

SAMPLER

Horse-Man

Also by Em Strang

Bird-Woman

SAMPLER

Em Strang

Horse-Man

SAMPLE

Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2019 by
Shearsman Books
50 Westons Hill Drive
Emersons Green
BRISTOL
BS16 7DF

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(this address not for correspondence)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-677-6

Copyright © Em Strang, 2019.

The right of Em Strang to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the
Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.
All rights reserved.

SAMPLER

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

SAMPLER

For Horse-Man

SAMPLER

SAMPLER

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

SAMPLER

SAMPLER

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.

SAMPLER

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.

SAMPLER

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.

SAMPLER

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.

SAMPLER

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.

SAMPLER