

The Body in Space

Also by Gerrie Fellows

Technologies and Other Poems (Polygon, 1990)

The Powerlines (Polygon, 2000)

The Duntroon Toponymy (Mariscat, 2001)

Window for a Small Blue Child (Carcenet, 2007)

Gerrie Fellows

*The
Body
in
Space*

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I

The Miraculous World

The Miraculous World

From a bothy
spun around a pole odd tree
in a place without wood
its sills, shells its windows
onto water and the cliff
where our men lean outward
roped over waves

she watches her father climb
through the sheared air
holds him in her sight
out over the dark all I saw of the minke
triangular fins of coasting sharks
the gannets' dive the explosion
that comes to us across the water

At the end of his route
he'll show her a pinioned boulder
triangle of air she might
step through: we'll hold her
in the net of our observation unroped
in a place sheeny with quartz and salt
that slants away

to the waves'
white rushing and falling back
the sharks' dark fins
the ballet of gannets
their light bones their perfectly
aerodynamic skulls diving into
all around us
the miraculous world

From Breanais

I

At Uig building a mountain
a castle, a harbour
my daughter's bridge
the only one that will stand
in the wet sand

towers are brochs
fallen into ruin
even as they're built a rubble
like the concrete blocks
left standing
the roofless houses

From the back of the beach
she yells urgently over and over
what is this?

pellet knit with fur and rabbit bones
the knuckles as clear
as if just lifted
from the broth of the stomach

What bird coasting on great wings
gurgled this knot disgorged
over the machair
over eyebright and sandwort
bird's-foot trefoil

II

What bird
coasting on great wings

over half-built dwellings
 hump-backed houses fallen back
to walls the hurricane filled up with sand

 stones flung above a beach
(the way a hurricane enters a conversation)

 places revealed by storm
 places sealed and hidden

over the dead buried at the edge of the ocean

III

The custodian is telling us
how fish and seal meat, seabirds
 smoked above a hearth
were stored in the cool stone cellar
how smoke drifts from the hearth
how she brushes the ashes out
 day after day
 in a house set down in earth
The English she speaks is smoky with Gaelic sounds
(as if it had in it a colour found only in this place)

 orchid clover tufted vetch
 heath milkwort siabann nam ban-sìdh
 forget-me-not cotharach protector

her purple cardigan like a flower of the machair

IV

Mealisval, Cracaval,
Laival a' Tuath, Laival a' Deas, Griomaval

They might be the names
of colours
 in a poem about light
 shades of blue
 when the sky
is a clear, subtle turquoise

shades of translucence
when the ocean
is a green mineral
light/ness of elements
 suspended between wave lengths

V

Even on Leòdhas they say it—
Breanais is the back of beyond

a house with yellow like the eye
or the beak of a bird
as if a great seabird
ground-nested there
coasting watching the ocean

In the grass of the machair
the head and beak of a fulmar
the beak intact ochre
the closed curve of a knife
broken-open empty skull
delicate white
almost translucent

This is what we found

The bones of birds
are lighter than ours

Island Journal

I

Walking on Mull's basaltic sands
we look aslant over water
from our wet footprints
the way the lava ran
from the caldera molten

to the slate islands' riven fins
Cullipool's black steep
that pitched our daughter's football once
from beach

to wave tips white on white
taking the yachts' sails
against the lava flow
from that island
cattle-grazed with green

to this island's cooled opposite
to our being here now
aslant in time and distance
bound by black sand by water

II

After rain: you and I
over moss water-logged pasture
steep up into the
rain diary logged rainbows
sharp showers sharp
wind dipping below the cloud
of our big dark neighbour

but we're on fire
the caldera's flow fixed to stone
 cold, but we are warm-
blooded animals moving
in the bellow of stags
scree travellers footing it
 over and up looking back

at the distant col at unexpected
others might be rocks
but their legs jolt as they stand
I expect them silhouetted
crossing the ridge but
 they are nowhere
our co-inhabitants vanished
into the planet of time and rock

III

Gone over water
he travels towards his father
fallen flyer on Warfarin

She and I at a forest edge
talking of this
between upheaved tussocks
grass, pathless bracken
the conversation of years:

beyond us, unseen the debris
of a wartime flight ripped
aluminium in rock a vanishing
as of walkers on a ridge or the flit
of yesterday's texts on her phone

our bootprints trackless
on the steep black scree

IV

At the boat rail
our daughters

mottled as young birds
as seal pups
 out on the water

towards a landing stage
 light-stepped
 pyramid

 out towards
 bird churches
broken lava terraces

 out towards

And where we were
 a green falling away

V

a walk by raised beaches sheep
fort verdant headland in rain
taking us by columns cooled
to the hexagonal the not-quite
we marvel at dark honeycomb
 over which the sea escapes

racing away from us
 as the beaches lift
 tip us descending

towards fanned basalt
flattered by sunlight

A child's delight
at the monkey puzzle shape of it
dashed to a stump hollow impress
of a trunk gigantic horsetail
 up beyond us, craning necks
 until I say to her—
 fifty million years

standing as we do
in the Atlantic forests
in the warm damp
young as we are in the ancient

The Invisible Field

Beyond a gate emblazoned with padlocks
in a ghost territory of bracken and fencing
bootsoles smash downwards on concrete
and powerlines burr under the arch of pylons

*Where the shepherd had a house from the master
two cows' grass pasture for sixty sheep on the hill
chainsaws fell upright stands of conifer
for chipboard cellulose rayon newsprint
for boxes fences telegraph poles*

*The graziers were at first considered by the natives
as aliens and invaders of property
Abortive attempts were made to extirpate them*

The soil of the plantings rain-washed downwards
leached ash grey iron pan on the slopes
(salt and earth kept separate on the breast of the corpse)
the alkali of the spirit
the destructible granular body graded and quarried

concrete uplifted by mountains
where ice cup was *argent* spillage of cold
rasped over quartz mica
All this broken through *a saltire enrailed*
(*The crest a demi-savage
brandishing in his dexter hand a broadsword*)

A torse of rock crushed and sectioned
one hundred and fifty tons an hour transported
across submerged and treacherous regions
mixed with sand became the healing balm
on cableways slung from headmasts
three thousand cubic yards a week

eight and a quarter miles of concrete aqueducts
a hundred and four intake dams
section by section the headwall
thirteen buttresses spanned by arches
In an escroll above the motto THIS I'LL DEFEND

Upright upon the earth the engineer
calculated the meanings of rock and water
*Let concrete be the balm Let water run
in the penstocks Let energy equal light*

*Supporters two highland men in belted plaids
in trenches of rock and mud
incomers from war at war with the earth
rainwashed slipping beneath them
(the cast-off cladding the falling timber
the men bare-headed sweating shaken)
(anonymous but for the injured and the dead)*

Section by section the headwall
a memorial plaque one hundred and sixty feet high
*all Proper standing on a compartment wavy
whereon is the word LOCH SLOY*

The slung cables sigh under the arch of pylons
The invisible field dwarfs the bungalow
a man and a woman fenced and netted
bodies disrupted as mine is
passing beneath that charged singing

*Let there be light in the dark regions
an end to black Mondays on Clydeside
an end to blackouts on washday in the tenements*

And there was light: far down Glen Loin
it burns over the nuclear secrets
over the shipwrecked yards
over my own boots on the road