound

I want this meat and these loaves.
Big leg of lamb and red rack of pork.

The fat around the muscle is odious,
white like a smoker’s sclera.

I see the fresh bread is brooding
and there’s a row of knives like dead fish.

The man lifts everything
deftly over the counter.

There has never been meat in my life
nor loaves like these.

The man sees that the pork will fit the gash
and the bread will swab the blood.

I look up as I shove the things in.
How much?
Slaughterhouse

Those white hands working a dark space of universal muscle over universal bone.

Somewhere a barn door opens and closes.

Dogs with bright faces bark for so long that the dust turns back into stone.