

Beneath the Rime

Also by Siriol Troup:

Drowning up the Blue End

SIRIOL TROUP

Beneath the Rime

**Shearsman Books
Exeter**

First published in the United Kingdom in 2009 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
58 Velwell Road
Exeter EX4 4LD

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-030-9

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First Edition

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for my parents

*Die Gedanken
machen das Wasser eisig.
(Thoughts
make the water icy.)*

Günter Eich

THE HUMAN POSITION

BEGINNINGS

See the man with the goose
on his head—that's Negneg
the Great Cackler
trumpeting wake-up calls
to the protoplasm,
his honking cry
the *souffle prophétique*
that fanned creation.
That egg in his hand
is worth two bushy
phoenixes: the sun's inside,
a dazzling yolk
in clouds of albumen.

Don't let him crack you up
with his small pink bill
and chestnut spectacles—
the world's at stake:
a shudder on the horizon.

FAUN

L'après-midi d'un faune, Nijinsky
for Alison and Stephen Musgrave

When he comes to the edge to drink
you recognize his angular grace—
slim hips, hair quiffed into horns,
thumb cocked like a gun.

You know him from disco nights
and back-seat sex,
hot tongue on your pale skin,
that dreamy look that tells you he's high

on something you've never tried:
the power to take on other forms,
to find what remains in him
of the animal or the pagan.

Goatish in hooves and fur,
then suddenly drawing music
from a reed or a bone
as if the world's a shadow on stone

and all that matters
is the sound of the pipe,
the play of sunlight on water,
the abstract beauty of limbs.

NOX ELEPHANTORUM

—*Elephant Night at the Coliseum*

Climb the railings by moonlight—you'll find us
on our knees in the ring, turning tricks
under the sky's black awning. Such eloquent
desolation: the rime of ivory on tufa,
a breeze down the stairwells, the whiff
of dung and *pozzolana*. We have only
a few hours each night, but they are very long.

How shall we entertain you? Walk the tightrope
backwards? Toss stray cats in the air, watch them
break as they fall? For Germanicus
we danced the graveyard shuffle, our big feet
tender as pincushions, a crimson ellipsis
on the sand. The people roared, the vultures
lunged and hissed over the bleachers.

Let me be your guide. Once there were
statues, frescoes, trapdoors, marble seats, sails
flying through cloud. The butchery defied
imagination: bulls, bears, crocodiles,
tigers and giraffes—an alphabet of beasts
slaughtered *ad libitum*, carousels
of blood. Listen, you can hear the skirl

of tusks along the colonnades.
I had a mother once. These ears are for
remembering: the feverish sea, psoriasis
of salt on skin, the subterranean
cells, the bite of chains. Now, in the centre
of the herd, we place the ones who cannot
die, shading them with the bark of our hides,

with memories of acacias rooted in heat-haze.
They weep like rocks, piteously, below
the range of human hearing. In summer
the moths come, creamy as baobab flowers,
wings like gauze on their wounds. How many
of us lie buried in this vanished world?
Step closer, let me show you the little paths

that wind among the ruins. The travertine vaults.
The drains gathering water from the hills of Rome.
The Vestals sat here. Here's the spot where tongues
of lightning set fire to the upper floors. Here
twenty elephants were killed, but not before
we'd raised our trunks to heaven, causing the crowd
to rain down curses on Pompey. And here

you stand with your guidebook, staring at things
you cannot see. Soon it will be dawn.
You'll leave with our dust on your feet, our breath
on your neck, our tears on your dry cheeks.
Will you remember how we died? How little
we asked of the gods? How the moon tonight
was encompassed by a light unknown in your land?

ABOUT SUFFERING

Two Photographs of W. H. Auden

How well the camera understands
the human position, giving us the same scene
in both shots—a café in Venice,
a table, a tray, two glasses of wine.

Three of them in the first photograph—
Day Lewis and Spender buttoned up
while Wystan holds forth in the corner,
jabbing his finger like a thin cigar.

In the second, Chester Kallman
sits beside him, open-necked and tanned,
eyes turned away towards the lens,
oblivious of his lover's loving gaze.
The others have gone, the glasses
are almost empty, but the sun still shines
as it has to on the white legs disappearing
under the table, and Wystan, who has always known
that suffering takes place
while someone else is flirting or smoking a cigarette or just
idly watching
the miraculous behinds of sailors strutting their stuff in the square,
must go on smiling, must go on
telling some amazing story
as the camera flashes, and his tears fall down.

THE PENANCE OF ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

After Lucas Cranach

He wanted the simple life:
a roof of rock, birdsong to wake him up,
cupped hands for berries, water, prayer.
But there was always that graphic primal urge—
the roebuck's horns, the needle-lust
of larch and spruce and pine,
church-steeple throbbing in his mind.

When he found her in the mouth of his cave
he waxed like a candle. Now he's on his knees
and when their child looks round or calls his name,
he's just part of the landscape:
a scar of schist where horsetails sprout like hair,
his fingers rooting in the ground,
his penance hardening into stone.

KNOWLEDGE

She wanted the world—
he closed his eyes to shut it out,
threw her an apple:

Take that!

She bit her lip
and knowledge flowed
like blood.

It tasted good,
she discovered,
saucing his rib.

COUNTRY LIVING

Monday to Friday we're alone with the rabbits,
Madame and I. Up at dawn with the smell
of wet straw and piss-a-bed, the piebald does
spaced out on ammonia behind the wire.

I slip the bolts, hear them jolt as I enter,
a skitter of hearts and toenails, whiskery hysterics.
Madame smacks my wrist: speak to them gently,
reward them when they come.

She calls them each by name, nuzzles and smooches,
nibbles their loose fur, their dippy tails—
mes biches, mes pucelles, mes allumeuses.
I clean their water-bowls and disinfect their beds.

On Sunday, she blocks her ears and weeps
into the casserole. Monsieur lays down his fork
and strokes her hand, then tucks in with relish,
slurping the thick juice until it trickles down his chin.

Pauvre Geneviève!

I take the afternoon off, light a candle
to St. Gertrude, let a boy in the market-place
stick his fist up my skirt.

The night I leave, I fill the bowls with foxgloves,
ivy, corn-lilies, creeping butterweed.
Push my fingers through the mesh.
Watch them come to me like whores.