Beneath the Rime
Also by Siriol Troup:

Drowning up the Blue End
SIRIOL TROUP

Beneath the Rime

Shearsman Books
Exeter
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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?
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-steeples 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.
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.