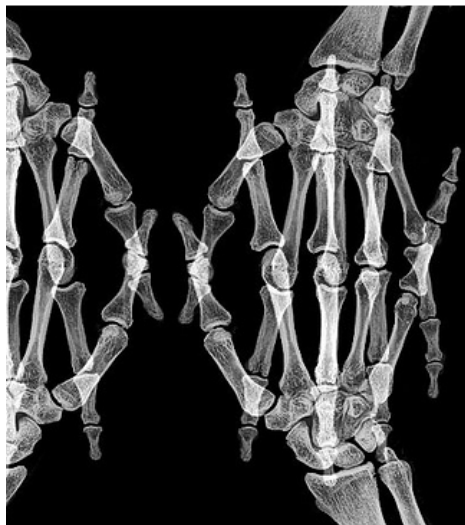


Poetry

Death
and other
Beauty

Toby Russell



No object is so ugly, that under certain conditions, it will not look beautiful.

Apologies to Oscar Wilde

Contents

Fire Kills Three, Mother Survives	1
Caribbean Floods, May 2004	2
Last Letter	3
Isabella	5
Rebirth	6
Our Ghosts Kiss Still	7
Material Girl	8
Moon Song	9
Skies New	11
Inside Inside	12
C&A Woman	13
Voyeur	15
Neat Trick	17
Cebu Mango Tree	18
Lego World	19
Scrotum Sonnet	20
Bantayan	21
Night Noises	22
This is Done	23
Loch Assynt	24
Revisited	25
Earth in Me	26
Analysis of Nothing	27
Bedtime	28
Isabella Poos in Wales	29
Bound	30
Brothers in the Room	32
Morgue Dream	33
Diary of a Girl Who Hanged Herself	34
Panic Trained	36

The Diplomat's Daughter	37
It Is Her Breath	38
Virgin Eyes	39
Where I Saw God	40
Repose	41
Sonnet for Saddam	42
Spoons	43
Love Lost	44
Saved	45
False Plenty	46
Squat on the Floor Sits a Woman with her Bags	47
False Antidote	49
Thank You, You Two	50
Connoisseur of Rain	51
Aurea von Phillips	52
Lost Boy	53
Sleepless	54
Empty Handed	55
Deceived	56
Poem on the Underground	57
Rupert, Mark and Me	58
You Beast	60

Fire Kills Three Girls, Mother Survives

How can we make you see
it's not happening now,

that we are not still
choking, not still
trying not to breathe?

We

are not reaching out our arms
for your strong neck
any more,

no longer trying
to shrink from the flames'
burning red kisses.

It's over.
The fire has burned out.

Caribbean Floods, May 2004

With the rain still hammering down
he put them to bed.

When the flood came he got near enough
to curl wet hands round thin, slick wrists
as half his house slipped away.

But his grip was not good –
muscled from him by viscid limbs
arcing out from thrashing waters,
his girls were sucked into the night.

And they, babies both, kept apart
by the vicious dance of that sudden river,
died alone in the swirling black
of torn trees and bloated goats,
the broken walls and ceilings of their world,

receding forever
from his drenched and outstretched face.

Last Letter

I cannot remember clearly
what came to me as I fell asleep last night.
You were spinning away in thin, pale threads,
there was something about a memory replacing a person,
something about how nothing can,
but mostly it's gone,
the details blurred by the morning light.

And now I want you to know I touched your forehead
and tried to neaten your stiff hand.
Forgive me,
but I must dwell on the end-stone of your face,
its bones its teeth its retracted mouth so

unheimlich,
so like a lake,
so fake yet you,
and this fake you, as a remnant,
it was a terrible thing.

I must carve this out,
must spell precisely the sensation of skin
slipping as I pressed enough
to feel the bone beneath:

it was not cold, not warm,
it was temperature without character,
it was flesh without nerve offering
no response, making no recovery,
just my fingers against it making
no contact making no
relationship.

So here I am explaining this to you,
sending it across the sea,
what death is like, or
how it appeared to me,

because I know the living
dwell more on death than the dead,
because I am still untangling,
still making parallel all lines
that stream from that event to this,
because we are still talking
even though you are drowned,

and because your weight – so little before –
took on a merciless gravity
that crushed in an instant what we had been
and made it endless.

Isabella

I dreamed last night of new love and loss,
aroused by the tips of your curling eyelashes,
now long and black, coming in with your smile,
blooming with your open mouthed words.
You wanted to be with us. Did you choose us?

Kiss your ears as soft as cloth because
love pulls me there when you see me, wide open,
pouring yourself fearless into our private 'we,'
billowing out, gentle blue, little heavy-headed you
till I know and feel (it was last night's dream)
what new love is and what loss would be.

Rebirth

There will always be a dead mother here,
pinned forever to this dangerous road
where cars whip by in blurs of colour.

Her legs are just setting off,
taking that last step, her face cold,
thumped free of its name. There

in the hole of her open mouth
is carved a hot, insoluble shout,
and in the centre of each palm

burns a horrible dot where
the whole was ripped from her.
It's stuck in her throat like a bur.

A new beast was born from the belly of that bang.
It made its first, uncertain steps towards its brightly quiet pram
howling for another air, but sucked down a new soul

which burst like an airbag, filled its skin,
forced love out through eyes, pores, limbs,
to leave behind, standing on the grass by the road,

a moment's ghost, a mother's shape,
marking forever a simple mistake.

Our Ghosts Kiss Still

The memory of your tongue
is your tongue in my mouth,
the strength of your jaw its strength,
the blood of its bed much riper
than strawberry-red.
I suck on its juice again and again.

My hands fumble
under your untucked shirt, unclip
your worn bra strap.
Your breasts brush against the white –
cotton kisses,
long tickles I still long to touch –
as your lips shape to me.

I trace the twin bows of your ribs cupped,
pressing us together, pressing us into dust,
pushing us down onto the shadow-hills
of your room's many cushions,
in love with the old freshness of your legs,
they caressed by your dark brown skirt
as it, weak and open mouthed, flops aside,
a sail upturned at last and floating away
on the fading sheen of your sepia ocean.

Deep in the dizzy heat of you, diffuse
with this futile precision and these waves
of probing and probing and probing,
I feel the wet drops of everything else
raining us apart, splashing us
into the time-stained memory
of what we must become.

Material Girl

At the first making of herself
there are no mistakes.
She crawls from the ocean's slick glimmer
a soul fused with her well oiled parts,
a whole satisfied with each taut sense.

In her hands the simple maths of ambition,
the impulse decisions that will pave the way.
Without even trying
she takes herself to the heart of the matter.
She is a perfect fit, as blades in metal,
blood in love, meat in flesh,
immune to all eyes that would root her out.
There is nowhere else she can be.

I cannot rid my guts of her,
cannot sort her from the strands of my DNA.
She has slipped between the lines of my good intent,
shone her sharp blue gaze somewhere else,
somewhere only she lights up, there where light hurts
and all our ugliness is upside down. She is right in there,
as always she was, and where she looks, she sees.
But what a world hers is.

Moon Song

prepare

i will coat my tongue
with your sticky sugars

to the tip
of my finger
bring
the small stars
of your ripe
and blooming ache

here
deep in the pit
where the moon's pink bud
weeps a slow white

here
in the warm bay
where the ocean's tide tugs
teasing the shore

here
in the home of life
where new suns pour
blinding your eyes and
bucking your back and
seeding waves ever out
and out

tying our knot
tighter
and tighter

rightthere...

from your mouth escapes
the noise that is its name

drip
into me

prepare

Skies New

Vaporous, seductive, everywhere,
his sun quivers on our skin, prickling up
through delicious surface fevers.
With precise and delicate kisses
it dabs our minds to sweet nothings.
Eyes twitch and sweat in the domed light.

He knows exactly what he is doing.
The fluttering beat of his mouth may seem
as fragile as a word, but will easily
swallow down everything there is.
Soon there'll be one monotone Sky
and six billion smiles of dumb repletion.

It's so everywhere it's easy to miss,
and lying back is the cheapest bliss.

Inside Inside

The carpet's lit by non-stop data
of cracks and spits from the TV set.
I'm laid out on an old brown couch, high
on Incest Dreams, cooking in the heat

of normalcy. The honey grip of God's
rasping fist secures me to my vice.
Fluttering light leaps in ripened buds
across the windowless room, splashes

against my eyes, devoid of sap but packed
with easy bliss – the profusion-blitz
of strobe and glare, a bitter sac of sweat
unreleased, trapped, congealed. Violence

to be done for love, for love of rage,
waits folded in a fold of His blinding face.

C&A Woman

You are flesh and blood, not pixels,
yet I find some solace
in the hope you might be fake;
surely skin cannot be that luscious,
breasts that mesmerising,
lips so moist they excite a flush of red thoughts
just by parting.
But C&A Woman
you look like you know a thing or two.

I saw you first at the bus stop,
where you fell instantly in love with my subjugation.
I am male, mortal, happily
susceptible to the obvious tricks of your trade,
convinced at bone-marrow level of your deity,
and I think you like me that way.
But you say – forgive me for doubting you –
you seem to say: other women dressed like you
might work the same wonders.
I want to believe...

But should I, for example, equip my wife with your kit –
the panties, the bra, the suspender belt –
style her hair like yours
glisten her lips that red
dim the lights down low ... well
somehow I don't think it would really ...

And yes, I do know perfection is an illusion!
I know too you
curse, egest, wake with bad breath, but knowing doesn't help.
There you always are, always
perfectly perfect,
steadily suckling at my desire.

So of course I want you
when you fix me with your copyrighted stare,
of course I flow into your room, draw you close,
breathe in whatever scent sparkles
in your brown and carefully curled hair.
And when we touch ...
sweet bliss! You want me too!

I resist. I go home and resist –
the washing waits, and the cooking, and the kids.
But it's no use,
your snake-oil charms have long lined my lungs and lids.
Somehow I just can't bring myself to
ask you to leave, though I think perhaps I should.
Whatever it is you have planned for me
will succeed. Darling, I am yours.

Here, take my colour, reality's too –
I shan't be needing either any more.

Voyeur

Online again today, I read how
“the popping sounds of heads being broken”
were heard by a member of Aung San Suu Kyi’s convoy,
as it was attacked by a mob of drunks
outside Depayin in northern Burma
while spreading the message of democracy.
When he heard that noise, U Khin Zaw
was one hundred meters away –

and I remembered seeing
in amongst the thumbnail-pics of horny young teens

a tongue being torn slowly in two,
fish hooks in each new, bleeding half,
and above that split of red
the girl’s eyes
disappearing into the black of their pupils,
each globe bloated,
blooming a mute denial, a please
don’t let this be real
don’t let this be me.

Who was the pretty young thing who could not twist
the muscles of her face far enough
from the wet, brown and yellow shit
some man’s hand was rubbing into it?
And neither her clenched eyes
nor her tightly shut mouth
could keep my gaze out.

I saw it
and I was afraid.

There was no love that made it there on time –

only bits in some unknowable mess
were gathered and cast
across a sea of wire to me.
Made of nothing more than light
they weigh enough to sink as silt
and drown the littered floor of the world.

Neat Trick

We are consumers climbing rungs
our consumption creates, consuming them
to build the next ones.

We strip down efficiency lean,
time to a tick, perfect to a purr
the whir of our machines, dismiss

if it doesn't fit yet gladly
drink down the juice of placebo,
epiphenomena and dream.

But nothing feels solid enough –
we wonder one eyed
at an ouroboros variously redeemed

as the low-fat, über-young
beauty-thing of our dreams
flutters in our face like a map

blown by high winds. For a short while
back there
all directions pointed to it ...

now they always will.

Cebu Mango Tree

Touched awake by the wet morning air
the new leaves have just uncurled.
There they laze in their perfect curves,

enjoying the cloudy weight of warmth and light
that lolls across them like a lover's limbs,
drinking in my jealous gaze, confessing nothing.

How can that young and violent green
be so still, just lie idle until
kicked by wind or rain?

How can a green so soaked with life
do nothing other than be?
The rudeness of it confounds me

yet there they are, bunched in close groups,
oozing genius, promising
the sweetest fruits.

They ignore their duller siblings
and spare no thought for their fallen.
From where I sit they are

what beauty is.

Lego World

When pretty poor and monied meet,
what a crop of mummy wheat!

Turquoise, white and green the land
with heat and dazzling blue. The rain's
intense, the drizzle somehow too.

Little flowers give little smells
from shacks in slums, from sometime-yards,
profuse in ditches and littered mud,

their colours brave. They bloom
where nothing can be done. It all
fits together so well – the growing,
the plucking, the real, met needs,

but no one is at home. “Na higugma
ko nimo! ‘I love you’ in my language.”
“Klar, und ich liebe dich auch,
Schaetzchen. Nun aber zur Sache.”

Scrotum Sonnet

Scrotum, I love you, but am ashamed
to have noticed it first at forty two.
Buoyant in the bath just yesterday
your intel-skin amazed beyond taboo –

its elasticity reports my mood
in wondrous, snaking, lazy wiggles
which paint me to a “T” ... Am I you?
Messy work of art in Pollock-squiggles

tease me with your sourceless tickles,
mysterious and inopportune!
Bestower of life in gusts and dribbles,
o wrinkled sack for sibling, oval moons,

teach me with your ugly perfection
to be less charmed by emptier confection.

Bantayan

Out there at the heart of it all,
suspended in this night's supple sea,
fish sleep.

Still themselves,
they are rocked gently back and forth,
cradled by the great in-and-out
of their father's mighty lung,
colour bled to the moonless dark.

We stand on the beach, sorting the bobbing lights
of some hundred night-time fishermen
from stars sparking on the water's syrupy skin.
They have cast their nets and will gather sleepers
to tables in distant hotels.

With one arm wrapped round you
and the other pointing at the sky,
I try to order the twinkling heavens,
but the stars prove immune
and drift quietly through every net I throw.

Night Noises

He can hear his wife – as he falls asleep with his back to the bedroom door –
still pottering and tinkering
fussing and shuffling
dispatching
the various
tiny night-time chores.

He lies, eyes closed, aware of the light from the hall
that shadows the covers
that covers his hair and his shoulders,
and waits for the click of the switch
that signals the end of her day.

He waits. He has no idea what she does every night
there in the light at his back.
He cannot work it out – and why does it take so damned long? –
tinker potter
potter tinker
shuffle fidget fuss
potter tinker shuffle fuss –
what on earth could it be?

One of these days he will remember to ask
but tonight, as always, the waiting becomes sleeping.
He wakes in the morning to an orderly house –
just as he likes it – last night's noises an empty head away.

This is Done

These happened first. Incidents like
parking fines on her home street,
being overcharged for utility bills. The grubby fight
to get her money back! The anonymity!

School arrived with cold assessments,
misappraisals and she, proud, pulled taut
by pragmatics, love and doubt, tried and tried.

A sudden affair. Her husband gone. The price of milk
and bread a daily affront. Shouting at the kids.
Weight-gain, hair-loss, her wardrobe
thinning. The stamping foot of housework,

housework, housework. No sunned ocean. No kiss.
No weekend-rides down paths through city woods. Just housework,
shouting and sleep. Housework. Shouting. Sleep. Never

enough sleep. Endless tedium and TV.
Scraps of romance from romance books repeat
for years and on sleepless nights a sense
of slippage, slow decay. Her head

numbed, but aware the citrous bite,
the smoky trail of some alternative missed,
already sailed, teases well out of reach, a fire

that heats, that cannot warm. A solid cloud takes shape
and fills her view, her air, strains, then mires
her thoughts in tuts that cut her through, run her
in rings, wear her down to a nub. Worst of all

this is no surprise, no new thing, is drab
and meaningless as mud, that my fingers
groping at her with high concern disgust.

Loch Assynt

Push my hand and arm searching
through the open memory of his mouth –

muscle through the sea of sand inside –
find no motion, no evidence of tide.

Pick him up as stiff as a vase
and break him open like an egg

that bursts into a cloud of dust
that blows across the lake

while we watch the bone white flakes
sink into the rust brown waters

that ripple still
around the broken castle on the hill.

Revisited

You do not move
from the doorway to my room –

I have fallen asleep at the edge of my bed
again, hunched like a dumped leather bag.

Is it love that stops you? Your stasis
disturbs me. You tilt neither forwards nor back.

You think if you straighten me out I'll wake
and shout. You think too much. Come here

and give me that shove. I need
the conflict, your contrast.

But you wait, still as the greens of the dressing gown
that hug the old bones of my back and I

cannot make myself heard – a machine
grinds away in the corner, drowning me out

day and night, on and on and on.

Earth in Me

Soil as a sound. It sparks this.
My spade punching through,

pressed back, cleaving earth.
That sound, that smell,

clouds of both.
Sunshine as a river flowing

the air its bed.
My back curved under

a weight of rushing light.
Being in that sound,

that smell, seeping into them.
The warm wood of the spade

in the flesh of my palms
the terminus for it all;

all my senses melt to this point
spin inwards then

uncollect, unwind, till woven
down into the soil like rain.

I am a thread confusing
my hair for spiders, my toes

for tubers, stitched into time's arrow
as eternal as earth,

as lost as a second.

Analysis of Nothing

Matter cored of nothing.
In the hole this left, its absence.

Laid out on my desk,
under pressure of my eyes' earnest affect,
pure nothing yields a few facts:

1. It is soil for mind's roots.
2. All particles whirl from its oil.
3. It delimits time
and so is timeless.
4. It blinds us into sight.
5. It is a malfunctioning mirror.
6. Thirst for it is endless
as is fear
of it.

But there is evidence to suggest
it may, counter-intuitively, be something after all.
Research is ongoing.

Bedtime

Butter-kisses from unpracticed lips.
The artful weight of rain-sized hands
lulling your Mummy to sleep. The moon,

a closing eye, a dozy spy at the window pane,
sees sheep slumber on a distant hill, or are they
woolly knots in your hair?

In your knuckles small parcels of defiance stir,
buoyant as sugar puffs in milk.
You rise, pale in the dark, not tired at all

and flee, only to be yanked back by the door,
your plans for endless play doomed
by the sudden charm of your dash for freedom.

Dimly seen, your return to the clutter
of covers and sheets is familiar to me,
a dreamy fight, a nighttime routine.

You too know the moves, the to-and-fro
and close your eyes for real this time.
Your heartbeat slows. You thread

your arms around her cool neck again
where kisses fall like warm summer rain.

Isabella Poos in Wales

I've been sent to guard her all the way to the ocean's edge,
tugged along by the knotted milk-forest of her hair.

She pads in till waves lick her pale knees
then squats.

This is where she wants it,
this is how she wants to be –
naked, crouching in shallows,
fully immersed in a bright burst
of land and sea,
calmly obeying the rumbling in her bowels,
her bottom kissed by the salt-cool water.

With no evidence of effort nor sign of strain,
a sudden shoal of small brown round ones
flits quickly down to the safety of the sand.
There they sit, politely awaiting dissipation
or a foreign foot.

She's finished, and dashes off, aimless as water,
weaving her fat-free, rippling body
back across the firm wet sands,
in amongst the startled bikinis and rumpled towels,
sunned and shining, loving indiscriminately
with the blonde-blue chaos of her smile.

I follow dutifully, clothed and useless so far,
but eating up the distance between us
with my wide adult strides.

Bound

I Fear of Fire

Useless with fear,
whipped by branches and cut by hawthorn,
you stumble through the woods,
the prey of a chasing pack
armed with farm tools and conviction.

That they catch, subdue and bind you,
you forget. Those details get burned
with your clothes and hair and blood,
to swirl up into a dark sky
littered with the fire's fevered sparks.

Instead you reconstruct,
inspired by your crowd's most righteous ire,
how your witch's power poured you forward
into the shape of a panther,
how you calmly broke your elegant stride
to turn and show your true face to those
who would have your meat for fun.
See how they run.

II Village Idiot

Simple and lost on familiar muddy paths,
haunted by new noise that warps and rends
the houses out of shape, that tips the sky
over on its bed, I cannot find you.

There is a horse, and a man on that horse
who has my fear in his hands. He tugs
its head to the right and my mouth bleeds.
I am weak with confusion but know fire

lights up the night. At last that smell leads me
to your side. You won't hear me, though your

bursting eyes stare, and your white hair screams up

and dies. My knee cracks inwards, broken
by a blow you did not foresee. I fall
to the horse's hooves, hating your weakness.

III Berlin 1920

Clenched with petty hates and clamped in a dark flat,
my tongue gummed to the floor of my mouth but
still convinced, even when mumbling and stuttering,
it has something important to say, I beat
that ugly fear out of you and you love me.

Our daughter, a pool of noise and piss,
will not learn and you love me.

The walls are red and press in.

They ignore my rage which fumes and swarms,
a cloud of pests. The babe can only scream –
I sit down, she screams; I prowl, she screams;
you feed her and she screams. She will not still
despite my ministrations

yet you love me –
a wet petal sucked to my bark – but I am
tipped over my eyes gone black and

when things are clear again
blood and excrement seep onto her yellow sheets...
There is nothing here I can look at any more.
I swivel darkness over me like a hood and fly on
to wake again, a vessel full of remorse, undeserving
of the forgiveness I need
and receive
from you.

Cruel miracle,
how can I let you in for what I have done?

Brothers in the Room

I grip Rupert with both arms.

His black leather jacket smells of him,
smells how I think of him now;
an animal brother of blood
and cigarettes. And Duncan's big back

shakes inside his heavy green shirt.
I lay my arm around him
to bring him calm, and he grabs my hand.
We are grabbing at each other
holding on in turns as this
sudden storm blows us together,

blows us apart. Eyes closed I
see our heads above the rough sea,
bobbing like buoys, choking
on the brine that keeps rushing in.

It is a miracle of emotion, a flood
and our faces are washed away. In the tumult
the stillness of Mum's death

anchors, packs her emaciated frame
with a terrible gravity, its focused weight
the most charismatic thing,
a burden we cannot yet bear.

I can smell his jacket at will,
still taste the brine in my mouth.

Morgue Dream

Soaked through with dark light,
with saliva spilling from us
down, into and through all soil,
we exit this tight chamber
arm in arm,
skins decaying,
souls guttering out
like stars at the end of time.

Mother,
I have dreamed myself beside you,
found I am this process,
this dissolution, this renewal.
You have taken me with you, broken yolk,
egg of my memory, germ of me,
and made me real:

in this very breakdown
I find the solid you.

Diary of a Girl Who Hanged Herself

Sunday 3 – Rope Trick

no pain just silence
the fall through unending dark
no wind in my hair

Sunday 3rd – A Little Death

The rope round my neck is a lover's hand,
the bud of my throat butter melting.
Fingers squeeze, slip through, tease me in two,
deftly dividing the fat from the cream.
My mouth flickers a delirious smile,
my pulse quickens, my eyeballs pitch and roll.

But oh! – the key to my room's in his pocket.
Before he can think, he's in the thick of it,
panicking the slippery weight of me up,
fumbling me free from noose and beam.

I am a bag of flesh, delivered
from a dim, indefinite room, slumped
across his shoulders like a wounded doe,
still as a baby in a blooded womb.

Monday 4th – At the Hospital

At some point my body made up its mind
to open its eyes, fill its lungs, and scream.
Explain this to me: blood had burst its banks,
flooded, then swamped my sight – all was red:
the sheets, the walls, my parents' clothes...
But the wail gushing from my open face
only darkened the omnipresent stain.

My buoyant life had slipped my hands again,
fled straight back to their worried clutchings
(look! already they beetle about it).

And I had tried so hard to rope it in,
down there, out of reach, down where it belongs,
freshly fallen and buried away, left
for dead in the ditch of your scorn.

Tuesday 5th – Keepsake from the Remains of that Day

Had I not been saved
I would never have learned how hard
my body bucked and whipped
above the tipped stool.

Was it trying to escape the noose
or just finish the job?

Panic Trained

Terror slipped in through well timed words,
cemented exits shut, daubed florid blood
on signs that stray from good consensus,
took over so slowly no one could notice,
became a thing more boring than foul,
became the big tent in which we dissect
our shades of grey – lame, hale and endless.
Backwards, forwards, inwards, nothing else
but fractious consent, while a deluge of details
excites concern but blunts dissent. Hell
is this sealed, this drab, this even. In school
homogeny is wrought, rebellion found
 where none exists. Its absence goes unseen,
 missing from the feathers we all comb and preen.

The Diplomat's Daughter

scatters her words across the water,
lily-pads that might support a gentle approach.
He feels his way again and again, unsure –

those depths and secret currents could oppose.
But she has understood the kernel of his eye.
Her careful indiscretions arrange a slip. Falling

he notices things he's noticed before:
her face and rings and scarves and jeans,
sees now something inexplicable in each –

mirrors made of him reflecting her in ripples
glinting and uncertain, distortions, pulses,
eerie soundings from unfathomable depths.

Her smile suddenly chill as winter blue,
he surges forward to close the gap.
She panics, coalesces. He is expelled

but has breathed her silence.
What else is there but drowning in the noisy air
if she does not let him near?

It Is Her Breath

From the window
night breezes stir our room's air,
in which she sleeps
and I stand.

To my left and right
somewhere among inked trees
two foxes bark the heat into a twist
of waves under granite cloud.
The stillness tightens, shifts in
on itself, a horse about to bolt.

Her breaths pulse in and out of our lock.
The window heaves around me,
arms open. In its chest,
gaping, thick promise of the unknown,
into which I lean, sniffing, reeling
with the sumptuousness of fear.

When I fall, mosquitoes will catch me,
bear me down to where my weight will bend
no blade of grass. Foxes will come,
bold, give their smells for my skin
but my wanderings will splinter
into labyrinthine cracks
lost in the soil.

Virgin Eyes

I

In their brown,
under her black forest,
a forest that catches a sun or a cloud alight,
in that brown

are ice-coals, engine-souls,
mechanical mysteries infinitely complex
and very far away, lost
and home-sick on differing paths. Earth colours here

and there, with their dark-heart moon
of love and hurt, of trust given
and pierced
and pierced again. Cold at need,

a warm garden under wraps
waits for the right spring,
for a still truth
in a sad and shifty world.

II

Sleep smokes at their edges, stirs
the pots of witches' dreams in
and out of focus, cooking hot wet brews
for the lucky few, who scold their tongues
on her inward curling flame.

Where I Saw God

It was not there
in that writhing ouroboros of liquid flame,
nor on its solar winds.
Nor was it beyond
in that infinity of black,
nor in the chance array of star and rock,
nor in any law thereof.
Not there in our sky's delicate skin,
nor underneath in rhythms of weather.
Not coded in the rich violence of growth,
nor somewhere concealed in the turn of its wheel.
And it was not in us, nor in our works,
nor in our children. It was

by a kerb under a maple tree, where four sparrows
stuttered about on an unkempt strip of grass and weed,
right there
in their ignorance of our cars,
of our street, of our world. It was
precisely there,
in that hard gulf between
a perception built of words,
and another not.

In that wordless womb, in that not-space, that
closely ignored dissonance, shimmered
for a moment,
the thin wine of a mute divinity,
the alien grin of an intelligent mind.

Repose

In the new calm of her just hardened eyes,
in the fixed curve of her back, in the bed's
hospital neatness, in the fleshless
bumps of her hips (even through blankets

and sheets), in the single stance of those
around her and the single song of it,
I couldn't sense the seed of my repose –
the absent glow alarmed, too brightly lit

for reflection. But the egged eyes, unknowing,
blotting light, ploughed the future, sowing.

Sonnet For Saddam

Caged in the papers and on TV you are
dumb in a white-tiled room, your plump hand
busy in your beard, your fingers pale forms
struggling in a haphazard wire mesh.

An anonymous doctor pokes around
in your old mouth, turns your messed up head
this way and that. You comply and there is
no butchery, no fall-out – no word

of an order to attack. It is your
calm that catches me – your soft face and
gentle gaze undo everything

I might hope for. I am emptied by you;
the baffled king unearthed, undisturbed
by the indignity of his fall.

Spoons

The black hairs I touch aside
curl to my fingertips,

those stragglers, those free-spirits,
those child-vagabonds I love.

They seem to know how their play
sets off the soft

vale of your neck, where my mouth
now explores. You curl to my kiss,

clamping my head between your head
and your shoulder as my groin

finds the rump of your back. I become
driven in your softness,

my arms among your curves, while all around
the melting snows of your trust

take me in.

Love Lost

If only of itself this leather could be my home.
The surface is soft enough to sleep against,
its colour is familiar and well-worn,
but the bones that give form jag and jut.

And there are white pools in red wounds
which must be daily nursed. Its brown too is odd –
should be paler – sees no sun – so I know
the colour merely fools it would protect.

But thin furrows, between his arse and upper thighs,
on his scalp and below his knees,
make him look vulnerable and sweet,
though his lips have thinned and curl in, stay snarled

dryly against his darkened teeth. And I
am nowhere near. I am there kneeling
behind him, about to clean and dress a wound
as he stands waiting for me,

weak on his feet, leaning against his oxygen machine
like a crooked cigar, but I want to say something.
And still I want to say something before I can begin
but can get nowhere near –

the leathery softness of the folds of his skin
have drowned my sight. As if glued to sleep,
as if fixed by pins, we wait like manikins
in a cold museum, unvisited in the harsh light.

Saved

That night time slowed,
mired in a deed that was itself a bur
in time's springs and wheels.

Words flurried in the air, the air
jittery, an incompetent mediator, a child at some
horrible crime, both useless –

no amount of each was any help;
I had done what I had done.
Now we burned on our sofa, skin-sticky

in the acids of my selfishness. And each
passing second changed not one thing,
each spat out pointlessly, cruelly,

from time's precisely stuttering mouth. Then
a sudden silence was the judgement
that would not fall, would not fall,

would not fall, until you cried from the tight ball
of your arms and legs and head
and your face collapsed together

in a tiny avalanche of tears
you dug up from deep within a truth
I had never known, and saved us both.

False Plenty

Net-wrapped fruit on vines alive with hornets
(their papery nest nearby) and agile wrens
charmed by the comic, bulging sweetness
that should be ours, and our children's.

I'm troubled by the nets, but the sunshine –
a coloured oil, the richest I've known –
bathes the world in its most heady wine,
a soul-wine, a dream-wine, as this cartoon

of a fine, long imagined day makes
moot the dangers, safe the insects' legs.
Brambles, raspberries, and perfect grapes
baste in the blunted lust of our intent.

Dare we be scared (fruit so full juice beads
as skins rip with strain), dare we learn our needs?

Squat on the Floor Sits a Woman with her Bags

her back balled, her head
a mere continuation of that, her legs lumps
of old blanket, her arms less important
than their puffed and rotting sleeves,
her feet hidden somewhere
in the no-faced, non-front surface
of the ball of her.

A smudge of sound, small, lone,
religious, oozes from her parted mouth
to wither steadily in the dense
shadow of her inner round.

All wasted on me, on the winter air –
repeating patterns in a mighty fabric of decay –

but for the book in my hand, in which I just read
of a woman abandoned,
mentioned in a few words, in passing,
the hint of a shallow soul crushed.

Could her tipping point have been
her husband one morning
waking to say he'd had enough?
After years of her spending, her frivolity, her incessant
gaiety, her childish smiles, her small mind,
did he drop her from his life?
Did she drift from him, dumbstruck,

slowly curling into that ball?
The sun will kill her and not notice.
She will sink with her mist of smells
back into the stuff from which she came.

The familiar boil on the tarmac will be lanced,

drained, and cleaned away. There will be no stain.
She will have meant only
what you take from this, nothing more.
You and I are her equal in that.

False Antidote

Helicopter just under clouds
my gaze catches you.
Your distance hypnotises,

ropes me in. Your height
offers permanent escape. Trees still
their work, bare buildings marvel

at the heat of your rising. Could I pack
my whole family into you?
How far can you fly?

Does the clouds' close omen
oppress you too? To that at least:
no – far above our fishbowl

flying in the good air
our fishbowl cannot bother you.
But when I drive my shout

hard against its glass, hoping
for a crack, I fear it too. And when
the prisons break, and thieves

crawl the earth, will you find safe ground
after the fuel has gone?

Thank You, You Two

In the playground opposite Jules Verne Restaurant,
on a wide, heavy-duty hammock
lie my daughters. Twenty little fingers cling
to four nodes of the steel-cored rope-lattice
I'm swinging wildly back and forth.

The complaining creaks of wood
weave through the sounds of our laughter,
through my shouts and their shrieks
and cocoon us together, a part of,
but insensible to, the falling rain. So woven

in this coloured cloth of sound and touch
the rest of the world pales then rebrightens,
falls away then swings back into view
as fresh and as simple as dew.

Connoisseur of Rain

We were wetting our mouths with the rain's pearled fruit,
which, hanging from yellow leaves like silver yolks,
broke on my finger when touched,
only to reform,
be carried from leaf to lip.

At each drop tasted
you nodded your hearty approval
like a connoisseur.

It was still raining softly as I held you in the nook of my left arm.
The air was very still
and the April-yellow light from the leaves
was on our faces.

Aurea von Phillips

There you are,
half-light soft, your skin a balm
in the skin-soft light, the light
intoxicant. You are
the ancient premonition,

the miracle exciter of old.
You have been touched by wonders,
perfected, misted, breathed
into airs. I dissolve
in your clear intent.

Turn your eyes on me,
open up your gaze,
spin a shield for my boyish fears,
for those dirty crimes
only you conceal.

Our odourless love sustains.
Our unwoundable dream –
formless, kindly lit –
my new home, my clean bower,
my deepest bed.

Lost Boy

There's one star left in his enormous sky.
The others lie waning at his feet.

White noise hisses in his fervent eyes,
skitters stray impulse left and right.

An unanswerable love clangs in his voice,
balloons his every word to empty pops,
words he hurls at the booming sky.

His arms are raised above his head –
a head that strains and strains –
as he stands on the tips of his toes,
reaching, reaching,
fingers wriggling,
craving the star he will never reach.

Sleepless

I am alien to my own body.
Tired, awake, flawed, I am not sure...
Am I a balloon bobbing at my skin,

or a buoy adrift on an ocean of sleep?
Tiny pains pick at me then
vanish as I twist round, crazed,

confusing up for down,
my spine a barbed hook caught in my throat.
I'm thrown awake again and again,

tossed like a cough expelled
from a far, impossible calm.
I cannot wait any more

but am alien to this body.
Its bones jut, perverted, wrong,
the ugly arches of a gutted whale

not of my making
not to my liking.
Trapped and dizzy

my fleeting attacks to restore order
are as light flurries on churning water.
Stuck fast against the distant sky

I gaze down at dark and boiling sea,
miles from home.
Please, sleep,

take me, sleep
take me,
sleep take me

Empty Handed

Coiled round my genes a clinging mist –
the smoke of their firing – cloud-spirals
at zero distance, in no air, of no material
but that I cannot imagine.

This the inward twist,
the contortion of finger pointing at itself.
It is this knotty steam I am,
this head of proclamatory shout
of an anger whose fuel
is its own frustration.

And here, as I twist again, snapping in
and in
at the intuited truth
these very efforts create, here it is I am
at my most useless, my most persistent,
my most denuded.

When I lean back, exhausted, the cum
of my energies wasted, messed, there is left
only vapour and husk, or some other
silly mix of things.

Deceived

There is tension without release.
A scattered storm, whose locus is lost
in the chance and shifting smears of her rain
repaints the landscape again and again.

I tap my right foot there, then there, blind,
searching for a way. But desperation
cooks nothing of any use, except,
at last, to worry the range of my sight

down, boil it down to a small peep-hole
that looks out solely on ground I own,
ground I can command. This small truth, bleeding,
seeps an ink that stems my forced readings

and concoctions – in the end I can
only know what only I can know.

Poem on the Underground

She sits
two seats in the distance.
Her black
water-sheen hair
jolts
to each percussive buck and lurch
of the wagon we share.

Her back is to me, but I know she's pretty;
she didn't even look my way
as I watched her step on board.

My dream
of crawling quietly across dusty seats
to put my tongue
to the pink swell of her unparted lips
does not rouse her.
I was hoping for a turn of her head, a look,
some sign she had understood.

She sits two seats in the distance.

Soon she will rise
a calm note in
wild and rickety noise
and disappear.
Until then
she will be as real to me as my thoughts.
Until then I will dream on,
carefully committing her to memory.

Rupert, Mark and Me

An unheld line easily adapts
to the distance that waxes and wanes between us.
It reaches through our navels in a stream.
We cannot see it, but it's there,
unaffected by people
spilling from pub doorways, with music and smoke,
to hail taxis, or pool at bus-stops, or drift off home.

None of them know we are joined.
None of them know
what we have done to make it so.

We're making our way to the playground.
It's out here somewhere, hiding in the night air,
crouching by a reservoir, waiting..

Without voicing ideas of how, we find the place,
climb over black iron railings and rest
in a wooden shelter we had forgotten about.
The summer air is an animal heat.
It rubs against the wood
and our senses pick it up.
The smell of warm timber prowls the dark,
becomes more real than my own hands,
lifts me back and down, back and away..

I feel a staircase beneath me.
The weave of carpet is rough and familiar
to my bare hands and knees –
I am in our childhood home.

I talk about it. You remember too.
Our friend listens, slightly on the outside now,
ousted for a moment by the blood in our words.
He looks suddenly like a boy to me;

head bent, attention at his feet
and I think: we three are children now.
We are for a moment in that love
that is the body being a child and not understanding
how anything works, not even knowing
that only this very mystery makes sense.

You Beast

That animal blueprint for our frame
wires synapse through thickest osteon,
shoots fevers into the thought-mouth,
maps feeling-fuzz precise to fingertips.

It steers mind, populates
the unseen with shape-shifting fog,
vanishes under scrutiny, fuses crowds,
distributes panic, rage, sprays

sex in gaudy colours
all along your hyaloid canal.
It is a squatter with rights
most deeply enshrined, splintering

self through wilds of nerve
all the way home to soul.

