

*The China Shop Pictures*

*Also by Robert Saxton*

The Promise Clinic

Manganese

Local Honey

Hesiod's Calendar

Robert Saxton

*The  
China  
Shop  
Pictures*

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for my dear friend Peggy

and for my dear father, Colin





# The Floating Village



## Mayfly Menopause

However bad things are, they're far from worst.  
Our pond's well pleased, beneath the star of best.  
Our worsenings wave goodnight, quiet in the west.

Down in the flesh our mystery spins its time.  
Our prizes shrink, disdainful in their game.  
The beast inside us strokes us—courteous, tame.

The mountain clamps its average to a mound,  
mismatch of muses, in a double grind.  
We're dust but love the breezes of the mind.

No lion, drinking, stops to check its mane,  
no soup aspires to settle in its spoon.  
The love we longed for would have foxed our moon.

We're nice enough for both—truthful and kind.  
We're dust but love the breezes of the mind.

# On First Looking into a Second-hand Satchel

## *South Island*

Sonnets, like egrets, have recently been  
extending their range. We've spotted them of late  
in flooded workings, in river shallows, on saltmarshes,  
on heathlands. So beautiful—whitely defiant

beneath a pewter sky, proud of their angles,  
forever patient, reserving their power of flight.  
At times you'll even see them on cliff-tops  
where the wind might have been a disincentive.

They're like suppositions before they're supposed—  
ghosts, you might say, though indisputably *there*,  
the super-efficient surrogates of souls.

Into our ken swims a new science of the sonnet ...  
with terms like axillary, speculum, charm,  
singularity, thorax and pendentive.

## *Narrow Straits*

Where sonnets gather, manners have become  
more formal. There's a tra, there's a tralee,  
there's a fool, there's a king, there's a quiet grandee—  
and all that's just for the opening ceremony.

Your teeth have dropped out before you're ready  
for the first kiss. Sonneteers are always  
offering each other precedence, so  
no one actually ventures onto the stile,

and so the queue lengthens, frustratingly.  
From the top step: an unimagined heaven,  
suddenly lost as you drop to the other side.

That night you scribble away in your attic:  
'Modern sonnets tend to have a jagged head  
and a formidable tail, like a crocodile.'

### *North Island*

They'll eat you alive with a satisfying snap  
of the jaws, or fling you across the river.  
There's a meal that brings wisdom, a bellyful  
of acids corroding illusion, a protractor

in the throat of a jumbled pencil case.  
We refuse to learn until it's many loves  
too late—meanwhile we're fit and free,  
one foot in school and one foot in the rave.

'For true appreciation think of the tail  
as the head, and vice versa'—or a bulging  
battered satchel stretching taut its long loop

on a lonely cliff-top walk amid the gulls'  
cries in the wind, and a glimpse of a Dutchman  
flying through a door without an architrave.

## On Wicklow Fells

*Argan Spraint, a shepherd's son, knew the constellations  
before he knew the alphabet. One sheep, valiant against  
predators, he named O'Ryan.*

The fells of Wicklow teem with knitted sheep.  
Our cottage mumbles in its cap of slate.  
A stranger dances, gravely, on the grate.

The werewolf digs its den in human sleep.  
A bear, with a grin, pours honey on the dawn,  
your dewpond. A soot-speck fills your yawn.

The hills of Wicklow broil with ravelled sheep.  
Some golf we played before our furze was burned.  
Some gains we got before our lack was learned.

## Fumbleton Farm

Good wife, I've stabled the plough.  
Ribbons, like robins, deck the dray.  
Mummers, roll over—stick the play!

*Husband, your coat's besmirched by gulls.  
Here's a clutch of golden rules  
for the hayloft when my badge runs gules.*

It's pigskin tight, the milkmaid's ring,  
a peppermint on a farmer's tongue.  
Drowned harvest proves the prayer book wrong.

*You fling your stride beyond my ken.  
Our hearth's out in the rain, forlorn—  
a quail's nest in a crop of corn.*

Down on the farm we all make do,  
in the silence of prayer. *Too-whit too-who!*

# The Circulating Library

*Two equine-equestrian pictures, with appended verse commentaries*

*For the dark riders of the spiritual frontier*

Every night a dozen or so wild horses, souls of the wisest books, silently move in towards the red-glowing ash-mound of the campfire, to drink from quiet minds. Clouds know what rain knew once but can no longer remember. Yet splashes they could never imagine, the raindrop's enlightenment, a brilliant haiku in an epic of tedium. When the storyteller pauses mid-flow for a punctuating silence, some endure suspense, while others, with relief, hear the tale, then its people, their pressures on our minds, and all the world and all its winds, gallop off, thunderously at first, then quietening into silence, swallowed into the living black centre of the wilderness where horses gather, neigh greetings to each other, discover they can think, and read, and speak, but need to find a better way to teach.

*Cold starry night  
horses below  
their minds alight  
with all they know*

*blackboard of night  
chalk of snow  
the true the trite  
and the cold rainbow.*

\*



They linger still in our darkness, long after supper is over. We wonder how they can help us, because surely they can, and wish to, surely. They are like regrets, or in another mood the mistakes behind regrets, or the uncertainties behind mistakes. Our understanding is to our sickness as the weather is to our beloved valley—though many of us might imagine the opposite. So precarious are our myths, a stallion can take the place of a patriarch and be more intimate, on account of being a little less human. The Muybridge file lies unopened in some forgotten corner of the mind. Gusto is a wild cry, like ‘Geronimo!’ Acolytes occasionally take to the saddle, not in the sacred shows, but galloping hard between monasteries, carrying a thought before it has time to stiffen.

*Wise is the animal                    that only thin air*  
*that needs no hands                sustains its ride—*  
*and coming to a wall                vaulting despair*  
*instantly understands                to the other side.*

## *Sauve qui peut*

Time's arrow has transfixed me to my desk.  
Yellow brick makes the road more picturesque.

Your coat's a carpet, riding towards the door.  
The sky's a blank: the ceiling loves the floor.

\*

A gold purse, heart-shaped, the size of the palm  
of your hand, hangs from your bag like a charm,

first as the usual hostage to ruthless greed,  
then brandished as an amulet, selfless seed

of insouciance in the bustling market square.  
Snatchers and snippers melt into thin air,

like love or time. Its value's what you choose:  
you only keep what you could bear to lose.

\*

Stairs are more dangerous, so tense all day,  
with landings where we think, then turn away.

Bed beckons, softening what we share in sleep,  
too small for all the life we'd love to keep.