

The Manager: a poem

Selected Writings 2

RICHARD BERENGARTEN was born in London in 1943, into a family of musicians. He has lived in Italy, Greece, the USA and former Yugoslavia. His perspectives as a poet combine English, French, Mediterranean, Jewish, Slavic, American and Oriental influences.

Under the name RICHARD BURNS, he has published more than 25 books. In the 1970s, he founded and ran the international Cambridge Poetry Festival. He has received the Eric Gregory Award, the Wingate-Jewish Quarterly Award for Poetry, the Keats Poetry Prize, the Yeats Club Prize, the international Morava Charter Poetry Prize and the Great Lesson Award (Serbia). He has been Writer-in-Residence at the international Eliot-Dante Colloquium in Florence, Arts Council Writer-in-Residence at the Victoria Centre in Gravesend, Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Newnham College, Cambridge, and a Royal Literary Fund Project Fellow. He has been Visiting Associate Professor at the University of Notre Dame and British Council Lecturer in Belgrade, first at the Centre for Foreign Languages and then at the Philological Faculty. He is currently a Bye-Fellow at Downing College, Cambridge, and Praeceptor at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. His poems have been translated into more than 90 languages.

By Richard Berengarten

THE SELECTED WRITINGS OF RICHARD BERENGARTEN

Vol. 1 *For the Living: Selected Longer Poems, 1965–2000*

Vol. 2 *The Manager*

Vol. 3 *The Blue Butterfly* (*The Balkan Trilogy*, Part 1)

Vol. 4 *In a Time of Drought* (*The Balkan Trilogy*, Part 2)

Vol. 5 *Under Balkan Light* (*The Balkan Trilogy*, Part 3)

POETRY (WRITTEN AS RICHARD BURNS)

The Easter Rising 1967

The Return of Lazarus

Double Flute

Avebury

Inhabitable Space

Angels

Some Poems, Illuminated by Frances Richards

Learning to Talk

Tree

Roots/Routes

Black Light

Croft Woods

Against Perfection

Book With No Back Cover

Manual: the first 20

Holding the Darkness (Manual: the second 20)

Holding the Sea (Manual: the third 20)

AS EDITOR

An Octave for Octavio Paz

Ceri Richards: Drawings to Poems by Dylan Thomas

Rivers of Life

In Visible Ink: Selected Poems, Roberto Sanesi 1955–1979

Homage to Mandelstam

Out of Yugoslavia

For Angus

The Perfect Order: Selected Poems, Nasos Vayenas, 1974–2010

The Manager

a poem

Selected Writings

Volume 2

RICHARD BERENGARTEN

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To Whom It May Concern

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xix

Under the plane tree an old woman knits	3
---	---

PART ONE

1. <i>Gemini</i>	7
2. Our evenings together	8
3. Dad I can't get to sleep	9
4. Well Charles what'll it be	10
5. Day invades the curtains	11
6. Dancing half canned at Miriana's party	12
7. I yet myself continually	13
8. How I piss myself off	14
9. <i>Confidential Memo</i>	16
10. In tele-sales she said	18
11. It has never been like this	20
12. <i>Prospectus</i>	21
13. Hello, she sighs	23
14. October then	24
15. It was love perfect passion	26
16. Boarded the Twin Com	27
17. As a child on the playground edge	28
18. Coming in Wintersfield	30
19. As she stripped	31
20. Am I stealing you from your husband	32
21. Some people you can tell	33
22. One Thursday I skipped school	34

23. He's a lurcher not a whippet	36
24. You are a true blue brick Tony	38
25. Your silence squeezes me dry	39
26. Am I interrupting you	40
27. She had a curious way	42
28. You're pretending again	43
29. What's a woman like me to do	44
30. My name? <i>Homo aspirans</i>	46
31. She's watching <i>The Holocaust</i>	48
32. This morning every object	50
33. Is that the telephone ringing	51
34. Gasparo Napolitano in fullest flight	52
35. So that afternoon she flits	54
36. Yes hello there Looie hello	56
37. A lecture	58
38. Tonight she's in bed with her Cypriot	60
39. Cover me Manoula	62
40. Now it's autumn	63
41. Sipping Earl Grey in the Orangerie	64
42. Far too many years	66
43. Dozing, half past something	68
44. Room 1409	70
45. If I may make so bold as to speak	72
46. This bed smells of Eleni Deirdre Jane	74
47. Once in bed you said	75
48. Well this Adam Kadmon mate	76
49. My arms have been amputated	78
50. Hello. Hello. Are you there	80
51. I sit behind my desk	81

Curriculum Vitae	83
------------------	----

PART TWO

52. Last night I was kept awake	87
53. Through the aerial arrival gate	88
54. Why you must to tell me	90
55. A polythene green dragon	92
56. The Saturday before they left	93
57. <i>Memo. To: Psychometric Testing Evaluation Unit</i>	94
58. There go the dead again	96
59. If I were to speak I'd call up the dead	98
60. I lift myself from despair	99
61. And if I were to greet you	100
62. To say Mummy again	101
63. Snowfall, two feet, at Green Hedges	102
64. The car turning the corner	103
65. I have spent much of my time looking	104
65. What I have lost is perpetual	105
66. I have searched all over this house	106
68. Sir. Since the living	108
69. Here my darling is the house	110
70. Chill east wind from Poland	112
71. Nobody calls	114
72. The minister has been tainted	115
73. He chats to me cheerily	116
74. Adam Kadmon hangs upside down	118
75. Cedar Ward	120
76. Damnedness and madness	121
77. This is a Reassessment Unit	122
78. <i>Hip Know sissies</i>	124
Hypnosis is	125
79. <i>Fax: Urgent</i>	126
80. We thought things might get better	128
81. After betrayal and after bereavement	129
82. This limestone cavern has the hugest mouth	130
83. Through heathered acres	131

84. I have tried to make sense of my life	132
85. <i>Email</i>	134
86. All the people I need to talk to	135
87. A hidden agenda	138
88. When did I last see myself	140
89. Auntie Mimi has died	142
90. Oh my cousin	143
91. Closed the front door quietly	144
92. I cannot make it cohere	146
93. To be not here, or anywhere	147
94. One street on my citymap always eludes me	148
95. In the parks and among the flowering gardens	150
96. This is a petition	152
97. Do not approach	154
98. The aeon lies torn in pieces	155
99. I've been trying to get through for ages	156
100. You who sit waiting for me	157
 Noon. A sky of jade	 159
 <i>Postscript</i>	 161
<i>Notes</i>	163

Preface

The Manager is the second volume in the ongoing series of *Selected Writings* by Richard Berengarten. Through its previous publications, under the name Richard Burns, this book-length poem has a curious history. It was first effectively noticed by Barry MacSweeney, who published four sections from it as a work-in-progress in *Poetry South East*, 1980:

Richard Burns, a poet from Cambridge, is currently working in Gravesend. *The Manager* is a fabulous work. I wish I had room to publish more, or cash to print the lot. Its tense, hysterical edges (no insult) and jagged rhythms are just what we need in the eighties. More and more we need to record the breakdown, anger, frustration, paranoia and downright bloodiness of society. Richard has his writing hand on the thudding pulse. It will make a fine book.¹

In 1982, this first editorial response was followed up by the leading American journal of postmodern literature, *Boundary 2*, which published thirty sections.² Six years later, in 1988, Elaine Feinstein chose three extracts for *PEN New Poetry II*.³ Reviewing that anthology in *The Guardian*, Carol Ann Duffy wrote:

Some poets soar above straightforward craftsmanship. [The] extracts from *The Manager* by Richard Burns give a genuine frisson with their stark originality.

In 1987, the author left England to live in Yugoslavia. One unexpected result of his move was that a draft of *The Manager* was published by the Writers' Association of Montenegro in 1990, so the book had the unique distinction of appearing in Serbo-Croatian translation eleven

¹ Barry MacSweeney, guest ed., 'Introduction', *Poetry South East* 5, South East Arts, Tunbridge Wells, 1980.

² Richard Burns, '30 Extracts from *The Manager*', *Boundary 2*, XII/1, ed. William V. Spanos, State University of New York at Binghamton, pp. 15–31.

³ Richard Burns, 'Three Extracts from *The Manager*', *P. E.N. New Poetry II*, ed. Elaine Feinstein, Quartet Books, London, 1988, pp. 21–24.

years before its first full appearance in English.⁴ Unfortunately, it came out when Yugoslavia was on the verge of falling apart.

By January 1991, Burns had returned to England, and the poet and editor Anthony Rudolf, a good friend of his, showed the English text to the far-sighted London literary agent Giles Gordon. Gordon's response was rapid and unequivocal: 'I suspect, quite genuinely, that *The Manager* may be a masterpiece and posterity will recognise it as such.' But he added: 'Therefore it is extremely feeble of me to say that I don't believe I'd be able to find a publisher for it [. . .] and certainly not next week.'⁵

Giles Gordon's predictions proved right. The poetics of *The Manager* were scarcely in keeping with the post-Thatcherian 1990s. Indeed, the poem is interpretable, at least in part, as an exposé of the hollowness and shallowness of Thatcherism. For all its wit, it is also replete with elements that some readers still find uncomfortable, discomfiting, disturbing. At any rate, a first full English edition was not to appear in print for another ten years, when Anthony Rudolf, a consistently loyal advocate of the book, showed a copy to the London publishing consultant David Elliott, who was immediately enthusiastic. The eventual result was that the firm Elliott and Thompson was founded *because* its editors knew they had to publish *The Manager*. It was their first book, and they took considerable pains in its printing and design. David Elliott's sleeve-notes claimed:

The Manager is a long poem of a new kind. In presenting the reader with fictional episodes from the life of one man, it offers an account of the disjunctions and contradictions of modern-day living. The text bristles with outrage, anger, obsession, loss and romance, interwoven with passages of a wry, sardonic humour. It merges characters, interactions and drama. Its medium, the 'verse-paragraph', enables the reader to capture an impressive range of the registers, inflexions and nuances of contemporary language in all its forms.⁶

⁴ *Menadžer*, tr. Jasna B. Mišić and Vladimir Sekulić, with introduction by Anthony Rudolf, Udruženje Crne Gore, Titograd, 1990.

⁵ Giles Gordon, letter to Richard Burns. January 17, 1991. Text supplied by RB.

⁶ David Elliott (unattributed), description on inside front flap, *The Manager, a poem*, 1st edition, Elliott & Thompson, London & Bath, 2001.

But perhaps not surprisingly, with the exemplary exceptions of *Poetry Review* and the *London Magazine*,⁷ the mainstream culture managers and fashionable reviewers bypassed the book entirely, wouldn't touch it with a barge pole. London stayed impermeable, unstirred, unmoved.



Even so, as often happens with genuinely new, original and powerful poetry, reception of *The Manager* started to go through a series of slow and gradual drifts. The book began to find its own way and ways, turning up in unexpected peripheries, rooting itself here and there, occupying edges, filling hollows, spilling onto and over ledges. For example, it achieved glistening responses in Swansea (Wales), Plymouth and Exeter (Devon), Athens (Greece), South Bend (Indiana), New Orleans, and Tbilisi (Georgia). From South Wales, poet and critic Jeremy Hooker wrote:

I find *The Manager* brilliant, a work of sustained brilliance. It is everywhere exceptionally well written, with a linguistic versatility that is rare in any writing and sometimes calls to mind Joyce, not by suggesting a debt to him, but by virtue of its control of language, its knowledge of words. [. . .] The work has immense verbal richness, it delights in words, it knows them intimately, it knows their many diverse use for different purposes, and therefore has a considerable range of voices, a range far wider than *The Waste Land*. [. . .] It is in the voices, above all – romantic, lyrical, sardonic, self-condemned by cliché, 'managerial', 'popular', 'bitter', tender – that *The Manager* at once composes and reveals, projects and diagnoses a whole modern world with its conditions of life. [. . .] I do not know another poem, or indeed any writing, which is at once so expert in our modern consumerist specialist language, and so witty in exposing their superficiality and heartlessness.⁸

From Edinburgh, the historian and poet Angus Calder wrote for *The London Magazine*:

⁷ 'This is an extremely ambitious and interesting work – one that needs to be read and reread.' Jonathan Treitl, 'From the Ludoslovakian', *Poetry Review*, 92/1, 2002, p. 55. See note 9 below for Angus Calder's review in *The London Magazine*.

⁸ Jeremy Hooker, letter to Richard Burns, 2002. Text supplied by RB. See also the same author's review. 'Handling Experience' in *Swansea Review*, 22, 2003, pp. 114–118.

In a cycle of a hundred poems, with three very fine detached lyrics, Burns takes Charles Bruno from cynically philandering middle management through marital and mental breakdown to the point where he speaks as a prophet in the Old Testament sense, winning past death to endorse life. [. . .] Burns has pulled off the rare feat of creating an experimental poem which is at every point wholly accessible. [. . .] It cannot be said that Charles Bruno alias Adam Kadmon alias Cadman is a 'consistent' or 'rounded' character. Which is, I take it, part of Burns' point. Each in his own prison, to bring in Eliot again, experiences himself as multiple. Escaping the prison to face up to our Usness entails not 'rounded' bargaining but open-eyed dissolution, as far as possible, into the life around us. Well, that's how I'd put it, and I wouldn't have phrased that thought this way if I hadn't been thinking hard about Burns' truly remarkable poem.⁹

Two further comments endorsed Calder's response. The novelist Nicholas Mosley wrote: 'I found *The Manager* intensely powerful and moving – like Dylan Thomas's raging against the dying of the light. It is a savage paean of praise for life. The protagonist becomes a giant figure.'¹⁰ And the critic and journalist Val Hennessy noted: 'I found it absolutely riveting. It is a wrenched-from-the-heart work, packed with good things and zapping along in a very compelling manner.'¹¹ Similarly, in January 2003, Steve Spence in Plymouth published a rave review on the *Terrible Work* website:

This epic poem sequence [. . .] looks set to become one of the major works of the last part of the 20th century, hovering edgily on the 21st. [. . .] There are a hundred 'poems' which revolve around the life of 'The Manager', a title which hints both at the pervasive nature of late 20th century business culture and the notion of an individual attempting to manage his own life. I guess the work's unifying subject is ultimately the attempt to reconstitute the idea of 'history' from the ravages of postmodernism, both as a political theory and as cultural deprivation, but it's a poem which so abounds with life, with energy and with such a wide array of voices and different regis-

⁹ Angus Calder, 'A Spectacular Variety of Registers', *The London Magazine*, December/January 2004, pp. 88–94.

¹⁰ Nicholas Mosley, note to RB, 2001. Supplied by RB.

¹¹ Val Hennessy, note to David Elliott, 2001.

ters that you just have to dip in and go with the flow. It's a poem about people, about society, about breakdown in an age of information overload and business uniformity, that takes on big issues through fragmented narratives which point towards a wider picture. *The Manager* is a work which revels in form, technique and wordplay while never quite losing sight of its objective. It's a poem which has 'heart' at its centre, feeling as its source but which never denies the pleasures of the cerebral in so doing. It's that rare thing, also, a poem 'about' language which nevertheless has the potential to reach a wide audience. Hopefully, that will happen because I think it's also an important statement about the confusions and difficulties of the age we live in from the pen of a writer who is clearly working at the peak of his powers. I suspect this work has been some considerable time in the making and looks like becoming Burns' magnum opus. [...] This may well turn out to be the book of the decade. Get hold of a copy and read it. Re-read it.¹²

Then, in summer 2003, a highly successful dramatised version was performed by lead actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company at the 50th Stratford-upon-Avon Poetry Festival. Roger Pringle, director of the Festival, wrote in the programme:

It is well known that a major new artistic or literary work rarely achieves immediate acceptance, let alone acclaim or even recognition. There is often a time-gap before it reaches a wider public. It is almost as though the world offered a natural resistance, which a new work has to challenge and break.

The Manager is a long poem which explores modern experience in a modern idiom. It is a poem of its time and for its time; an expression of our age, and a critique of it. In turn humorously, ironically, even savagely, it examines contemporary behaviour in the business-world, male/female relationships, family life, politics. It is a sequential, connected poem which, like its publishing history, contains elements of surprise and fascinating twists. And because it disregards established poetic norms and creates its own, publishers in Britain did not know what to do with it. Not so, however, in former Yugoslavia. An earlier version of the poem was first published by the Association of Writers of Montenegro in 1990 in a Serbo-Croat

¹² Steve Spence, January 2003, <http://www.terriblework.co.uk/Archive%20whole.htm>, consulted July 17, 2008; no longer accessible.

translation. (At the time the author was living in Serbia.) Eventually, the book was taken on by David Elliott and Brad Thompson, who founded their new firm, Elliott and Thompson, in order to publish it. Their finely designed edition came out quietly in November 2001.

Since then, by word of mouth, around the edges of the poetry world in the UK and abroad, by means of appearances at poetry readings, at festivals and conferences, and among the literary avant-garde as well as among well-known writers, journalists and critics, a slow and steady swell of praise has been growing. It is our belief and hope that the appearance of *The Manager* as the finale to the 50th Stratford-upon-Avon Poetry Festival marks yet another phase in the appreciation and recognition of a major long poem.¹³

Writing from West Point, New York, the American critic Patrick Query comments:

Virtually every thematic element of the poem is contingent, shifting, negotiable, ungovernable. The form, though, is never negotiable, and from that tension emerges the special genius of the poem; and this is why Burns may be said to have written, against impossible odds, a great poem of hope. [. . .] *The Manager* itself is a kind of provisional answer to some of the most vexing questions about the place of poetry in the contemporary world. [. . .] Despite its strangeness, *The Manager*, one might say, is a thoroughly hospitable poem. [. . .] Yet *The Manager* is about more than managing, more than simply hanging on. It is also about the deliberate search for a meaningful order that includes both life's fractious material and its capacity to support utter beauty and joy.¹⁴



As is suggested by this brief outline of some of the critical and editorial responses to *The Manager*, in terms of its balancing on peripheries and

¹³ Roger Pringle, 'Introduction', *Programme* for *The Manager*, performed by Jasper Britton, Alexandra Gilbreath, Henry Goodman and Richard Burns, at the Shakespeare Centre, 50th Stratford-upon-Avon Poetry Festival, August 24, 2003.

¹⁴ Patrick Query, 'Form and Redemption in *The Manager*', forthcoming in *The Salt Companion to Richard Berengarten*, ed. Norman Jope and Paul Scott Derrick, Salt Publishing, Cambridge, 2011.

positioning along border zones, no other major English poem of our age could have had such a tortuous path towards reception by readers in its own language, while at the same time achieving such consistency of commentary and evaluation from those who have been fortunate enough to discover and respond to it. To conclude this sketch, the scale of its originality and the clarity of its insights are fully recognised by the major theorist of the nuances of modernity, Zygmunt Bauman:

Many have tried, and many more will try, to crack the mystery of our condition, which is unlike any other we or our fathers or mothers have ever known before. Most have failed: our experience seems to escape any nets sewn of words which have been forced into stiff definitions. But images often say more and, unlike arguments, may be used as mirrors to hold up to the countenance of our experience. Richard Burns is master-supreme of images. His images speak, and they speak of truth that cannot be grasped in any other way.¹⁵



The publication of this edition of *The Manager* as a single volume in the ongoing series of Richard Berengarten's *Selected Writings* not only initiates the proper and timely contextualisation of this long poem within his own overall oeuvre, but consolidates its position as a major text of European postmodernism. For this edition, appropriately, the author repossesses his ancestral name.

CHRIS HAMILTON-EMERY
JULY 2008

¹⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, complete text for back cover commendation, 1st edition of *The Manager: a poem*, 2001. Text supplied by RB.

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Of the many friends who have helped me, I should especially like to mention Peter Mansfield (1942–2008), who was ever-available with patient help and advice, and painstakingly shaped and edited the text; Anthony Rudolf, who has been constant in support and encouragement; and Nasos Vayenas, through whose presence composition ended and began.

RB
CAMBRIDGE
2000 & 2008

The Manager

a poem

Under the plane tree an old woman knits. She has passed beyond need or mourning. She neither frowns nor smiles.

She is patterning our destiny. She is fashioning our future. She is reworking fate. She is making history.

We shall bear her across the river. We shall wear every garment she threads. Each evening we shall wash them

And by night hang them out. They will dry under the stars. Swathed in her images, we'll lie naked until morning.



Part One

GEMINI

May 22—June 21

This entire week you need to stay on guard. Rely on old friends only. Be thoroughly critical

Of business speculations. New clients may want something you would be sorry to part with.

Beware of approaches of a romantic nature. Your open, generous character may be undermined.

Developments at work will directly affect your love life. Aim to manage your affairs with tact

And circumspection. Avoid making pledges, promises or vows. Lest untamed angels in disguise

Try to enter your confidence, their forked tails and folded wings hidden beneath their smiles,

Particularly Friday. Admit them on no account. They aim to erode you: wear your words away,

Strip them of meanings, empty your acts of hope, sear and scar your heart, ground the flight

Of your dreams, smother you in sorrow. Over the Bank Holiday you may rot and shrink in their shadow.

And sudden breakdown or memory lapse tumble and flood you in darkness.

Two



Our evenings together, my love, are an economic miracle. Glimpsed through a one-way window that never opens.

The Man of Sundays looks in. The Man of Timelessness out. Tattoos are cut in his cheeks and his loincloth

Is pure crocodile. No matter if state subsidised for our educational benefit, he's nearly large as life

And sandwiched safe between Songs of Praise (which this week comes to us beamed down from the parish of Bishop's Cleaving

With a final five-minute appeal for the Distressed Mortgage Holders' Fund, a national cause all too close to our hearts)

And our favourite Late-Night Classic, The Sabbatarian Spinechiller, timed to prime us with suitably resonant nightmares

For the onset of our workweek. Edified by such rich appetisers to keep us in trim, Africa O Africa, for our regular

Emotional feastings monitored by digital watch, who needs Freud, needs Guilt. To strains of Oh-Isn't-He-A-Bit-Like-You-And-Me,

Trapped by us in our living room, our crocodile-man can't see anything. He gapes at The World About Us. Never mind.

Tonight it was pork chops. Your eyes are blurred too. At least you've done snipping out your offers from the colour supplements

And in a little while we both will tumble into breathlessness. One after the other. In whichever order we come.

Three



Dad I can't get to sleep. I keep sort of hearing creakings. I'm not really afraid but I am

A bit afraid. I think the noises are coming from over there in the corner. Now my little one. Listen.

On top of that shelf the elves are building a castle. In the corner by the desk

A colony of fairies. All made of light and shadow with bodies that shine like angels. No they don't have wings

Like butterflies. They fly with arms like ours. And on the wardrobe a dragon, four inches long.

His scales drink in sunlight. They swivel to catch the rays. So he can fuel the flame he has for a heart.

His nest is a mess because he kills moths and spiders. He chases them out of dream and turns them yes into stars.

And in the fireplace dwarves are digging to the cellar. To mine the glitter from coal and forge bows and arrows and swords

Tinier and finer than needles. That glint on the air like dust. Each one studded with a thousand sparkling jewels.

Four



Well Charles what'll it be. You must be bloody joking. Put a squirt of vodka in it. Hair of the dog. Hail Mary.

How's your patch doing then. Which branch did you say you're handling. Turnover how much. That can't be bad.

Good ole Middlesex. Firm's longest established cock-up. Everything in triplicate but contracts not a dickybird. Cross between

A morgue and the Natural History Museum. So can't say I'm sorry to hear you've been moved up. Fresh blood just what's wanted

And so much the better if you're making a bit of a go at it. Which must take some doing with Wilkins running the Stanmore show.

I suppose he's still there. Or has he been moved down to Staines. Just as I thought. He's been around for donkeys. Part of the F & F.

I say. I don't like the sound of that Charles. Try one of these antacids. New stuff. Swiss or German. Take two each night

Regularly mind. Works wonders you know. What're you eating. Ploughman's right you are. A scampi for me please my love.

No Wilkie's not a bad stick. Loyal as the corgis. But he's nothing but a glorified super-squaddie really. Always on time with his orders

And always sticks by the book. Never should've got past corporal if you see what I mean. All right sergeant I suppose if you must.

Thinks he can handle policy but won't ever go it alone. Keeps shooting off memos and phoning through to the top. I hear Sir K's

Had a bellyful. Poor ole codger should have got his handshake years ago. We'll have to find a way to kick him upstairs. Cheers.

Five



Day invades the curtains. Their ranks are in disarray. A damp breeze

Sends them fluttering and wheeling. Like birds before migration.

In the yellow room next door the children are playing soldiers. You
too wide awake

Smoking. The bedclothes rustle around us like a heap of dry leaves.

Six

Dancing half canned at Miriana's party, I mumbled: What do you want?
Meaning, From Life. From The World. You laced hands around my
neck pressed breasts and belly against me

Hooked eyebeams into mine and coolly said: You. And turned and
walked through the dancers. And stood by the front gate, waiting,
under white overhanging lilac. A perfumed sprig in each hand.

What's your name? I asked. And, in your raftered attic, with its orange
curtains, candles, homepainted mandalas, and tiger balm and saffron
scent soaked in cushions and hangings,

Lothlorien Ishtar, you said. I made it up out of books. I change my life
every day. So am free to change my name. How old are you? I said.
With pointed forefinger you lifted my chin, stepped

Back, unwound your sari, and stood before me naked. This is my real
name, you said. This is who I am. And lifting arms sideways: And
this, exactly how old. And I, a sudden schoolboy,

Hovered hands around you, as if you were blossoming hawthorn and
they a pair of blackbirds, wary of unseen danger, uncertain which
branch to settle. Till you pulled me down to your breasts,

Tumbled us onto your mattress, hoisted thighs around my waist and,
tearing at my shoulders, cried at the roofbeams. And afterwards, you
said, as if reciting a litany: Baba teaches that every cell

Has its inner memory. And flowers of the mind need body's soil to root
in. And the light lived by the soul is a body without shadows that
outshines all minds. You see. How simple it is.

Yes, I lied. I see. As if lying, half waterlogged, among salt waves sum-
moned by you. Drowning, an unbeliever, among your beautiful cli-
chés. Almost at peace, completed. Almost even believing.

Seven



I yet myself continually. I and myself. I why myself. I think my thoughts are bees. My hopes are silk and money.

My pockets overflow. My head is a promised land I glimpse through mountain haze. My eyes get golden days

But night is elephantine. In my dream a drop of water dies and turns to a round pebble.

Eight

How I piss myself off. Being so polite to them. The Directors and Deputy-Directors. The Customers Clients End-Users. The Strategists Tacticians Negotiators. The Specialists and Expert Consultants. The Marketers and Marketeers. The Banker-Member-Racketeers. The Arbitrators and Advisers and Researchers and Developers.

The Receptionists PAs Telephonists. The Clerics and the Clerks. The Commissioners and Commissionaires. The Porters and the Waiters and those who will not wait. The Internal and External Inspectors. The Plaintiffs and Complainers and Nobodies and Nerds. The Chairmen and their Charwomen – Chairpersons – Charpersons –

The Shareholders and Stakeholders and Contractors and Constructors. The Passionately Believing Reformers and Perfectionist Laissez Faire Dinosaurs. And the Graduates in Bloody Everything these days from Plumbing to Leisure Promotion. The Insurers Assurers Assessors. The Admen and the Admin-Men. Who with almost no exception see themselves as

Models of Efficiency Epitomes of Excellence Exemplars of Moral Virtue Upholders of Tradition Prosecutors of Injustice Scourges of Corruption Defenders of Reason and Rectitude Preservers of Rights and Privileges Paragons of Normality stroke Normalcy Patent-Holders of Honor slash Honour. Authorities on Bloody Everything –

Except that all these Paladins of Global Bullshit have to keep harping around faster faster faster in order not to collapse not sink not drown on the spot. As if the whole world were a quagmire they were shit-scared of getting muddied in. Or swamp where a point-zero-zero-three recurring risk of exposure guaranteed deadly infection. All carrying on non-stop

As if the top halves of their heads were permanently sliced off. All behaving as if Pure Dosh were the Total Be-All-and-End-All. Like Hey You Guys I Mean. We All Have The Right. To Survive. Make Ends Meet. Earn An Honest Buck Yen Mark Even Quid. Sheer Necessity Isn't It. So One Does Need to Make Allowances. And of course Perks. But why are they – or we –

All such arseholes?