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Submissions

Shearsman operates a submissions-window system, whereby submissions are only accepted during the months of March and September, when selections are made for the October and April issues, respectively. Submissions may be sent by mail or email, but email attachments—other than PDFs—are not accepted.

We aim to respond within 3 months of the window’s closure.

Acknowledgements

Maria do Cebreiro’s poem in this issue, and those in the previous issue, are taken from her Galician collection, Os hemisferios (Vigo: Editorial Galaxia, 2007), by permission of Galaxia. The poems by Jacqueline Risset are drawn from Sept passages de le vie d’une femme (Paris: Flammarion, 1985) and are published by permission of Flammarion. The translations of Esther Jansma’s poems in this issue also appear in Modern Poetry in Translation.
Contents

Zoë Skoulding 4
Martyn Crucefix 7
Kiran Millwood Hargrave 13
Simon Perchik 15
Alexandra Sashe 18
Tim Allen 21
sean burn 24
Michelle Cahill 31
James Byrne 34
Laura Elliott 38
James Bell 40
Michael Farrell 43
Keri Finlayson 46
Tania Hershman 48
Sarah James 49
Simon Smith 52
Rupert M Loydell 55
James McLaughlin 59
Kate Miller 61
John Phillips 63
Andrew Taylor 65
Geraldine Clarkson 67
Robert Sheppard & Zoë Skoulding 70

Virgil (translated from Latin by David Hadbawnik) 73
Esther Jansma (translated from Dutch by Andrew Houwen) 84
Francis Ponge (translated from French by Ian Brinton) 87
Olga Orozco (translated from Spanish by Peter Boyle) 91
Jacqueline Risset (translated from French by Kevin Nolan) 95
Jordi Doce (translated from Spanish by Lawrence Schimel) 99
María do Cebreiro (translated from Galician by Neil Anderson) 101

Biographical Notes 104
from Adda

I

a river behind itself
this long s disappearing
serifed into mud or the
torn edges of a map is

Adda or Adam after
Cae Mab Adda never
an origin only a
dried up rib of a river

a trickle of threat suppressed
escaping the level eye
where sea runs to horizons
innocent as water as

an adder stamped underground
with only the faintest hiss

II

river subtracted from its
own presence a riverrun
aground secretly working
as all rivers the double
edge of every beginning
u-shaped between its two banks
where flood is defenceless where
water levels the difference
digging the foundations it’s
as though no-one remembers
the water the ground is full
of it pumped out only to
rise up through the mud alive

III

flowering at the mouth it
speaks its own name on the point
of losing it becoming
public at a safe distance
our mouths flower in a name
becoming distant to us

what is it you’re listening to
there at the lowest point where
the town dips towards what it’s
forgotten what’s still there on
the tip of the tongue a rush
of kingcup campion bramble

in its stutter is what it’s
saying what it’s saying is
5. Bathing in the Olt

i.
A modest apartment
a swimsuit which on a famous beach last year in high season had
caused quite a stir
a well-lit house on a quiet street of the Capital
all part of the performance

an absence that had been longer than expected but through no fault
of his own
as all miserable people do
as they tried to hide
as you might after a funeral, having stood for hours, the welter of
powerful emotion
at that very moment Violetta exacting her revenge
aware of his girlfriend’s fierce jealousy
Benedict had been adamant
both reproach and bitter disappointment
bringing the conversation skilfully round to bathing
cheat on me – on the very same day you cheat on me – I’ll cheat on you

children taking cows to the pasture

close by he saw their naked bodies vanishing among the shadows of
the willow trees
crushed by the incident, imagining her happiness in ruins, her soul
flared with the great, heroic decision to take revenge
Dawning on Benedict

delightful entertainment during the long, hot summer days, bathing in the Olt
did not shout
did not threaten, did not say a word
drowning in the whirlpool of the Olt

Elegant, young, attractive
even Benedict seemed to have lost confidence
forests of osiers, of dense, hollow willow trees and huge sand bars
that gave the impression of tremendous disturbance
for her these were dreadful moments

given the opportunity to sneak back she swiftly dressed herself
going to bed that night they abandoned themselves to passionate embraces
he would not be able to keep the promise he had made when he’d left his girlfriend, Violetta
her eternal threat never left his mind
her misfortune was not something Violetta thought greatly about hidden under the shaggy willow trees on the fine, dry sand, beneath the melancholy rays of twilight
his athletic body and complete absence of hair
his body found where the current had brought it to the river bank
his was unexpected

I am miserable. I am very miserable…
I knew you would want to save me
If it was achieved without much effort on her part important business would keep Benedict in Craiova for two more days in contrast she appeared flawless in his every action he could leave no room for any suspicion in the carriage on the way they talked little in vain she pleaded to accompany him

just some beautiful hotel waitress

keenly looking for the dining car waiting to see him left home alone, spawned a host of suspicions lovingly aroused by desire, the thought that she belonged to him

Milcoveni to take tea, served according to the rules of a fine house more than once Mr. and Mrs. Virgil Trancu had been invited to join them bathing in the Olt near the bank the river was quiet neither love nor life in the old, white house in Milcoveni

No direct path so they had to make a detour to reach the water no inkling that anything was amiss no trace of Benedict not at all hard to convince. And he surrendered not taken in by his gesture; it merely fuelled her suspicions nothing seemed to threaten their happiness now they had lost almost everything on the opposite bank something strange was happening one solitary gesture: one of renunciation perfectly covering her body it emphasized her beautiful figure pretending fatigue and weakness quickly went under without trace
chorus cycle: eurydice & orpheus

let’s start with the sky  yes the sky  the sky
that day was all sorts of blue and pale
set against the forest where o walked and e
stood root-struck  as a tree  yes a tree was stuck
on the edge of the forest where o walked
and e she waited  though she did not know for
what she had been there so long tied  yes so long
tied to that same patch of ground for so long
laced to that same tight knot of soil so long
only music played sweet enough to suckle gods o
only music played like rivers meeting seas o
only music could uncoil her toes and spread
them like lilies opening out under full moons
and tip her arms out and o how o played
played her in played her out
played her in played her out
played her out

played her in played her out
-side of herself until the world tipped and off she
flitted flung like a peach pit lifted as lightning
through her love only brings them close as a
letter touch a dove flocked V land-locked
between o and e so adored that press tip to
fingertip that meant she had learned the secret of
flight and might someday know to fall with
aquiline race as up his nape she tastes the brackish
taint late summer blackberries he sang her
sticky and bruise lipped look e brought him such
song and he sang her as though she was caught in
his throat and he sang her until she was
e and only and o and always and oo o how easy she is shucked from her skin lifted to him
how easy she is shucked from her skin lifted to him as the rainclouds gather look up they’re filling gods are swirling the sky yes the sky the sky that we said we would fill and we said would fall the sky will fill and fall on their heads and o and e are still in bed learning fingertips and singing and seeding like their bodies are celestial and will not bleed when bitten seize when poisoned rot when dead when will they learn the shape of things stop it has a fearful momentum they must stop it will not come good in the end no way to stop it now monsters are coming look down yes down or even behind no not behind in hindsight a backward glance was always going to end it all in a backward glance it will all come down crashing

Host

Swans have nested beneath my scalp. Mornings I feel them running for take-off, neat as tadpoles, webbed feet sticking my cortex. They nibble weeds from the stem. When they love, I wear my hair loose and they lift it from the follicle, pull it in for nests. When they mate, my nape tingles. This summer I walk carefully, my brain full of eggs.
Four Poems

* 
You try to hide the way all hillsides are warmed from inside and sunlight useless, begin each breath

in a mouth far off, lit by thirst and those slow lips where evenings come to listen —it’s an old sun, one

you’re never sure will be a morning let you surface again, go as if you were leaving a heart

to give yourself up :a breath that would empty the Earth —even so it begins inside a whisper not yet

a mound, with a shadow all its own spreading out your flowers —a harbor smelling from distance and spray.

* 
You have a feel for place to place fresh from the ground and trains stopping by to check the gates

each station and even in winter arrives late, surrounded by a drizzle against the window pane
and your hair can’t dry, is trapped
inside this old hat half stone, half
crushed, half its hot-shot tilt

in so many directions at once
falling along the tracks
without a sound covers your forehead

lets it grow old and escape again
is possible without more rain
looking for help or the barracks.

*

One stone still forming
left to itself though its roots
can’t find the place

—from a distance this pebble
is taking so long, sends the others
a signal that is not a morning

not yet rain coming with skies
—it’s a dark nothingness, its sparks
still hidden, too soon for the two

that would become a sun
and for the first time
without evenings or the dirt

you grind slowly from footsteps
and loneliness, has the shadow
it needs for rest, kept alive

on the darkness nursing your fingers
pressed against each other and your eyes
without kisses or a mouth.
from *Wandering Cycles*

To restore the outer edge of the table
forced into a faultful square –
to free its initial curve of the circle,
   chisel away the angles
   and save all    without mercy.

The honey voice of the wooden shavings
sings their last, uncovered purpose.
The smooth surface takes over,
along with us, disculpated,
absolved from being
furniture.

   The sunlight bakes us a daily bread
   of nothing – leavened and salted
   with its recurrence.

   The wood shapes our common dwelling
   with its arboreal thought
   and a rings concept.

Walls embrace
our measure of space,
chairs grow backs,
   upright,
attuned with our conscience.

Time and bread cut in slices,
spread with awaiting,
sweetened per serving,
   we eat from the empty porcelain plates.
Metamorphic and static, we slough  
our off-white upholstery  
and grow skin  
from the warp and weft  
of : sunlight, nothing, partaking, tablecloth.

( From scripts and plants we collect  
our measure of oxygen. )

We inhabit the centre, the sole room,  
its shelves and harbours,  
valleys and fields :  

As our armchair  
develops the Ark’s capacity,  
we are simplified,  
perfected,  
reduced  
to the bare fullness of being.

Spring Canticle

When the snow subsides  
beyond its raison d’être,  
mills are milling a new flour  

the flight of birds,  
stripped of its off-white background,  
twines with the all-embracing sky  
the naked line of the horizon.  

the thaw water, pure and delivered,  
carries its pearls  
of lessness and fullness.  
Orphancy sprouts. We sit on the porch,  
our eyes welling with sunlight.
6 poems from *A New Geography of Romanticism*

1.
place the dancer in diluted solution
lose her face in the mathematical shadows
runaway hermit devoted to lute’s barometer
turn away turn back once undiscovered

ea simple death fall of night old desires
undercover gives you one way out
dissolute yet fizzing with twisted nostalgia
painting a white sail on the burnt black wall

unconscious diamond loathes its lucidity
nitrnicky surgeon’s self-conscious skills
filing clerk scarcely drifts over flaky lake
borderline child initiates the hypochondriacs

2.
maxim thrives in speed-writing antidote
spade’s multiple surfaces dig up 9 dimensions
doubtful automaton patrols an avenue of hives
mineral as crude as stereotypical water

plump spermatozoa of well respected recluse
ending a manifesto rather too abruptly
euphonic eunuch repopulates the world
flying fish stranded photo-finish

don’t do what I do but do write soon
quantumly spying as if forging hidden gifts
solicitor’s tone alone confounds torturer
stranded needles of light on the tin-foil moon
Harbour

Because there are no shoals of haddock spawning
he spends the night cutting timber to repair a keel,
gathers faggots in spit rain, in floodwater fields.

The sun’s parachute silk settles over chimneys.
Pale clouds hang crowding the sky like driftnets.
Up, up, the black-backed gulls arc into draughts.

A heron hunched on the rocks like an old fisherman
in a raincoat snubs the hushed foray. The tide measures
time as Autumn cobbles the town, deserted by tourists.

Dawn tarnishes roofs, their curved gables, furred
winter trees. Safe from the saltmarsh, the intervallic
hedgerowed fields, he unloads bags of firewood.

He is not the sea’s signature, its memory of human
coal, its middle passage of linen, tobacco, gold.
When he is beckoned he leaves the harbour quietly.

The traveller enters the banal to haunt the empty
creels, his seaweed hair. She hears in a pipe rinsing
flagstones, Zambia’s swamps—all the drowned past.
Improvisations for Adam-Baiting

1. Rock

whinnying snakeskin
to the lachrymal girl
fronting the moshpit
who exempts herself
in stretching to touch
the scarred geography
of secondary birth—
water to the sleeping
lifeboat of a ribcage
encases her orphanhood
and the rhino-horned
six-stringed encore is
ejaculatory whenever
he plays the final solo
ii. Heart

bar where dead men
go to die and the dandy
barman stiffs Chuck
another carafe of wine
under the thorn-tether
of his brow and droopy
eyes—for Chuck who
dies piecemeal when
pre-electing men over
women—revelling in
himself made mystical
announcing to the bar
‘when I knew women
I knew my own heart’

iii. Fire

clinkered to fire how is it
women live to the strike
of a matchbox while men
grow more crooked—as if
adam died before he had
time enough to recast man’s
beastliness among animals—
fire from a dowry’s length
lit by the original mother-
fucker who is matricidal
as the sun burns—like
Coriolanus saving Rome for
one woman—Volumnia—
her hushed cry of fire
the inadvertent surrogacy of matchboxes

Collecting matchboxes bled into an enquiry of locations. Connect the matchbox in the pinetum with the shattered birdcage, the matchbox on the mountain path with the hot spring, or the appearance of the hot spring on the mountainside silence. And now connect the matchbox to the river’s green frosted glass your body brings in to the guest room, the blue that lingers around your outline in an unmixed pointillism. There was bharat gold in the valley, deluxe bhola and chameli, a green feathered weed. At 32.2666700/77.1666700 short-sights clapped on a waterfall washing down a Himalayan slope to a holy spring in a ancient village, the light dimmed, disanimated, and our not hearing it not feeling it – like the mute red lal mirchi, cardboard super roshni swept off the balcony – was stunning. Would you describe the chakor as ulular, would you say that it howled through the phalanx of trees when the stripped trunk crashed through the roof of the aviary? We will call her Jodi.jpeg 19 of 39, yellow winged beneath the mushroom stalks on the matchbox we retrieved, scanned onto indianlitter.tumblr.com, beside fragrant jeevan, image/62060215943.
rutabaga in a landscape

ectopic engineering schools have become schools
omnium medical schools have become schools
passionate schools have become schools of finite
older schools and never been schools have
become grounded in a science of design fraud
a list of food is provided:
rutabaga should not be eaten more than once a week
among philosophers of science nobody wants
there is a rebirth of interest in the ancient topics
we cannot say what it is/ that we know
in our pattern of action/ our feel for the stuff
ordinary people often think about what they are doing
this entire process of reflection is central to the art
there is nothing strange about the idea

Kinryusan Temple in Asakusa

after Hiroshige

begin with a word for snow

happenstance says the turn of a page
will reveal somewhere familiar
forgotten until returned to now

takes the word away
and settles for snow as it falls
beyond the paper lantern held
up with rope from below
although large it cannot dominate
    in the asymmetric shift to the left
to bring in the red and green of the entrance gate

both croppings are the frame we look through
    as if this is a film still and will
    unfreeze then move to show me more
and this is really a temple we visited

snow is only frozen water

there are no footprints though people walk
    either side beside snow filled trees
    and buildings across a vast expanse
of white that recedes in a reversed V
    to display an early use of perspective

people as pins of colour under parasols
    walk towards the flat red
    of the temple’s shapes
    walk as if the ground is white paper

far from cicada song in summer
    when parasols are for shelter from the sun

when people seem still to walk towards
    instead of from the temple

though the scene has a silence associated with winter
    angles fixed and nothing moves

end with a word for snow
Order

‘The sacred is order’
Like pyramids; Akhenaten’s cult

Settlement is an order

Oodgeroo’s editor made her Bora Ring
(The shape of her Bora Ring story)
A rectangle

Her Rainbow Snake a rectangle

Make of that (a rectangle snake)
What you will

Reading the Aboriginal petitions of the 1920s-30s
The letters to newspapers
(1940s, 60s)
I’m struck by the theme of friendship
The black hand offered to the white

This is the clasp on the cover
Of Robert Walker’s *Up Not Down Mate*
(The first edition; the second portrays an Aboriginal flag
And a hand against prison bars)

Walker yelled a lot his last night

Settlement and Federation and mapping
The coastline

Feeding the young man
That escaped from gaol on his birthday
He was already wearing a crucifix
To reverse Stevens: humans are earth
(Soil stone sand and sea)
They’re not walking maps
From above they are points
(Pyramid points become blobs)
Numbers of people make blobs too
And sometimes rings, snakes

Hymns are of an old, Greek order
(Relatively old)

The poems of Kevin Gilbert are not like hymns
If anything they protest the loss of hymning

At least it seems that way to me

In the ‘Native Settlements’ like Moore River
(Featured in the film Rabbit-Proof Fence)
Young Aboriginal students read the Bible
(Just as they do in juvenile detention now)

At times they were allowed into the bush
And learned from the elders
This apparent contradiction allowed an extension
Of control
As did trivial permissions and underfeeding

The effect of the Stolen Generations is not only
One of history, the story of Gladys Gilligan
For example
Late of Moore River Native Settlement

When I read the language of Aboriginal friends
On Facebook, I see the influence of African America
A marker that they ‘own’

Just as Christianity differentiates country people
From the faithless urban ‘arm’
It’s not just Cook that makes this poem possible
But the Wurundjeri Council
Their office at Abbotsford Convent
A short bike ride away
From where I write this in my prism
(Seen as a rectangle from above)

Yet I remember the earthquake when
This building moved (relatively) like a snake
The wren, that gossip, is a fine one to talk

small girl: From Flushing Falmouth rose up like a wave.
I rode the jogging foot plate of the pram
along the muddy tow path as it broadened
into street then hardened at the very end
as cottages.

*the wren (singing)*: Listen to the women tell themselves worlds
Chanting it all as the lives unfurl
Listen to the women tell themselves worlds

small girl: I saw two-up, two-downed rows of false
and distant aunts.
They gathered in the smeechy back
to trill tight shapes, rocking themselves joyful
with spite and the shared electricity
of unkind words.

*the wren (singing)*: Listen to the women tell themselves worlds
Tonguing and glossing each kink and curl
Listen to the women tell themselves worlds

small girl: These powerless, powerful,
nylon pinnied school friends of my Nan
cotted the world with their making breath.
Tattled up ghosts, the sins of their fathers
making flesh from rough words.

*the wren (singing)*: Listen to the women tell themselves worlds
Chanting it all as the lives unfurl
Tonguing and glossing each kink and curl
Listen to the women tell themselves worlds
small girl: Those were false and distant villages sung to life.
Inconstant.
Vagrant
Animated by animosity.
Wren, they were no better than they ought to be.
Conversation With a Taxi Driver

Mirabella’s mast, the world’s largest, he tells me, holds inside its vastness: stairs. No more scaling rigging, a civilized ascent. Mirabella’s mast, he tells me, is made of lead, and we don’t know, he says, why it is so tall. Just because it can be. A son, he tells me, drives around a General, he’s an army man. David, he says, David is treated well. I imagine, as we drive, the son, inside Mirabella’s mast, leading his General by the hand. Where is my command? the old man says. Here, whispers David.

Bridal

Today it only took a garment bag
to make me feel inadequate it
hung from the strap of her rucksack in front
of me in the queue one word BIGGER than
the rest of course it held the dress and god
forbid it should be packed no
she must carry it like a child so
all of us wedded or not will know
Purple

His name is not William; 
the wheelbarrow we haven’t got 
is not red and the ungreen bottle 
is not broken, but down to the last 
heavy scent of lavender.

A filmic gloss. Our bath 
gleams empty cream. Void 
of violets, the first crocus 
splitting winter, juice of true 
cherries and bramble wine.

No memories of Magenta 
driving him ins-a-a-a-a-ane, 
Amsterdam smoke inhaled, 
snakes uncoiled in his veins, 
their ps-t hiss hazed. No.

My apology’s shrugged. 
Stress eddies his brow, throws 
claw lines. I offer a kiss 
and the last plum from the table. 
He doesn’t bite; leaves its amber 
whole, next to the bottle – 
its shape emptied of foam 
but bubbling with resonances, 
upon which so much depends 
while water still pours,
while the hospital where we met
still has wings and white walls,
while corridors are endless,
purple with dried blood
and long night calls.

“Remember when…” I start.
At last, his lips arc red to a smile.
La Jolla fog-bound looking over the cliff

to 30 or 40 cormorants bobbing up
& down Pacific surf

behind the wheel of the Accent GL, 12.49pm

north on I-5 miss

the turn for I-405, so carry

on the I-5, across east

to west on I-22 to meet the 405 again

drop away to Manchester

Avenue et voilà the door to Guy and Béatrice’s, 8128 Airlane Avenue

3.47pm

check the hire car’s over-active air con. Check.

Talk & beer, cheese, fresh pineapple, more talk LAX


Taxi 3.16 pm London, 7.16 am LA.

copies of or Issue Eight line my suitcase

‘Ode: Sat Nav Narrative on Flying into LAX’

‘Los Angeles River’

‘Eyewitness News’

‘Paradise Cove’

— included

a full run (1-8) for the Poetry Library, London
‘A Process of Discovery’  
_for David Miller_

‘My writing must also, along 
what unfamiliar way, 
be company?’  
– David Miller, ‘Unity’

The poet’s book is one of the four I have brought away on holiday. It was a choice between my favourite versions of the short narrative poems of a Greek author, made especially awkward by the translator, who does not appear to be fluent in English, and my friend’s new book.

Eventually, I decided on the poet’s new collected poems, and looked forward to the dislocation between warm Tuscan light and the nameless grey cities that often form a background to his fragmented texts.

With shutters pinned back, windows wide, sun burning through morning cloud, the poems speak of love, confusion, moments and ideas, all threaded into necklaces of language.

•

The colours in my set of paints never match the colours outside. I have to work hard to find the muted tones of mist or dusk, even more to mix the faded earths and stones, the burnt greens that fill the view.

I have little need for red – a few roof tiles here and there, and only use yellow to mix variations of foliage in the distance. Neither the earth nor stone seem at all brown, more grey and off-white. The distant mountains require blue to give them distance, purples and greys if the light has gone or a storm arrived.
There is hardly any music here.

Sometimes a faint radio
in the distance,
a few CDs in our hire car
for long journeys,

those drummers we watched
at a medieval fair –
the whole village play acting
for a weekend.

A falcon flew
off into the silence.
A saxophone,
a clarinet:

reported
conversations
on the pages
of his book.

Despite itself,
the silence
is the event,

the appearance
of the angel
is the event,

the moment
as pregnant
as the madonna;
bird spirit
of God
top right,

a sparrow
flying across
window-framed sky.

•

In one version the angel
speaks in painted script,
is always speaking,
never silent.

I prefer the mute
gold wings of flight,
the ethereal earth
beneath celestial feet,
the always unsaid
unbelievable truth.

•

The poet’s book has served me well, and has sat literally and
conceptually alongside a short book on colour, a re-read novel of
occult training and enlightenment, and a fictional exploration of
moments when the celestial and human met or even touched.

Our conversation has been a long one. We first met on the page and
later in the flesh, but there is still a lot to be said.

For the moment, I am again listening.
The sun is even brighter now.

It is clear my painting’s colours are all wrong.

I rinse my brushes and head out for a swim.

A startled lizard runs from the sudden splash.

Notes

The title is a quote from David Miller.

The Greek author was Yannis Ritsos.

The four books were David Batchelor’s *The Luminous and the Grey*, Jim Dodge’s *Stone Junction*, Karl O. Knausgaard’s *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* and David Miller’s *Reassembling Still – Collected Poems*. 
Age

Under ashen grey skies
an
unvariegated screech

credulous I
the heron gullible
and domicile

one foot
on a rock
tenuous/ liable

it is there precipitous
as I
or Gods
or memories
die

if

The wind today in the long grass
sways and drifts to my nostrils.
Flies flick from the moss - its
noble so to be fauna: the air is
succulent as the sand
that twist in the bay.
The gulls have no intention
of dying—every
tree convulses with memory.
Each leaf and thorn forms a denial.
Gesture, sun, colour, breeze, texture, nuance, air,
intersperse, overlap, hinge
on this moment.
Now possibility exists / becomes mountainous. I may die in such possibility?

As is

a construed actuality to a narrowing to saudade or a variegated wisp a vine a vague propulsion forward to a

preposterous yearning a
(flight of tension)
or osculating twist /after rainbows retrench too clear worming purple and and

windfall apples darken in the wind / hint tone blemishing pockmarks a scratched trauma bits of scabs, things mutilate too some

mirth and mayhem alternately appear on every other constituent and a disfigurement wounds on the littlest of things on the tiniest of things
Reach

Peignons comme chante l’oiseau
Claude Monet

A cry stiffens the pool’s skin. Thin slip of wind
puts on a little flesh, stirs the stream.

I’m keeping one eye on the boat while Blanche sets out my paints.
We lumber from the mud and dead reed dip of riverbank.

Blow, wind, cheers a bird, shake the stream awake,
show her your violet streak!

Send her down the river, to rinse in the breath-warmth of creatures,
vole-squeak, cow-sigh, scratch of a heron shifting heddle feet.

A branch, then an eddy flips glass hair of willow.
Water holds a smeary mirror up to tips of light.

My other eye is climbing into space to reach
by stairs of cold, spires topping the air’s cliffs of ice.

As birdsong rises, as water winds, is winched upwards
in the screw of poplars, as vapour lifting to a clearing sky

is gathered in the net, we mark each break in the mesh of morning
mended with wires of light.
It’s not that I presume you are here listening just because I am here speaking. That’s not it.

Perhaps no one is here.

There are words, or such is apparent. But words do not mean someone is saying them or someone is listening. Anymore than a chair means someone must be present to sit in it, or even that it was made for the purpose of sitting.
Passing Place

Stonechats dart before the prow
down five miles of single track

ten year atlas
      fifty year old map

John Bartholomew & Son Ltd Duncan St Edinburgh

Along the burn a diversion
slow flow         fast flow

Mary’s Bridge  becalmed
stone gathered clear pool

shaped like the original
pool of home
Lustre

I’ve raggled my tail thinking of her. Gross glister of skin above drooped stockings. Eyes pissed, her twitching stick neck. Her caked face all lacework and doughy pasta. I’m maddened with why he wants her lumpen lustre when I’m clean and neat as a tine and faster than him or her and can more than pass muster in and out in the mornings before they’re awake, the master first and her the last, dreamless till noon, mouldy sister, I’ve cussed her, swallow blades when I think how he’s kissed her, how he says like a ninny he’s missed her when she’s away, won’t know himself for joy when—basta!—he’s lost her. By my kind grace.

When my enemy came home with my love,

I was on the phone. Necking-and-chinning my mobile, I chased them into the kitchen. My love ended up in the corner. My enemy between us. Glowing. Don’t give me a bloody hug, then, I made a kind of lunge, uncharacteristic. The glow baffled a bit, knocked to one side, then the other—puff!...puff!—the way white flour in a clear polythene bag might do if punched. We went back into the main room and she folded languorous limbs against a lovely long blue body while she recounted the wonderful afternoon they’d had. I heard about a wonderful meal at a place called Santa Lucia. Sahn-tah Loo-CHEE-ah. A laugh. Delicious giggles like the longest glasses of cool Orvieto wine. In a low voice some trembling revelations she’d been party to, hinted at. Flashes of glow. Here and there. Everywhere. A glass shatters. Chaos.
Not just the Suitors

Not just the Suitors. Their lovers too the bad maids strung up along a cable {epic simile} like birds caught in a net in a thicket till their legs stopped wombs dropped. Like civilisation my compatriot Aphrodite born from a cut. We’re still on the line where the page thickens towards forgetting / a starfish city split by spilt foam washes at the edges. When carrying this graft of atrocity and other aphrodisiacs we’re aphotic with despair aphonous with grief a writhing tongue lashing ourselves to the mast listening to keel’s creak / wheel’s squeak / sail’s frap and swooning in the void where the voices should be. Pop songs from minarets: the channel switches mid-current in saturated waves {braced notes} the call to prayer never so loud as in its tuning out. Whose love comes through the cables / in what frequencies on the wave spectrum jostling for decibel-music / with what frequency do trim voices bleed into prime time? Do they scissor ‘the price of the Euro decision for the {celestial static} haircut of Greek debt’? No doubt the other walks beside me and the other’s other slices through the shadows / each step cutting through the space between heartbeats / in constant deficit {love owed}. No ownership is not barbaric / no love not debt / no cable of yellow electric bulbs stretched across the carnival not darkened by smoke haze. Dimmed in hermaphroditic indifference desire dissolved in equity the other becomes
the same in toxic exchanges of war graves {peace claims}.
From hand to hand my trembling right becomes tangential to
the act. Who am I if not this beginning on a table where
different worlds come into view / do-it-yourself death mask
beyond the glass of tea / not in the room but part of it.
Half of me slips from the stool. The poem shatters
and its worlds flatten on the fifth wall of space / time demands
she drops a headscarf leaving the table / its moment
won’t return though she will to find it neatly folded
{double surface}. In the soft threads of another life
we cover and uncover the details that will never hold
together / each one unravelling its own past. Yes / this means
you. Or the cat wandering into no-man’s land
sinewy with insinuation her soft pads assimilating
human ground. Hot towel on your face at the barbers / you
hear the sharpening of cut blades and hope your muffled
defence ‘I am not Stavros Monopolous’ will save you.
from The Aeneid, Book VI — Visit to Hell

[On their way to Italy, the Trojans make a detour to hell to consult the ghost of Aeneas’ father. With Palinurus the pilot having fallen over the side and drowned, Aeneas steers the ship.]

1. et rabie fera corda tument

Thus bawling Aeneas
    guides the fleet to Cumae
    they drop anchor and eagerly
    young men flock the shore
        some seek flame-colored
    sparks in veins of flint
        others scour
    the hills for game

But pious Aeneas heads for the high citadel
where Apollo rules and beyond that
    the sanctuary of the dread Sibyl
a huge cave into which the god breathes
    whiffs of the future

Daedalus       the legend goes
    fleeing the realm of Minos
landed here on his homemade wings
    and dedicated this place to you
        Apollo, stowing his flying machine
    in the giant temple

On the gates it shows the grisly death
    of Androgeos—below that, the punishment meted out
to Athenians (poor bastards!)
who had to hand over seven newborn sons  
each year for a cruel lottery

On the opposite door  
another horrid scene—  
the bizarre love of Pasiphae for a bull  
and the horned progeny  
of mixed race—crime’s keepsake  
the Minotaur  
and that infamous house  
of unsolvable error  
—which Daedalus managed to unravel for the sake of  
Ariadne’s great love  
guiding Theseus’ blind steps with a thread

You, too, Icarus  
would’ve been part of the tableau  
had grief not stopped your dad’s hands

So the Trojans stare at the gates until  
Achates brings back the priestess who says

“Snap out of it—  
right now you’d be better off  
slaughtering seven bulls  
and so many sheep  
as custom demands.”

Aeneas does as he’s told.  
The priestess calls to  
the Trojans  
and through the hundred holes  
of the huge cave voices rush  
to answer her—  
The truthseekers come to the doorway  
and she says  
“It’s time  
to seek the oracles—  
god behold god.”
And she freaks out

    face    explodes

    hair    wild

    breast    heaves

    rage    soul

    giant    inhuman

    woman

    swelled by    god-breath

she roars

    “WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR
    AENEAS?

    Do you need a fucking invitation
    to fall on your knees
    in prayer?
    Well? These doors won’t open
    themselves.”

The chilly silence shudders
    down the prince’s spine, and he pours
    out prayers from deep in his chest
    trembling

the Vates still twisting
    under the will
    of Apollo

rages in the cave
    trying in vain to shake
    the god, but
the more she struggles the more
he takes control—her words
scream out through
the hundred cave-mouths:

“You guys who’ve endured so many
dangers (and have more
yet to come) don’t worry
you’ll make it after all—but
you’ll wish to hell you hadn’t

war     I see
Tiber
blood   you won’t miss
the gore
of Troy      you’ll find
another Achilles
also born    of goddess
Juno   won’t be far

and piss-poor   you’ll have to go
begging
in every Italian town
you’ll wed      an enemy
lay her down in
a foreign bridal chamber
but keep the faith    brave guy
when you least expect it
salvation comes by way of
the Greeks.”

Then Apollo pulls back the spurs
from her heart
the frenzy
stops
A Perfect Movement

It’s all water it’s seeing nothing
to the end of the landscape here
drowned the place where you lived
turned corners in the familiar

knowing of a body where school is
your bike goes your house stands in the small

warm places of your life the cradle rests.
It’s water on which the sun crashes.

Who will know if far below
the light breaks so briefly that it seems

as if a little hand loosens itself
from what is missing or the shape of a cheek

or smaller an eyelid a glimpse of
what goes with seeing something new, wanting

to understand it? It’s water, it’s a fraction
of it, it’s just rowing and rowing

and wishing you knew the shimmering light
in your eyes sometimes appears in the depths

as if for a moment a perfect movement
emerges there showing nothing has gone.
Blackberries

Inside the verbal complex that is a poem, set down on the line between ‘mind’ and ‘thing’, there are certain fruits made up of separate spheres and each containing a black drop within.

Appearing in khaki, a light red, and black, rather than giving the picker ‘the come-on’, they suggest the separate stages of a rambling family.

With so much more seed than pulp the birds don’t much care for them since there’s not a lot left as they travel between beak and anus.

But during the process of the poet’s constitutional he addresses this seed in his mind as follows: a great number of the flowers’ patient efforts find success, knotted, within the spiky brambles. Amongst its few properties my poem is buried in the berry.

Moss

Vegetation on reconnaissance used to halt on block-still rock. Cudgels of velvet and silk ranked there cross-legged. Since that time, since the twitching of those lancers camped on rock, there has been a universal loss of head by those trapped and stamped and stifled.

And then the hair started growing and the world grew darker.

Self-absorbed in this growth the hair grew longer to form thick-pile carpets that bow beneath you before rising again entangled: suffocating… drowning.
Stop! Slice the razor through this spongy tissue, this saturation, these soggy mats. Re-discover ancient rock bottom.

The Crate

Halfway along the path between a coop and a cell the French language gives us a crate, a slatted spaced container for conveying those fruits in danger of being stifled by the least hint of suffocation. Constructed for its purpose with delicacy it can be smashed up with ease and is used only once: it lasts less time than the fragile contents it holds.

On every street corner, round by the market, these boxes of balsa are stacked shining. Still so new, and a little stunned to find itself thrown off balance on its way to the tip, this object inspires a moment’s sympathy without compelling us to dwell on its fate too long as we pass.
Cantos to Berenice (V)

You reigned in Bubastis
your feet in earth, like the Nile,
a constellation for a headdress above your heavenly double.
You were the Sun’s daughter and fought against night’s malevolent
ones –
mire, treason or mole, rodents gnawing at the house wall, at the bed
of lovemaking –
from the bejewelled dynasties of stone
to ash-coated kitchen spices, multiplying yourself,
from the temple’s halo to the steam off cooking pots.
Solitary sphinx or domestic sybil,
you were the goddess Lar and in every fold, every brushy patch
of your inexplicable anatomy, you housed a god, like some
insomniac flea.
Through the ears of Isis or Osiris you discovered
that your names were Bastet and Bast and that other name only
you know
(or maybe a cat doesn’t need three names?)
but when the Furies nibbled away at your heart like a
honeycomb of plagues
you puffed yourself up till you claimed kinship with the lion,
then you were called Sekhet, the revenger.
But the gods, the gods too die to be immortal
and, once again, any day they like, burn dust and garbage.
Your little bell rolled round, its music silenced by the wind.
Your little pouch lies scattered among countless mouths of sand.
And now your shield is a blurred idol for lizards and centipedes.
The centuries have bound and wrapped you in your wasted
necropolis –
that city swathed in bandages that walks through children’s
nightmares –
and because each body by itself is one small part
of the immense sarcophagus of a god
you were hardly even you and, at the same time, a legion sitting
in suspense,
seated there, you with that air
of being always at ready, sitting on guard
at the threshold.

Cantos to Berenice (XVII)

Though all our traces may be wiped clean just like candles at dawn
and you maybe can’t remember in reverse, like the White Queen,
leave me your smile in the air.
Perhaps by now you’re as immense as all my dead,
with your skin night after night hiding the overflowing night of
farewell:
one eye on Achernar, the other on Sirius,
your ears stuck to the deafening wall of other planets,
your vast body drowned in their boiling ablution,
in their Jordan of stars.
Maybe my head would be impossible, my voice not even a void,
my words less than tattered rags of some ridiculous language.
But leave me your smile in the air:
a gentle vibration to coat in quicksilver a sliver of the glass of absence,
that brief vigil tattooed in live flame in a corner;
a tender sign to perforate one by one the leaves of that harsh calendar
of snow.
Leave me your smile
as some form of perpetual guardian,
Berenice.
The War

IN THE DISTANCE

destroying means

to open an ear

aged tympanum

philosophy

 unknowable zoning

of light and shade
A.R.

we are always leaving for Aden
we need to find horses, muster wagons
we make a few sorties
on fine mules with fancy bridles
but we have to make shift
grab the paperwork,
write letters,
Move it—they’re waiting, pack up and go

—why did they let him sleep on?
—why didn’t they help him get dressed?

THE ENEMY

Youth—tempestuousness
all that
has made
red bright fruit

so I’ve hefted
a shovel
because we need
to dig

—And who knew how
laboured
—strength could be?

Eat
and the darkness—
of blood—
The End of March

The indolence of the air on the rooftop
and the lukewarm roughness of the geraniums
on the neighbouring balcony—
their trembling is enough for me to know, again,
the day’s simple decline,
the tenacious half-light that always returns
and seeks shelter within these lines.

Swollen and promiscuous,
the mid-afternoon sun
crashes against the façade and breaks in two:
above, into a palpable triangle,
the dense juice of the final light;
below, between flowerpots and dirty skylights,
the persistent dampness of the shadowed patio.

The light is always a higher order,
what exhumes and reveals,
what cleans and redeems,
the obligatory emblem of all transcendence.
Only at the feet of the sun or divinity
do we take on body, are we what we are,
a handful of shadow shaped by desire.

Outside, among the geraniums of the balcony,
two pigeons preside over the vespertine stillness
with greedy, ignorant eyes.
From time to time, one tilts its head
and the sun lights its crest with sudden, undeserved brilliance,
and it is as if the hand, despite everything, could hold it,
perhaps, by just opening.
Field

(The sound of the water didn’t keep her from seeing, but rather from thinking.)

There were five of us: my friend, the kids, the woman. There was someone else. They left us behind.

—You almost never give names.

—The current shifted. On the wooden bridge, very quietly, the third one said: “Come with me. Don’t be scared. Hold on to my arm.”

—Were you scared of the bridge or his arm?

—His insistence, whispered, hard as wood.

—What was his name? —The bridge twisted round.

The woman, on the other side, suggested that I hike up the hem of my dress.
“I’ve already been here.” He doesn’t believe her.

As it splashes on the ground, the detergent paints the sea on the stones.

—You use white paper. You don’t recycle.

I think you are only capable of desire.

She’s not offended. She smiles.

—You’re not going to tell me I’m right?
—You don’t need me to.

As she entered the river, the sound of the water blinded her.

—Were you compatible, the two of you?

—One day he asked me, “do you sort your garbage?”

—Did you stop loving him?

—I came to understand that sometimes he preferred to suspect.

—He was probably scared.

—He wrote with his left hand. She was far away.

We kept walking for a bit, I had said goodbye, but he hadn’t.

We lay down in the grass.
—One wouldn’t think that you were so sensitive to landscape.
—You know how I like to improvise.
—Tickling, taking your clothes off, turning away from the world.
—Changing my mind, rolling around, playing. —Getting wet, seeing you all together.

The river came later. Running clear.

It was one of those moments when it seems that things give us continuity, that any old thing can carry us on.

—I would come out on top.
—I’m sure you would.

Very slowly, daylight crept into the room. They breathe deeply. Saying nothing, thinking nothing, not even the air separates us.