

Denise Riley
Selected
Poems

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From *Marxism for Infants*

A NOTE ON SEX AND 'THE RECLAIMING OF LANGUAGE'

The Savage is flying back home from the New Country
in native-style dress with a baggage of sensibility
to gaze on the ancestral plains with the myths thought up
and dreamed in her kitchens as guides.

She will be discovered
as meaning is flocking densely around the words seeking a way
any way in between the gaps, like a fertilisation.

The work is
e.g. to write 'she' and for that to be a statement
of fact only, and not a strong image
of everything which is not-you, which sees you.

The new land is colonised, though its prospects are empty.

The Savage weeps as, landing at the airport
she is asked to buy wood carvings, which represent herself.

She's imagining her wife & how will she live her? When
the wife goes off to endless meetings in the rain
she'll say aah, I admire her spirit, bravo la petite
& when her belly swells into an improbable curve
the she-husband will think yes, it was me who caused that,
and more generously, Biology, you are wonderful

She has ingested her wife
she has re-inhabited her own wrists
she is squatting in her own temples, the
fall of light on hair or any decoration
is re-possessed. 'She' is I.

There's nothing for it. Your 'father' and I.
Biologically, a lack. The child tries manfully;
he calls it special seed but he gets confused at school

An unselfconscious wife is raised high as a flag over
the playground and burns up

I heard the water freezing in a thousand laundrettes
with a dense white shudder
I heard the roar of a thousand vacuum cleaners
stammer away into uncarpeted silence

today it is all grandiose domestic visions truly

in St Petersburg now Leningrad we have communal kitchens
the cooking is dreadful but we get to meet our friends

it's November, child, and time goes
in little bursts a warm room
clean and squeaky as an orange pip
in a wet landscape

From *No Fee*

IN 1970

the eyes of the girls are awash with violets
pansies are flowering under their tongues
they are grouped by the edge of the waves and are anxious to swim;
each one is on fire with passion to achieve herself.

AFFECTIONS MUST NOT

This is an old fiction of reliability

is a weather presence, is a righteousness
is arms in cotton

this is what stands up in kitchens
is a true storm shelter
& is taken straight out of colonial history, master and slave

arms that I will not love folded nor admire for their 'strength'
linens that I will not love folded but will see flop open
tables that will rise heavily in the new wind & lift away, bearing their precious burdens

of mothers who never were, nor white nor black
mothers who were always a set of equipment and a fragile balance
mothers who looked over a gulf through the cloud of an act & at times speechlessly saw it

inside a designation there are people permanently started to bear it, the not-me against sociology
inside the kitchens there is realising of tightropes
Milk, if I do not continue to love you as deeply and truly as you want and need
that is us in the mythical streets again

support, support

the houses are murmuring with many small pockets of emotion
on which spongy grounds adults' lives are being erected and paid for daily
while their feet and their childrens' feet are tangled around like those of fen larks
in the fine steely wires which run to and fro between love and economics

affections must not support the rent

I. neglect. the house

NOT WHAT YOU THINK

wonderful light
viridian summers
deft boys
no thanks

From *Dry Air*

THE AGES

You towns of Euphrates!
You streets of Palmyra!
You forests of pillars
in wastes of the plain –
what are you? You passed
beyond breathing, your crowns
snatched by smoke, by
divinity's flame.
Now I sit under clouds
each has its own peace
under well-arranged oaks
on the heath of the deer
and strange and dead to me
the souls of the blest.

*(After Friedrich Hölderlin's 'Lebensalter', written between
1799 and 1806)*

WHAT I DO

An even time
all to myself, though
lately it hasn't been,
more violent. My
death still will
skip on, 'This way,
my love', I know
but privately
I cross my heart; that
shakes, though, the noise-maker.
I am in several cupboards
deep, and wish well out,
wish out from this
dark air of china.
Is my name 'skeleton'
or only 'cup'?
A crack of light falls round me.

From *Mop Mop Georgette*

LAIBACH LYRIK : SLOVENIA, 1991

*The milky sheen of birch trees
stepping forward. Breathless
the deeper woods.*

*Goldfinches rattle down
through branches, leap
and sparkle off to dusk.*

*Below a mass of cloud this evening
a faintly orange light
slides on your lifting smile.*

*Afternoon's blue winds dropped
now wreaths of raspberry smoke
pat the steady sky.*

*Cream fields chat quietly
careless of distant provinces
and the guns of rebels.*

*Whooping cranes rise where
herdsmen, clattering, wheel about
the plains in scarlet.*

Cut the slavonics now. Cut the slavonics.
Slovenian and all other civil planes are off.
The federal airforce has the skies sewn up.
The snows come early, Austrian lorries slide
across the mountain pass in slow veers sidelong
skate gingerly to fates, grand destinies dreamily chosen.
Entering Yugoslavia we aren't there, we are straight into Slovenia instead
late at night, frozen, instantly crazy with obsessive and terrible tenderness
again, unable to find my passport. Napoléon, sauveur of Illyria ! whose
monument in Ljubljana spells out in gleams of gold calligraphy, Our Liberty.
Here videos of the summer bombings, entitled the Triumph of Slovenia, or
How a Nation Awoke, are wrapped in paper jackets showing fighter planes
with yellow extension-lead cables, mortar smoke, on stalls with t-shirts,
logos of the state. The country restaurant pipes a first-time go
at national music to its dining rooms, unclear what that should sound like;
oompah Bavarian results, mortifying to the city friends, who disconnect
its speakers, drawing down a ruddy glare of sausages, peasant style.
Rain darkens the fish-scale roofs of the provincial capital. In London
temporary exiles meet, some in despair about their forced new names
others worn down with dislocation, with explaining histories
to well-meant local ignorant evenhandedness. A girl calls out 'This time
last year, we none of us knew or cared. The cars streamed down all summer
to the Dalmatian coast from Serbia, and so what. Did I grow up for this
to take new designations, learn to hate my neighbours, just because of where
I came from, which I never used to know? The last war stopped
before my mother's birth. Who says I must be 'Bosnian' now.
I grew up Yugoslavian. Just stop this craziness, these killings.' Another,
older, says 'It is a lie that walls are coming down in Europe. We see them rise
and we are penned inside. The deaths of twenty thousand make me this

that I don't want to be. But that blood lost means I must take that name – though not that politics – must be, no not a nationalist, yet ambiguously Croatian must be it through the dictates of those deaths alone. We should, all should – look forward, must rebuild ...' She stops. I'm seeing present history glance round it for support, I'm hearing it at work to stammer its imperfect story go on too long, be conscientious, grab at straws, then reach its edge of tears.

I'm not these, never could be, am by accident of place of birth protected, yet exactly as this nation-sheltered onlooker, must try to think. The room splits into clumps and fights. Outsiders now move off, get back to native non-community, and across real distances made semi-manageable through irony; so that I'll say I've stood here as a dark stand of trees, still, sealed black, outwardly silent but vibrantly loud inside with others' gossip about itself, like 'the unconscious'; and I'll leave as I might leave a party whose guests were venomous yet inconsolable, deliberately straightening my shoulders and saying aloud, although to nobody in particular, It's good to get some air. The usual spectator's cocky journey home through stupidity. This evening's tongues go scrapping on till dawn:

*The settling scar agrees to voice
what seems to speak its earliest cut.
A rage to be some wholeness gropes*

*past damage that it half recalls –
where it was, I will find my name.
A hesitant gap now stretches its*

*raw mouth: I will become this sex
and Istrian. And still at night
hair dazzles in white lights*

*from flares. A greenish patina
may roughen these spent shells
for future curious songs. Now people*

*and their resonant cities are obliterated.
What is it that shapes us, whether
we will or no, that through these*

*opened and reopened mouths that form
the hollow of a speaking wound, we
come to say, yes, now we are Illyrian.*

LETTERS FROM PALMER

On moors the dark is spangled furze. Dusk noise presses.
Water *varnishes* everything that it covers, as pebbled beds
of streams. The plainly liquid quality of all shadow.

A blind baby feeling for the breast knows the taste of milk.
Woods must be rich, in thickly tumbling light.
Real tree colour, not anything picture colour.

The glimmering-through of the white paper.
Those thousand little luminous eyes which peer
through a finished linear etching, even in its shadows.

They have built us up with great houses, and destroyed
the elasticity of the air. How should the light strain through.
Guineas are being lost by the hundreds, in losing the Spring.

Interest is a capital lever when goodness moves it.
In May a peculiar grey effect is very charming.
If a man gets a name as a mannerist it is all up with him.

Enough of green tea poetry and smoky philosophy.
The choir of greys between violet and copper.
Keeping my shadows tender clear and neutral.

Vapour suspended over the far distance like a curtain.
I saw it in nature for so long that I was afraid to try it.
I have finished the little town by the blue river.

Small specks of pure white paint may glitter like the rain.
When I have gone to school to a potato in black & white chalk
I have found it difficult to make it unmistakably like.

As through a little frame a curtained spectacle
of downs and elms and matted pines. Stopping
the figure feeling intruding on the landscape feeling.

The upper shadows of objects in the air. The cool
sub-light they get from the sky. Moon-powdered
woollen leaves. The hillocks blocked in surges.

Where is the Vergilian muse? At the railway whistle she fled for ever.
Her very oxen wander the city disconsolate.
Corydon and Thyrsis meet in corduroys and Manchester cottons.

If I seem mirthful it is tinsel & spangles on a black ground.
O for a safe passage to that world where undivorced beauty
shall ever be the index and form of goodness.

Our earth is honeycombed with cells of fire. We suffer
the Poles to fight themselves out & the Danes & the Circassians
and need not expect pity when our turn comes.

Crude flake white is in hue a cold colour. Writing our difficulties. I spring upon my books. You want something which will *not* be taken away. Which will fill your heart.

Writhing for the death of my son. They may be allowed to walk unseen as our guides in this darkness. You lay the book down as tenderly as if you had handled something alive.

To come to the point, avoiding the temptation to impertinent & superfluous labour. Exactness the common honesty of art. What is prosperity without it but a violated responsibility.

The stove within me rages. A filmless sun burns. In cobalt air. Hills fired with living gold. I am walked and scorched to death. Drenched in a hot white mist. Grand coruscation of sudden light.

The solemn & inexhaustible eloquence of rains and mountain. O the playful heave and tumble of lines in the hills here. We are first green and then grey and then nothing in this world.

A SHORTENED SET

All the connectives of right recall
have grown askew. I know
a child could have lived, that
my body was cut. This cut
my memory half-sealed but glued
the edges together awry.
The skin is distorted, the scar-tissue
does damage, the accounts are wrong.
And this is called 'the healing process'.
Now nothing's aligned properly.
It's a barbarous zone.
The bad sutures
thicken with loss and hope –
brilliant, deliberate
shaking patients in an anteroom
refusing the years, ferocious to be called
so I'll snip through the puckered skin
to where they tug for re-aligning. Now
steady me against inaccuracy, a lyric urge
to showing-off. The easy knife
is in my hand again. Protect me.

Small is the history, and dark.
Its purplish valleys are unfurled
as the militant trees clash over it together.
I'd long in its steep descent to slip
past fuss and toughness to escape
both well-oiled grief and an escaper's
cheery whistling. Tedious. This
representing yourself, desperate to get it right,
as if you could, is that the aim of the writing?
'I haven't got off lightly, but I got off' – that won't
deflect your eyes that track you through the dark.
There is the traveller, there the decline
and his sex that the journey strips from him. A
perfectly democratic loneliness sets out
down the mined routes of speaking to its life.
So massively, gently, should it go
that it might overtake
even the neatest Professor of Speed.

*

The last sun on dark red brick burns violet-black where
I wait to get back something in the narrows of the city
under its great sides, whose brick or painted walls
glow into the paler light above them, a hugely quiet halo
formed from the internal heat of rooftops. These seep
their day off to the sky cupped very coolly distant
over this tight rim. My heart takes grateful note
to be in life, the late heat shaped in bricks of air

stuck out, hot ghosts to catch my hand on.
The slap of recognition that you know.
Your feelings, I mean mine, are common to us all:
that puts you square between relief and boredom
under the standoffish sky.
In this I'm not unique, I'm just
the only one who thinks I'm not. Maybe.

*

How can black paint be warm ? It is. As ochre
stains slip into flooding milk, to the soft black
that glows and clots in sooty swathes.
Its edges rust, it bleeds lamp-black
slow pools, as planes of dragged cream
shoot over it to whiteness, layered.
Or the cream paint, leaden, wrinkles: birch bark
in slabs, streaked over a peeling blue. A twist
of thought is pinned there. A sexual black. And I
can't find my way home. Yet wandering there I may.
By these snow graphics. Ice glazed
to a grey sheen, hard across dark grass spikes.

*

Is that what's going on – the slow
replacement of a set of violent feelings
by neutral ones. The hell if so.
There has been damage, which must stop at me.

I think that's finished. Then the underside
of a brushed wing unsettles things.
I'd cup that powdery trace in mind
like a big moth in a matchbox, whirring.

Are you alright I ask out there
straining into the dusk to hear.
I think its listening particles of air
at you like shot.
You're being called across your work
or – No I don't want that thought.
Nor want to get this noise to the point
it interests me. It's to you. Stop.

But

Am I alright you don't ask me.
Oh probably, and in the heart
of this light on hills it is for me
alone to speak. No triumph.
This milky light's a fact and the broad air
and the strip of primrose water, a long way down.
That red dot is my car, let's go

Or let I go.

– That black dot was myself.
I strike you as complete:
a late unpacking in life
in hope of a human view.
After these nights of rain on
the mountain the water's running
so hard it's marbled white
the streams like heavy snow.
Deletions are sifting down
onto the study floor – Cut
more cut more, mutter my
hearing creatures, snouts
rooting upward for light.
They push to nudge my
failures aside and go but
what would become of me in
the quiet once they were out.
Will you be good towards
these animals of unease
I can just about call them home.

*

Coffee goes coppery on my tongue today
as 'Let's Dance' is hammered out again on the radio.
It was my party and I wept not wanting to.

'Mother of children, don't go into the house in the dark'.
Letters crash onto the hall floor with their weight of intelligence and junk.
I get up with hope for them, until word may finally arrive.

*

It is called feeling but is its real name thought?
Moons in their spheres are not so bland as these.
A round O says I feel and all agree.
Walking by many on London streets
in a despair which carries me
I look from face to face like a dog going
in the social democracy of loneliness.
May move instead through a shimmer
around me of racial beauty crying like something expensive which
breaks into eyes sparkling all over skin.

*

It's that simple
in another town.
No, it doesn't know me
nor this train I'm on.

The ex-poet's beside herself:
'Here in the clouded
red, the grey, the burnt
oak forest, the rails shake'.

Safely I'll love it by letter
yet skip the 'better
that way' to cancel
the doubter's rhyme, trembling.

*

Aha we are frozen
stiff as young hyacinths –
outrageous blue
decides to leave green.

*

I'd drive anywhere with anyone, just
to have that held sense of looking out
from a container, amiably, stolidly, while
I'm portered by. Along the ring-road
murmurous orange lights on stilts with
necks stuck out like herons on the grey
slipway, angled above the cars repeating
themselves fast and fast as if they were one.
When I'm unloaded and stood in dread
at home encircled by my life, whose
edges do show – then I so want it to run
and run again, the solitary travelling perception.
Road movie: Protectedness, or, Gets through time.

*

An ice blue calm, violently sustained,
has got to know a thing about this nation
and our being in it.
How do I act, then, properly
without a sticky modesty
in the crammed-fullness of the place
too dense for story threads to pierce?
I'm quiet. I'm at the end of all opinion.
Should I not know where clearness lies.
Time has run short and I need company
to crack my separate stupidity. I'd thought
to ask around, what's lyric poetry?
Its bee noise starts before I can:
You do that; love me; die alone.

*

Don't quote the 'we'
of pairs, nor worse, of sentient
humanity, thanks.

That's attitudinising, in those
three lines. That's what I do.
Help me out of it, you
you sentient humanity.

I was signed up for a course
on earth by two others who left me and
left me impossibly slow at Life Skills

at admitting unlikeness or grasping the
dodgem collision whose shock isn't
truth but like the spine says is no

deception. I hate the word
collusion used of love but in the end
I wasn't anyone else ever –

that I sweated blood to force
lucidity to come as if headlocked
by history, to explain I really was –

all that was powered by desperation –
the thought of it makes me mortified.
Then after years, so-whattish:

The loves are returned to
themselves, leaving
an out post-sexual.

Unanxious, today.
A feeling of rain
and dark happiness.

Rain slops into dust
caught underfoot
in short grit runnels.

Faint news from the wharf
peppered on skin in
fresh patters of rain.

The evening lightens.
A friend's shout
blown inaudibly.

Sit. See, from the riverside
winds buzz new towers
of puzzling wealth.

Curved to this view
the gleam of a moment's
social rest.

Hair lit to a cloud
the sunlight lowering
first hesitant then strong.

In a rush
the glide of the heart
out on a flood of ease.

SUMMER

Looking in pools to see things flick.
Red globules. A million navy lips,
pursed mussels.

Lean in a head wind – ‘spread-eagled’
should not pin down, should soar
but biscuit rock stare over water.

*

Night falls like a coin in a slot ambling
down tiers of perspex trays
tipped to Animal Aid.

Moon, its pre-industrial light. What though
the dark thee cumber:
Glow, worm. Say to her.

WHEREVER YOU ARE, BE SOMEWHERE ELSE

A body shot through, perforated, a tin sheet
beaten out then peppered with thin holes,
silvery, leaf-curved at their edges; light flies

right through this tracery, voices leap, slip side-
long, all faces split to angled facets: whichever
piece is glimpsed, that bit is what I am, held

in a look until dropped like an egg on the floor
let slop, crashed to slide and run, yolk yellow
for the live, the dead who worked through me.

Out of their lined shell the young snakes broke
past skin fronds stretched over sunless colour or
lit at a slant, or saturated grey – a fringe flapping

round nothing, frayed on a gape of glass, perspex
seen through, seen past, no name, just scrappy
filaments lifting and lifting over in the wind.

Draw the night right up over my eyes so that I
don't see and then I'm gone; push the soft hem
of the night into my mouth so that I stay quiet

when an old breeze buffets my face to muffle
me in terror of being left, or is that a far worse
terror of not being left. No. Inching flat out

over a glacier overhanging blackness I see no
edge but will tip where its glassy cold may stop
short and hard ice crash to dark air. What do

the worms sing, rearing up at the threshold?
Floating a plain globe goes, the sky closes.
But I did see by it a soul trot on ahead of me.

I can try on these gothic riffs, they do make
a black twitchy cloak to both ham up and so
perversely dignify my usual fear of ends.

To stare at nothing, just to get it right
get nothing right, with some faint idea of
this as a proper way to spend a life. No, what

I really mean to say instead is, come back
won't you, just all of you come back, and give
me one more go at doing it all again but doing it

far better this time round – the work, the love stuff –
so I go to the wordprocessor longing for line cables
to loop out of the machine straight to my head

and back, as I do want to be only transmission –
in sleep alone I get articulate, to mouth the part of
anyone and reel off others' characters until the focus

of a day through one-eyed self sets in again: go into it.
I must. *The flower breaks open to its bell of sound
that rings out through the woods.* I eat my knuckles

hearing that. I've only earned a modern, what, a flatness.
Or no, I can earn nothing, but maybe
some right to stop now and to say to you, Tell me.

– That plea for mutuality's not true. It's more ordinary that
flying light should flap me away into a stream of specks
a million surfaces without a tongue and I never have wanted

'a voice' anyway, nor got it. Alright. *No silver coin has been
nailed to your house's forehead you dog-skin among the fox fur
where did you get that rosewater to make your skin so white ?*

I did get that rosewater before I came to the light grass
shakes in a wind running wild over tassels of barley
the sails were of the light green silk sewn of both gold

*and white money, take down take down the sails of silk set up
the sails of skin* and something dark and blurred upon the ground
where something else patrols it, cool, nervous, calling out

Stop now. Hold it there. Balance. Be beautiful. Try.

– And I can't do this. I can't talk like any of this.
You hear me not do it.

LURE, 1963

Navy near-black cut in with lemon, fruity bright lime green.
I roam around around around around acidic yellows, globe
oranges burning, slashed cream, huge scarlet flowing
anemones, barbaric pink singing, radiant weeping When
will I be loved? Flood, drag to papery long brushes
of deep violet, that's where it is, indigo, oh no, it's in
his kiss. Lime brilliance. Obsessive song. Ink tongues.
Black cascades trail and spatter darkly orange pools
toward washed lakes, whose welling rose and milk-
beribboned pillars melt and sag, I'm just a crimson
kid that you won't date. Pear glow boys. Clean red.
Fluent grey green, pine, broad stinging blue rough
strips to make this floating space a burning place of
whitest shores, a wave out on the ocean could never
move that way, flower, swell, don't ever make her blue.
Oh yes I'm the great pretender. Red lays a stripe of darkest
green on dark. My need is such I pretend too much, I'm
wearing. And you're not listening to a word I say.

A MISREMEMBERED LYRIC

A misremembered lyric: a soft catch of its song
whirrs in my throat. 'Something's gotta hold of my heart
tearing my' soul and my conscience apart, long after
presence is clean gone and leaves unfurnished no
shadow. Rain lyrics. Yes, then the rain lyrics fall.
I don't want absence to be this beautiful.
It shouldn't be; in fact I know it wasn't, while
'everything that consoles is false' is off the point –
you get no consolation anyway until your memory's
dead; or something never had gotten hold of
your heart in the first place, and that's the fear thought.
Do shrimps make good mothers? Yes they do.
There is no beauty out of loss; can't do it –
and once the falling rain starts on the upturned
leaves, and I listen to the rhythm of unhappy pleasure
what I hear is bossy death telling me which way to
go, what I see is a pool with an eye in it. Still let
me know. Looking for a brand-new start. Oh and never
notice yourself ever. As in life you don't.

SHANTUNG

It's true that anyone can fall
in love with anyone at all.
Later, they can't. Ouf, ouf.

How much mascara washes away each day
and internationally, making the blue one black.
Come on everybody. Especially you girls.

Each day I think of something about dying.
Does everybody? do they think that, I mean.
My friends! some answers. Gently
unstrap my wristwatch. Lay it face down.

KNOWING IN THE REAL WORLD

A yellow glow slips from the brick houses.
Some steely clouds swell up over them.

One afternoon hour burns away until a rust-
coloured light sinks in towards evening

or any time at all when I fall straight through
myself to thud as onto the streaked floor of

a swimming pool drained out for winter, no
greeny depths but lined in blackened leaves.

Then the cold comes to tighten the air. In my room
I hear cars and the snow flying around the street.

I'm not outside anything: I'm not inside it either.
There's no democracy in beauty, I'm following

human looks. Though people spin away, don't
be thrown by their puzzling lives, later the lives

secrete their meaning. *The red sun's on the rain.*
Where do I put myself, if public life's destroyed.

Only to manage something blindingly sweet. I'm
too old now to want to be careful. Then I wasn't.

What you see is what you could have easily. You
could. Or take me home. Another kind of thought,

liquid behind speech, bleeds away from it altogether.
I washed my son in the morning milk.

Sliced into the shine of now, a hand on a blade.
A wound, taproot in its day, its red blossom in light.

The wind sheets slap the sea to ruffled wheatfields.
Angel, fish, paradise, rain of cherries.

POEM BEGINNING WITH A LINE FROM PROVERBS

As iron sharpens iron
I sharpen the face of my friend
so hard he sings out
in high delicate notes.

A struggle for mastery to most speak
powerful beauty would run any
attention or kindness clean out
of town in angry rags.

Ringed by darkness the heart pulsates.
And power comes in like lightning.
A lion in the room, fair and flowing
twists with unsparing eyes.

Whitely the glance runs
to it and away. But let it
talk its golden talk if we
don't understand it.

Grabbed by remote music
I'm frightening myself. Speak
steadily as is needed to
stare down beauty. That calms it.

LYRIC

Stammering it fights to get
held and to never get held
as whatever motors it swells
to hammer itself out on me

then it can call out high
and rounded as a night-
bird's cry falling clean
down out of a black tree.

I take on its rage at the cost
of sleep. If I love it I sink
attracting its hatred. If I
don't love it I steal its music.

Take up a pleat in this awful
process and then fold me flat
inside it so that I don't see
where I'm already knotted in.

It is my burden and subject
to listen for sweetness in hope
to hold it in weeping ears though
each hurt each never so much.

WHAT ELSE

A clean historical wind has cut
the forest, torn it to streaming
ribbons. Now under its snapped
branches I'll listen for silence.

At first I'll hear only my blood
ticking on inside my eardrums.
Failing light lays its hand over my lips.
Breathing darkness presses forward.

It will rush in from a great way off
to put its mouth to my straining ears.
This time I'll know it as death, I'll cup
my hands round its conviction.

It will come sobbing in my ears
calling my names to me over and over.
I'll think, and try to keep my eyes
wide open as if swimming underwater.

But I don't know how at the time
I'll conduct myself on that forest floor
where I will be quite alone. So
somebody here, hurry, take part in life.

SONG

Some very dark blue hyacinths on the table
A confession or two before dusk
flings open the fridge with loud relief
Listen honey I ...

A warm disturbing wind cruises the high road

where in curtained rooms children
are being beaten then so am I again but no-one's
asking for it, I'm asking for something different now

WHEN IT'S TIME TO GO

When an aggressively uncontrolled schadenfreude
reads a personal threat in everywhere
and so animatedly takes this as 'the political'
that the very kitchen colander shells out a neat
wehrmacht helmet of brown rice
das schmeckt nach mehr!
or when an inverse brand of professional unhappiness
taps on its wristwatch 'as a realist I ...' – then

set this boy free

No this isn't me, it's just my motor running

O great classic cadences of English poetry
We blush to hear thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless.

TRUE NORTH

My body's frame arched to a drum houses a needle. A splinter of this world
has stuck in me, snapped-off, afloat down syrupy blood. It points me on.
This thick body can't dim its brilliance though it vexes the car of my flesh.
Sliver of outside that I cradle inside and which guarantees me my life also.

RAYON

The day is nervous buff – the shakiness, is it inside the day or me?
Perhaps the passions that we feel don't quite belong to anyone
but hang outside us in the light like hoverflies, aping wasps and swivelling
and lashing up one storm of stripes. In tiny cones of air.
Yet you enact that feeling, as you usually *bzzzzzzzzzz* get to do it, while I,
I do this. If it takes me all night and day. Oh Carol.

MARRIAGE SONG WITH A REMEMBERED LINE

The partridge is possessed of the ground it runs on
As the deep clouds possess the sea.
The blue-black. The
Catastrophic rain.
And slowly fall down together over and over

POOR SNOW

The violet
light of snow falling.

Its tiny darts
make eye stripes.

Dark flakes
rapid, upwards.

It's restless, it can't
find whiteness.

Its grey and violet
trillion souls.

PASTORAL

Gents in a landscape hang above their lands.
Their long keen shadows trace peninsulas on fields.
Englishness, Welshness, flow blankly out around them.
Hawks in good jackets lean into the wind, shriek 'lonely I:
This sight is mine, but I can't think I am.
Those pale blue floods of watered silk have flounced indoors, I hear
their flick of vicious fans. I'll land and stow my feathered legs
and walk to find a sweet interior of beer' – These men are right:
it's hard to own perceptions setting out and in, but
settling with a shudder into a hired car as if into a coat
or bed, Rose Riley in the back, our lives in the hand of my calm
crossing the bealach past implausible farms and up and up the
breathless track of couldn't reverse now if I had to, I've not
had enough of this yet. Look out for those in our red car
so that it may be well; the road thread spins
out of the car's smooth mouth, a dream of ease slips back –

*I don't know why it isn't any harder than this
I don't know why this light is evident
I fell into sleep, and that was a pure place
I woke, it is so easy that I can only smile –*

A homely accident will do for that: so within days
I've one eye left that pulls to join the darkness
in which its brother sits; one eye's unharmed
yet I can't steer by that, my brain
would drag the shutters down, now that the dark
has got the balance. I, snowman, cinder for eye
bandaged white upon red, an icon of d.v.
must tap my blindfold way around
this mother-and-child, child-and-mother
silver hoop that I live in: who
will step in to help me. Inside the eye
taped closely shut, repeating suns
are fringed with cloud and race away
into each other, and as they hotly go
from brown to reddish-violet to ochre
they snake, like sunspot photographs
or lights which stream out from eclipsed moons;
they'll not keep still but whoosh and whoosh
in a poor video I can't switch off. The iris
is frayed insect wings; what if the
pupil's black should slop and run across its
sheeny brown and green, what if that black
spill out of its neat rigorous circle –
I haven't got a body, till it hurts –
Eyes can mend fast: into the place of all of us
my sight returns and with it mastery
to track again the feather-trousered flights.

WELL ALL RIGHT

Above, a flurry of swans, brothers, great wings airy around my bowed head in rushing darkness, neatly these bone fingers plaited their green cloaks each night to unfeather them so now they stand upright before me freed and gaily they leap to their caparisoned horses as in my breathing cell I smooth down my own cloak of nettles – but Grimm sweetie mediaeval griseldas, right out on the night plains are no tiny lights of huddlement but only the impersonal stars in blackness and the long long winds. What you see is what you see: it's never what you won't. Well all right, things happened it would be pleasanter not to recall, as a deeply embarrassed dog looks studiously at a sofa for just anything to do instead, so determine to assume events silently with no fuss – who doesn't try to – yes that is a dart in my neck and doesn't it look a bit *biedermeier* – so take up that thud of attack dropped out of a righteously wide-open beak sailing slowly across its own high sky which you'd not registered as contempt straight out to kill – far rather than know that, wear it as an owned cloak's blazing fabric stuck in the fine flesh of your shoulders like any natural skin burning; so cloaked, no-one sees through to you wrapped in darkness, only a darkness pressed to

outward navy twill – no queen of the night’s gorgeous
winking suit, just suave cheap unexceptional off any
rack – want to slip out of it? but flesh has soaked to join
its fiery choric costume. Break out in flames. Leap to
the crests of orange birds flickering along the long line
of shoulders, hiss, warble in gaping whistles hoarse lyre
chants of plumed and swollen throats whose glowing trills
waver and zigzag the swayed neck heavy under the flare
song of any body glittering with hard memory. Let fall
this garment with its noisy wings. Slide from me now –
and let’s just run something red and stinging rapidly down
the page, shall we, let’s try an echt gloss speed placing
let’s stand back in triumph dripping brushes, shall we
see what can be made out of this lot my lot, its lovely
trailed gash wet as a frock in a pool, what it’s for is for
defence, it will keep your beautiful soul glazed as a
skein of floating hill mist and as quietly as slightly
and as palely lit – at risk of frank indifference it may
make beauty to sleep and, or, to sleep with. Who sang
‘you don’t have to die before you live’ – well who.

A DRIFT

Move swift as a blur a fast drawn finger's smudge a
corner of the eye's unsteady streak a smear of nothing
solid only shaking fragments of tried-stopped-tried a
lot of noise which hurt nobody, keep head down keep
hands wrapped round head, jabbed down tight into eyes
ears keep blocked covered with hard fingers – to the north
you can run you can run till your feet glaze to the ground
miraculous ice particles keen out, chime, rattle in whipping
winds, carved face leans into stinging white of arctic night
a noble post for bears to circle with their amber urine in
the snow, no, shred drained mouth and toss the chattering
bits to any rapid driving lake to chop and drag them down
a tattered slipstream. Silenced drift. A cloud swims under
frozen waters, milky arch of wings, its shadow whirls
down screaming – how to a measured cool? if I lay down
my shield the loss dread darts up flicking in my throat so
take me by the shoulders, steady me, a finger-tip could do
until some solidness wells back and if the sweet talk's going
to come why then I'll talk it though it's going to be raining
indoors: a bad law – what you need you shall not get until
once you no longer need it then you will, will fall through
jampacked rivers red with thickset fish, through thrashing
muscled rivers' noisy dash pulsing from mud depths up to

air-drenched jumping surfaces in brilliant scales of scarlet time. I hear the calm talk nurse this power right in the teeth of harm. Learn proper sexual pride and how that's placed. These sentences come fast, give me no grief – does that mean that their whole tone is false and that their flow slid out of some cheap ease machine? Oh how that man do howl. Wait, lean from the topmost window, see over all this city in its gravely vigorous life the moon hung orange in the humming sky, the deeply breathing the electric air, tall houses dropping glow, one fox-pure shriek, dark gardens' charcoal pools, faint droning far-off traffic, never sleep high twists of sirens spiral down the road and palest heads of swimming roses gape awash in their own light against the grind of buses starting out as in this night a single traveller flies home through everything inside one life, its fearful hesitations, pouncing leaps of speed; at daybreak an hour's whiteness comes to lie in folds not brushed by any shadow screens, I act as a fan, I find soul settlement.

CRUELTY WITHOUT BEAUTY

Go on working around my hairline with a blade
and all you'll come to is a white sheen of bone
and all that would tell you is that I'm, what else,
human. I can tell you that now. Don't make
yourself into such a fine instrument of knowledge
that you slice uselessly back into your own hand
shocking yourself. There is a body, or soul, under
your skin too, but you won't assuage your doubts
about it by unpeeling me; no, that will uncover nothing
but your worse original anxiety. If I speak with formal
heaviness, that's the weight of stiff grief bending down
leaves, and the mild rain spotting their dust into rings.
No I don't much like this bland authoritative tone either
but it is what I took from years of reworded loss.
So if my skin slid downwards to the ground
you would see only a standing pillar of blood.
Believe that this would be true also of you.
– Such distanced care for self, rendered as knowing,
makes anybody ill: I'll drop this clinic voice to say
that this hot scowl on songs marks rage for
closeness just not found in a true human love –
burn, work, burn blue, since one clean word on
someone's blank makes salt well under any tongue,

am I to go unswollen, arm across my shoulders
good, that's who off the end of a wrist? so tired of
howling more more grand babe yet if there's angel too
this thick extent of longing's ugly as it's true. Heavy
water. Show your wound: Ah yes mine's deeper:
Is that my shaming subject after all. Best get this
done on paper no-one hears so I'll stay still in life
where I hear water speaking, may stand where light
falls as the plain light will – no that lot skims on wire
rhetoric, totters from tightly civic pause to weeping
open cut and back but can't get balanced; its figure
sways with outflung arms, I do, to hold the deadly
wish to be white eye stripped out of human motion
as if sight crashed to clearness, clean of me:
Brown rock and leaden sea. Crows in the wood
faced to the wind, pinned on high branches. Dark
blobs. Clacks on the wind. The drumming light.
Yet no-one should say to me, Nothing's enough
for you, ever. But I do want to kill and die.

SO IS IT ?

Opening mouth up to sifting rain, blurred to an o,
crouched to the green wash, swooping water,
stone arches slit to wind-cropped turf, in a grip
turn as sea-slicing gannets cut shock fans of
white water. Held shudder, sluiced in low cloud.
Where is a steady place where work gets fairly done.
Straight speech can drop out from behind the teeth
or the hands shake out clean strokes from bunched
knots onto energetic white or long soft ropes of
line loop from the mouth, uncoil to columns
hollowed to poured sheen purity, only in shelter.
Some. I walk into a light hot wood. Inside it all
exhales, a sulky wind gets up, slings a sad mass
at the back of eyes lowered for chattering dusk,
fingers dried ochres in rough air brushed rustling
to cream hoops, strokes powdery blues tacked on
to black wire. Die deeper into life at every second.
And no self coating slips onto my papers to make
them pulse to rooms emptied of me, they'll bear no
faint film for my children to wipe off later, so solidly
do objects stay themselves – the handwriting of the
freshly dead just doesn't get any loopier or more
archaic, as waxed comb honey would seep through

knuckles or pine ooze stiffen, domed to wasps.
Things packed with what they are. Not slatted I.
Preserve a self, for what? for ice through the ribs,
pale splinters driven straight to the heart's meat.
Calf of my senses. I'd thought out ways to grasp –
have walked straight off their edges. To dreams
of silent towns, nights, doorways, gazes, radios
on, while here a man turns and turns towards his
window, staring out over the street at dusk as rain-
hemmed curtains sway, their blackening yellowed
net. All seek a piercing charm to throb gingerly
nursed in our hands like a bird. Dear heart don't be
so strange to me but be nature. Or give me a sudden
bluish look. If I can get this far. An oil spill on the
wet road swims outwards, pleats, and flashes lilac or
rusting orange at its rim where it will dry and darken.
I think that's it. As I must think it is like this for you –
it is, isn't it. Don't tell me that edge that I never believe.

DARK LOOKS

Who anyone is or I am is nothing to the work. The writer properly should be the last person that the reader or the listener need think about yet the poet with her signature stands up trembling, grateful, mortally embarrassed and especially embarrassing to herself, patting her hair and twittering If, if only I need not have a physical appearance! To be sheer air, and mousseline! and as she frets the minute wars scorch on through paranoias of the unreviewed herded against a cold that drives us in together – then pat me more, Coventry to fall from Anglo-Catholic clouds of drifting *we's* high tones of feeling down to microscopic horror scans of tiny shiny surfaces rammed up against the nose cascading on Niagara, bobbed and jostled, racing rusted cans of Joseph Cotten reels charmed with his decent gleam: once *we* as incense-shrouded ectoplasm gets blown fresh drenched and scattered units pull on gloss coats to preen in their own polymer: still it's not right to flare and quiver at some fictive 'worldly boredom of the young' through middle-aged hormonal pride of *Madame, one must bleed, it's necessary ...* Mop mop georgette. The only point of holding up my blood is if you'd think So what? We've all got some of that: since then you'd each feel better; less apart. – Hardly: it's more for me to know that *I* have got some, like a textbook sexual anxiety while the social-worker poet in me would like her revenge for having been born and left. What forces the lyric person to put itself on trial though it must stay rigorously uninteresting? Does it count on its dullness to seem human and strongly lovable; a veil for the monomania which likes to feel itself helpless and touching at times? Or else it backs off to get sassy since arch isn't far from desperate: So take me or leave me. No, wait, I didn't mean leave me, wait, just *don't* – or don't flick and skim to the foot of a page and then get up to go –

RED SHOUT

Terrible to think it's more alive here when I'm alone than when I'm not – that something might come right just where 'the edges of a page begin to bleed and show that it is human' – and come more right than when I do the same – I see how there could be an okay life whose feeling was kept collared and pinned down only over the writing – I still wait for a really human sign as light and shocking as an annunciation – sometimes I get it and in democratic form: *Red Shout*. Red waves race by the sides of the eye to open out beyond in tides of shining browns sliced harder in to black and quicker as a sheet of clear red beauty rips apart – if there's good power this red won't stop but zips straight through who's here flat out and glad, hit hard on the head by life and through who isn't: all this means only it can work, the corrective of in this case paint for isolation – what works is just that someone possibly scared stiff and also living did it, no?

SEVEN STRANGELY EXCITING LIES

i Take two of these tablets tonight and in the morning go on living

So get up speed. So you're sick with fear again so what so what
Though in the past you screamed you wept you are still here alive
Get up a head of speed and you may nip through rocks without quite getting smashed apart
on them

So you bit on iron until the blood ran out of your lips
So your eyes swam into dark blue clouds with the enormous misting shock of it
So you couldn't see your hands in front of you, you hardly knew how to breathe
yet you do take breath after breath, one by one you ease them all out carefully again
and then you take another, for someone else will tell you when it's time to stop, not you
So you ground your forehead onto the concrete to skin yourself back into manageable life
because a streak of dusty red showed you could start a little harm and stop and then restart it
but you lived it, look into your eye at the shiny black life rolling around in it, get up
and breathe, just practising this will fill your life up steadily for months, while later on
getting distracted is better – as on a long drive to the seaside when after tedious hours
the upside-down triangle of navy blue is glimpsed, jammed hard into the V of the land
and a glad cry goes up, the car-sick infant groans but she still gets reluctantly interested
despite herself, and longs for sand and fish and chips and roundabouts again –
next become mildly malicious in studying the failed consolations of middle age
that at least some of the people you once mistakenly went to bed with and *v.v.*
now sometimes look seedier, more despairing than you, though that's only
because you get to use lipstick and hair-dye whereas they on the whole do not –
your vanities, and pleasure in theatrical self-blame, have got you where you are today
that's here: and though you've noticed now that you can breathe again, you do

ii Glamour

Rattling through market racks of nineteen-fifties poplin
and sixties Suzie Wong dresses with grey-oiled necklines
labelled 'mandarin dresses' by their sellers born *circa* 1970
I *circa* 1948 still want to look, equals be, more alright
than I'll ever see myself. Or am. That doesn't stop
although by now it should – who does it stop for –
and the slow fight to get redeemed from the original sin
of having got born at all, can't that be over with by now?
Suzie woke up but to roughened brocade and under an eyelid
less like a milk-white nut, finds being seen a curse since I
can't demonstrate the measured blonde I truly am beneath
these awful curls: vulgar as this, I'm sagging with shopping
with how to hook on to the sliding skin of the world in time
or: in time I am going to die, can you be there

iii Oleanna

I'd thought you'd get through any disagreement just by talking
by persisting quietly. Fool. Steel-rimmed the hole at the centre
through which all hopes of contact plummet down in flames
as modes of talk criss-cross from opposite directions like jets in flight
which rightly never slow or swerve to read the fleecy trails of others
then something searing wipes its arc across my sight again
as rape fields of acrylic flowers do stripe your eyeballs yellow
and unreflecting green takes charge at the horizon threatening to rain –
shove off or I soak you sunshine – suppose you stopped describing
something, would stopping free you from it, almost as if it hadn't happened?
So is that shiver down the back of the neck water, or is it memory calling water
or is it squaring up to getting properly shredded, which does cut clean away
from iron edges soaking into rust, from blurring fiery wells of tin-work –
*someone calling tell them I'm not home, hurt me so bad to see my baby get
away, ashen-mouthed, smoking regret* – instead of all that tactile surface junk
there is this sobbing flash, you-die immediacy: who longs for decent
and consensual talk, it is that calm and democratic front I'd work to be:
I was not born to that.

iv Lucille's tune

Riding this gorgeous car I saw in the wing-
mirror night-black leather coming up blind

it's the beginning it's the end of the world
though God knows I've wished it wasn't

an engine of light forgets about everything
but roaring you into it: blue drenches you

first they swear they'll love you to the grave
next they're down the woods to dig it for you:

little taffeta lips, call yourself a mother? *There
ain't nothing to you but I love you still*, don't

care that much for you and I always will.
You can hack off my breasts to write 'tits'

but you can't grow them on to your wire chest.
Starry unconscious: sea body: child maintenance

v Rep

Not your natural-historical, your exacting tender mushroom gill accounting
Others once got their Observer books for seven and sixpence too
Nor your fragile translucent leaf trembling in its behold-me wonder
Which is a behold-you wonder

Not your landscapes stiffened with figurines of an ageing woman politician, it is harder
than that

Not your happy here-we-go-down-together dream of a roseate catastrophe
Nor your reassuring conviction that whole governments
Will pale and stagger under the jawbones of your dismembered syntax
Vain boy! it keeps you busy, though you know
That Belgrade and Zagreb still shelter many post-surrealists, as does East Central One.

What I want please write it for me
Since my not managing to
Makes me malicious as this new costume
As the curlicued tomb.
Now will some silent throat step up
Unlock a Marvell karaoke.

vi Flip, flop

What clicks and rattles coloured strings of plastic curtains all the afternoon.

What writes down 'vanish' and then worries that 'varnish' might have been more truthful; at least prettier – from where I sit, exactly what's the difference between the two? I have to know.

What is it that I inch down, like a mouse in the tranquil throat of a snake.

– Be quiet it's a kind of work isn't it, so work, eat flies, and love your children.

Although they too will leave you they're always leaving you, you guano monument.

vii Disintegrate me

There was such brilliance lifting off the sea, its aquamarine strip blocked in behind white-dashed mimosas, that it stung my eyes all morning as I stood in the old playground, pushing the swing steadily, looking out across the water and longing to do without these radio voices, and without my post as zealous secretary, as transmitter of messages from the dead, who'd issue disclaimers that they'd ever sent them – all the while a slow hot cut spreads to baste me now with questions of my own complicity in harm muttering thoughtfully about 'patterns' until I'm stamped out as an old paisley shawl or worn kelim, do I look good as this one or should I be less loud, or less repetitive? and on the top of my wardrobe, familiar spirits cluster and hang to chatter, lean over to peer down interestedly at me, vivaciously complaining about the large amounts of fluff I've left up there, 'that's just as we'd expect': meanwhile the out-to-kill person is not, or so she or he shrugs, pulled at by voices, but dead at heart stands amnesiac plumped out with the effective innocence of the untroubled – This gloss is taking me on unconvincing dashes down blind alleys I mistrust, since desperate to see things straight, I can't fit apt blame in to self-damnation: could I believe instead in drained abandon, in mild drift out over some creamy acre studded with brick reds, to be lifted, eased above great sienna fields and born onward to be an opened stem or standing hollow, a flesh ring

through which all slips or a fluent cylinder washed through by azure-tangled braid, trailing Stella Maris, fervent star of the sea marine milk vessel flopped at the lip flicking down swathes of gulls emulsifying blackened earth striped and coiled under rock under burnt straw air fuzzed in breathy fields of coconut-sharp gorse flowers flushed tan on cliffs where lower, toothpaste green lucidly rears and rears in the crash of blinding crumpled water smoothing to clear and flat; so calmly let me disperse so simply let me disperse, drawn out thin-frothed in a broad lacy pancake fan of salt, or let me fall back as dolphins rock back in the sea twirled like slow toys on pin-wheels – No single word of this is any more than decoration of an old self-magnifying wish to throw the self away so violently and widely that interrogation has to pause since its chief suspect's sloped off to be cloud, to be wavery colour bands: no 'release from service to a hard master' said of the thankful close, it's hoped, of sexual need in oldest age can touch this other drive of shame fighting to clear a name to itself: it can't, because its motor runs on a conviction that if I understood my own extent of blame then that would prove me agent; it doesn't want to face a likely truth of helplessness – that the inflated will to gauge and skewer each wrong turn may blank out what's far worse to bear: impersonal hazard, the humiliating lack of much control – I don't get past this thought with any confidence.

viii

Thickened with books again, vexed by the
grave again, falling downstairs and not looking

and going outside again there's
a world, there's one in here also

Stay at once in both of them
though not for keeps yet certainly

Then past the quiffs of little trees along the motorway
the streaming lines of ragwort flags
their stuttering yellow
drive my car if I had one
but do keep me company

From *Penguin Modern Poets vol 10*
and uncollected poems

THE CASTALIAN SPRING

1

A gush of water, welling from some cave, which slopped
Down to a stone trough squatting stout and chalky as a
Morning sky: I plumped myself on lizard-ridden stone to stare
Into its old truth square that struck me as perhaps another lie
So serious did it look while it promised me, oh, everything.
That honest look of water nursed in stone excited me. Under
The generous trees, tall splotchy planes and brittle ilex, their
Dark flopped down, sun-glare and dust spun through it.

2

I sipped that cold and leafy water tentatively, lost lipstick
Dabbing my mouth, gulped down a little slippery grit I hoped
Was not ferny mosquito larvae; then sat on, guidebook-learned
To get gorgeous and pneumatic in the throat, my bulk deflating
Slowly until the sunset, when the last coach parties slid away.
The heat of the day peeled off, the light got blurred and hummed,
Pounding dusk struck up then a strong swelling rose in my throat
Thick with significant utterance. So, shivery in my cool and newly
Warty skin, I raised this novel voice to honk and boom.

3

I was small enough now, and stoical, to squat on the slabs of rock
Edging the trough, splashed with the spring that welled steadily into it
Shaking its stone-cupped water. I wear yet a precious jewel in my head,
I mused, this line of old rhetoric floating back through me, as quite
Unsurprised I settled to study the night, flexing my long damp thighs
Now as studded and ridged as the best dill pickles in Whitechapel.
Into the cooling air I gave tongue, my ears blurred with the lyre
Of my larynx, its vibrato reverberant into the struck-dumb dusk.

4

What should I sing out on this gratuitous new instrument?
Not much liking minimalism, I tried out some Messiaen,
Found I was a natural as a bassoon, indeed the ondes martenot
Simply oozed out of me. Or should lyric well up less, be bonier?
So I fluted like HD's muse in spiky girlish hellenics, slimmed
My voice down to twig-size, so shooting out stiffly it quivered
In firework bursts of sharp flowers. Or had I a responsibility to
Speak to society: though how could it hear me? It lay in its hotels.

5

I spun out some long lines, let them loop in sound ribbons
Lassoed the high branches where they dangled and trailed
Landing like leathery bats in vacancy – alighted, they pleaded,
Composed themselves flawlessly, as lifeless as gloves.
The silence that hung on these sounds made me sheepish.
I fished for my German, broke out into lieder, rhymed
Sieg with *Krieg*, so explaining our century; I was hooked
On my theory of militarism as stemming from lyricism.

6

I'd crouched close by a cemetery; at twilight its keeper
Lit oil lamps in shrines on the pale marble graves, each
Brandishing silver-framed photographs; fresh flowers
For the well-furnished dead shone out amiably, while
The scops owl in residence served up its decorous gulps.
Lights burned on steadfastly in this town of the dead,
Each soul in for a long night, their curtains undrawn.
My monotone croaking rang crude in such company.

7

Black plane trees bent over me, crouched in the night breeze.
For hours I called out on a sonorous roll, growing somewhat self-
Conscious I'd nothing to do but to sound: yet sound was so stirring
And beauty of utterance was surely enough, I thought I had read this.
A wind rose as I tore out my ravishing tenor, or sank down to throb
On my pitted hindquarters while my neck with its primrose striations
Pulsated and gleamed. Then beauty sobbed back to me, shocking,
Its counterpoint catching my harmonies; I had heard a fresh voice.

8

No longer alone, not espousing Narcissus, I answered each peal
In a drum of delirium, recalling with shame the dry white thighs
Of frogs like baked chicken wishbones, sorely in need of a sauce.
Our calls clasped in common, as heavy as love, and convulsively
Thickened by love – until ashamed of such ordinariness, I wailed
In sheer vowels. *Aaghoooh*, I sloughed off *raark*, *aaarrgh* noises,
Deliberately degenerate; exuded *ooeehaargh-I-oohyuuuh*; then
Randomly honked 'darkling blue of Dimitrios': I had dreamed that.

9

The voice hears itself as it sings to its fellows – must
Thrum in its own ears, like any noise thumping down
Anywhere airwaves must equably fall. I was not that
Narcissus who stared stunned by his handsomeness;
Or I was, but not culpably, since as I sang, so I loved.
In that action of calling hope out I embodied it, grew
Solemn and swollen ushering in my own utterance.
I rang florid yet grave in my ears, as I had to.

10

Did I need to account for myself as noise-maker?
I had stared in the windows of Clerkenwell clock shops
At dusty brand oils for the watchmakers' trade, made for
Easing the wound spring – some *horo*-prefixed, and so close
to my horror of time ticking by – brown bottles of clock oil
labelled Horolene, Horotech. Should I wind up my own time,
Chant 'I was dropped on the Borders, a poor scraplet of
Langholm, illegit. and state's burden, lone mother of three'?

11

Could I try on that song of my sociologised self? Its
Long angry flounce, tuned to piping self-sorrow, flopped
Lax in my gullet – 'But we're all *bufo bufo*', I sobbed –
Suddenly charmed by community – 'all warty we are'.
Low booms from the blackness welled up like dark liquid
Of 'wart' Ich auf Dich.' One Love was pulsed out from our
Isolate throats, concertina'ed in common; 'Du mit Mir' was
A comforting wheeze of old buffers, all coupled, one breed.

12

But then I heard others, odd pockets of sound; why wouldn't these
Claim me to chant in their choir? As I grew lonelier I got philosophical,
Piped up this line: 'Don't fall for paradox, to lie choked in its coils
While your years sidle by.' Some hooted reproachfully out of the dawn
'Don't *you* stifle *us* with your egotist's narrative or go soft on "sameness",
We'll plait our own wildly elaborate patterns' – they bristled like movies
By Kurosawa. By then I'd reflat, abandoned my toadhood, had pulled on
My usual skin like old nylons. I drifted to Delphi, I'd a temple to see.

CURMUDGEONLY

A *partner* is a social-democratic thing to have; so much so that you'll come across couples, long Solidly-married, yet who'll introduce each other as 'my partner', not 'my wife' or 'husband.'

OK, it's sociologically neat, its journalese copes usefully with mass cohabitation

But the spread of the intimate sense of the word puzzles me. Sexually egalitarian in ways –

Assuming nothing *re* the so-called sexual orientation of the partnered ones – it strikes me

As also innocently, blindly, aristocratic. This maybe is my soured reaction; but I only mean

If you've a private contract to describe a person as your partner, junking all the shackles

Of the state, plunged in a glow of free association – that is fine, but don't you then set up

An unintentional excluding coldness to the millions who through bad luck, mismanagement,

death or desertion, find themselves un-partnered?

Using 'my spouse' or even the sugary 'my lover' does publicly mark the tracks of a willed act, it

inscribes an emotional history,

Yet neither sound like mundane attributes that anyone socially competent ought to have.

The lack of glamour of the term 'my partner' could suggest that such an undramatic thing

Is got from any supermarket, rather like 'new toothpaste' or 'some string.'

Of course just what to call them makes you slither (like 'the father of my youngest child', 'a person

I once lived with?') – but I can't warm to this vogue for 'partner', since not to possess something

So sober yet so mildly venturesome, so virtuously *un*licensed by the state, sounds worse

Than not being trusted in business, not being picked for even the weakest school netball team.

Surely only a passionate attraction should glue people together; yet better speak it in a reserved

Diction of friendship, or of marriage, legal or no, but for every sex – not this twang of cowboys

Hunched over their baked bean cans, keeping out of the prairie wind, and mighty self-conscious:

'Yup. It's lonesome tonight, kinda cold out there. So, Howdy, partner.' – What happened to

Unsettling love? Or to calmly-conducted if unimpassioned marriages, still exuding
Some generosity? Better a cheerful privacy than this partitioning pseudo-public speech
Of two followed by two, neat and wooden as Noah's Ark. I hear a bloodless future come
In which we'll sidle as usual through attachments whose truthful varieties are beaten flat
Under one leaden word; in which, to nick a line from well-married W. H. Auden,
Thousands have lived without love. Not one without partners.

‘AFFECTIONS OF THE EAR’

Here's the original Narcissus story: The blue nymph Leiriopé, called the lily-faced,
Clear blue as any Cretan iris, got the river-god, summer Cephissus, so on the boil
That lapped by his skeins of water, soused in them, spun round, twirled, interlaced
Until made pregnant, she had Narcissus. Stupefied well before he was pulped to oil
What future did he ever really have, with that slight azure mother of his embraced
By slippery Cephissus, insinuating himself everywhere to flatter, linger and coil?
Leiriopé chased Teiresias to set him his very first poser: would her boy be effaced
By a rapid death? The seer said No – just as long as he didn't know himself. Recoil
From the goal of self-knowledge! That maxim, chiselled in temple rock, gets erased
By the case of Narcissus who came to know himself to be loved water. Philosophy
Recommends severe self-scrutiny to us, while a blithe self-indifference is disgraced:
Yet for gorgeous Narcissus to know himself was sheer torment, and his catastrophe.

He did know he was beautiful before he ever caught sight of himself in the water.
A youth he didn't want died cursing 'Let him love, too, yet not get what he'll love.'
(I should explain myself, I sound derivative? Because I am, I'm Echo, your reporter.
I'll pick up any sound to flick it back if it's pitched louder than the mutter of a dove.
I am mere derivation, doomed by Mrs Zeus to hang out in this Thespian backwater.)
He pushed into the surface of the lake; when push had come, as come it will, to shove
Narcissus had to know. Then deathly recognition drew him lamb-like to his slaughter.
His object was no wavering boy beneath the water, he was far more than hand in glove
With what he saw. I know his problem, though at least I do have Lynx, my bird daughter.
To love himself was pain precisely when he came to understand that truth, most bitterly.
I got hurt too, by ox-eyed Hera as they call her although I'd say cow, recumbent above.
For me, Echo, to forcibly repeat others' words is my ear torment, my own catastrophe.

I told stories so Zeus' lovers escaped, under cover of my chatter they'd slip past Hera.
I did things with words until she caught me, to rage 'False fluency, your gossip's untrue:
You've always wanted the last word – see what good it'll do you.' I was right to fear her
For now I *have* got it. So exiled, I fell for Narcissus. I had no voice to plead so I'd pursue.
He called 'I'd die before I'd give myself to you!' I shrilled 'Give myself to you!' ran nearer.
If he'd cried 'I'd die before I'd fuck you', at least I could have echoed back that 'Fuck you.'
Sorry – I have to bounce back each last phrase. Half-petrified, I voice dead gorges. Dearer
My daughter Lynx, a wryneck, torticollis, twisted neck, barred and secretive as any cuckoo,
A writher in the woods – as a mother I am, and am merely, responsive; still, I keep near her.
My body goes rocky when I hang round Narcissus. Numbed to a trace of ruined articulatory
I mouth words I can't voice; half-turned to stone, am rigid with memory of what I could do.
So for lonely Narcissus fruitlessly knowing himself as his object was torture, a catastrophe.

He saw truth in fluidity, was an offshoot of water; he dreamily propped himself prone
Beside his reflection; the image that shone yet broke at his touch he did not misconstrue.
He lay dumb in the daze of himself by the glaze of the lake with his face set like stone.
If your mother was blue and your father was water, then mightn't you try to be true?
'Only the thinnest liquid film parts us; which is why, unlike most lovers', I heard him groan,
'I long for more distance between us; only then could I start to get near him.' Narcissus knew.
In the end, he was not misled by vanity. He saw it was himself he loved and not his clone:
In just that lay his torture. I've said that as a bulb he got pulped down to oil, mashed to a stew.
Narcissus oil's a narcotic, both stem from the same root *narcos*, numb; the bulb was known
As the botanical root to cure 'affections of the ear.' (I'll need that oil on my tympanum, too,
If thought is truly a bone.) His becoming a herbal remedy concludes Narcissus' biography.
Dying by water in knowing misery, he's recycled as unguent to drop on the sounding tissue
Of sore ears to heal their affections. Affections of the ear not of the heart, familiar catastrophe.

'Ears are the only orifices that can't be closed' though force may get some others to succumb.
My inward ears will jam wide open to internal words that overlying verbiage can't smother.
Boated over the Styx, Narcissus' shade peered in its black waters just in case his image swum.
Numbed by affection of his heart, now dried he'll cure the ear affections. Son of his lily mother
His beauty drove me deeper into repetition as a sounding-board, a ringing rock, a mere eardrum.
A rhyme rears up before me to insist on how I should repeat a stanza's formal utterance – other
Than this I cannot do, unless my hearers find a way of speaking to me so I don't stay semi-dumb
Or pirouette, a languid Sugarplum. Echo's a trope for lyric poetry's endemic barely hidden bother:
As I am made to parrot others' words so I am forced to form ideas by rhymes, the most humdrum.
All I may say is through constraint, dictation straight from sounds doggedly at work in a strophe.
'To make yourself seen reflects back to you, but to make yourself heard goes out toward another.'
That's all I, Echo, ever do. Occasionally diverting, it stays my passive hell and small catastrophe.

‘OUTSIDE FROM THE START’

i

What does the hard look do to what it sees?
Pull beauty out of it, or stare it in? Slippery

heart on legs clops into the boiling swirl as
a pale calm page shoots up, opening rapidly

to say *I know* – something unskinned me, so
now it bites into me – it has skinned me alive,

I get dried from dark red to dark windspun
withered jerky, to shape handy flyports out

of my lattice, or pulled out am membranes
arched bluish, webby, staked out to twang

or am mouthslick of chewed gum, dragged
in a tearing tent, flopped to a raggy soft sag.

Yet none have hard real edges, since each one
is rightly spilled over, from the start of her life.

How long do I pretend to be all of us.
Will you come in out of that air now.

ii

Black shadows, sharp scattered green
sunlit in lime, in acid leaves.

Hot leaves, veined with the sun
draining the watcher's look of all colour

so a dark film moves over her sight.
Then the trees glow with inside light.

Hold to the thought if it can shine
straight through a dream of failed eyes sliding

to the wristwatch's face, wet under its glass
a thickening red meniscus tilting across its dial.

iii

And then my ears get full of someone's teeth again
as someone's tongue

as brown and flexible as a young giraffe's
rasps all round someone else's story –

a glow of light that wavers and collapses
in a *phhhh* of forgiving what's indifferent to it:

not the being worked mechanically but the stare
to catch just what it's doing to you –

there's the revulsion point, puffs up a screen
tacks cushiony lips on a face-shaped gap

a-fuzz with a hair corona, its mouth a navel
not quiet, and disappointing as adult chocolate –

I'd rather stalk as upright as a gang of arrows
clattering a trolley down the aisles

though only the breastbone stone
the fair strung weltering

a softening seashore clay
steel-blue with crimps of early history

the piney trees their green afire
a deep light bubbling to grey

long birds honking across
the scrub, the ruffled shore

coral beaks dab at froth
the pinched sedge shirring

unbroken moor, spinney rushes
petticoat brine, bladderwrack-brown

coppice rustlers, always a one to fall
for – Cut it, blank pennywort charm, or

punch of now that rips the tireless air
or gorgeous finger-stroke of grime.

iv

True sweetness must fan out to find its end
but tied off from its object it will swell –

lumping across sterile air it counts itself
lonely and brave. At once it festers. Why shape

these sentiments, prosecution witnesses, in violet
washes of light where rock cascades to water bluer

than powdering hopes of home. A hook's tossed out
across one shoulder to snag on to any tufts of thrift:

Have I spoken only when things have hardened?
But wouldn't the fact of you melt a watch?

Unfurls no father-car umbrella here. No beautiful
fate is sought, nor any cut-out heart renunciation

– if only some Aztec god could get placated! But he don't –
there's just a swollen modesty to champ at its own breast.

High on itself, it sings of its own end, rejoicing
that this cannot come about. Because I am alive here.

v

The muscled waves reared up, and scrupulously
no hints of mock neutrality were lost.

Containment-led indifference, or conspiracy
accounts of generals' pensions, cost

no setback for the partners of democracy
who portioned barnyards out to each *volost*

while florid in the twilight, Nation stood
alight above the low dismembered good.

RHETORICAL

To be air or a black streak on air, or be silt.
Be any watery sheen threading brackish, or vein
nets tracked as patted under their skin glaze, running all ways.

Cascade of stubs.
Buttercup metal glow, ruff of dark strawberry tulle
in any vehement colour night you get blown into hundreds.

Is that clear as a glass stem cups its chill in its own throat.
Is it true that candour so tightens the integument of the heart
that quartz needles shower from the cut mouth of the speaker
though the voice opens to fall:

*If you can see me, look away
but swallow me into you*

And I must trust that need is held in common, as I think it my duty to.
That every down-draught's thick with stiffening feathers
with rustlings from pallor throats
as the air hangs with its free light and its dead weight equally

PROBLEMS OF HORROR

Boys play and a horse moves through the woods.
Through perfectly heat-sealed lyric, how to breathe?
He has tailored a cadence out of disgust, and spins to see its hang on him;
privately faint at heart he pirouettes, sporting a lapel nausea carnation.
Who shakes her locks, seaweed hissed branching to blood coral
flirty alright, sat under the painterly sky in this flapping landscape.
China blue swollen in a race of high cloud, full woods, blowing fields,
snatched gill smoke, rain slap of running wind.
Stone looks speak *freeze*.
Not, Call the sold earth hyacinthine 'to get the measure of the damaged world'.
The new barbarian's charmed sick
with his real sincerity, sluiced in town georgics fluency, solitude skills.
He knows this smooth emulsion is truly-felt revulsion.
He does not mean to be so pure an isolate, his elegance worries him:
Is beauty good, if it's a furious gloss body of disgust, not porous
and not more of a pitted beauty, penetrable, moody?
But Horror gleams 'we're all complicit, all to blame for cruelty' holding aloft
its fine-tuned shock; naming it *political* but sighing *see me, stay for ever*.

MILK INK

Don't read this as white ink flow, pressed out
Of retractable nipples. No,
Black as his is mine.

Rain-streaked glass, burnt orange cherry leaves, eye drape of sugar pink.
Don't pin me to frou-frou accident
But let me skate – that

This ganglion cluster should have been born with better eyes
More glowingly deer-like – then instead of being horrified might not
One lift its banging head up off the ground and stroke its streaming hair
And, and, and, and never go away.

Don't read his as white ink flow, shot out
Of retractable. No,
Black as this is mine.

GOETHE ON HIS HOLIDAYS

I and my truthful knapsack will strike out
To backpack through “this sea-fog snaked on walls,

Wool snagged on slate, lichen-splodged rocks
In spattered chromes, and cadmium flowered gorse” –

But my neat wooden song does yodel so.
There should be a stop put to all yellow talk,

To these artily crafted details to be seen to.
Nursery hatchings, little dulux squares.

A breathy purity I stalk
Of unheld colour, not grouted with dead stuff:

Colour as honesty, shakiness, seduction, sudden fate;
As irrevocable, steadied to humming greys.

There is nowhere further back than pure blue.
Nowhere to come to that aches more than blue aches

For the pompous mechanics of the human heart lack colour
Which lies closer to breathing. Morality of green for

Everyone! I shine in this fresh equality, I figure us all
In our universal study, released from particular griefs

As we are to imagine an absolutely pure red
Like fine carmine suffered to dry on white porcelain.

– To puff away only that tiniest wretched precision!
Then my tufts of hair should halo out in an ice gale –

Red becomes simpler to reach its integrity.
But blue brings a principle of darkness with it.

Sound will spill out toward silence through its twist
Of nostalgia. But colour swells upward like flame.

And I'm crouched gaping with such watering eyes that I'm
Fumbling again for my little book of metaphors

Because that unboundedness drains me. Plotting my
Dash to specifics, I've made a stiff joke of it: When the

Talk turns to colour, every philosopher sees red. Smile, simile!
I took up my rucksack and sprang modestly away to the coast –

“The caravans like blackened teeth
In a wide grin around the bay.

After the plough then sifting down
Gulls in white furrows being sown.

Grinding away on my left hand
I heard the engine of the sea.

Natural history, do me proud
As cover from the self out loud" –

Quite rapidly I'll get so brightly stupid
Bobbing around between abasement and a balloon

Blind in the green afterglow of a crimson dress
Poised by a pale wall then gone on out of the light

But the girl at the inn will fade, however intently I stare.
And I go walking again all over the moors to sob

That she is a long way off, which is where we shall always keep her.
No *having* suffices the heart, which must keep integrally red.

IT REALLY IS THE HEART

The heart does hurt
and that's no metaphor.
It really is
that 'throbbing muscle' you can't say
since that's 'steel comic-sex meat'

but it does hurt
top mid-left
under my shirt
with its atrocious beat.

NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

'Letters from Palmer' draws extensively on *The Letters of Samuel Palmer* edited by Raymond Lister, Oxford University Press, 1974.

'A shortened set' adapts a line from a traditional song from Nigeria, and repeats one Stevie Winwood phrase and a Lesley Gore line from 'It's My Party' written by W. Gold, J. Gluck Jr. and H. Wiener.

The paintings referred to in 'A shortened set' are by Ian McKeever.

'Wherever you are, be somewhere else' is a title based on the Nintendo Game Boy slogan; the italicised phrases in the poem are adapted from the old Chuvash, from the play *The Peach Blossom Fan* by K'ung Shang-jen, and from the ballads 'Fair Annie of Lochryan' and 'Sweet Willie and Fair Annie' in Alexander Gardner's *The Ballad Minstrelsy of Scotland*, 1893 – also a source of the lines italicised in 'Knowing in the Real World'.

'Lure, 1963' uses the title of a painting by Gillian Ayres. It quotes or rephrases song lyrics; 'The Great Pretender' written by Buck Ram, recorded by The Platters, 'The Wanderer' written by Ernest Maresca, sung by Dion, 'It's In His Kiss' by Rudy Clark, sung by Betty Everett, and the title of 'When Will I Be Loved' written by Phil Everly, recorded by The Everly Brothers.

'A misremembered lyric' uses a phrase from 'Rhythm of the Rain' written by Gummoe, sung by The Cascades, and from 'Something's Gotta Hold Of My Heart' by R.Cook and R. Greenaway, recorded by Gene Pitney; the poem also quotes a line from Graham Greene's version of a 1930s song.

Marvin Gaye is quoted in 'Shantung'.

The line from God is adapted from Proverbs 27, verse 17.

'Rayon' ends with the line sung by Neil Sedaka.

The first line of 'Marriage song' recalls one by Jon Ward, written circa 1969.

'Well all right' includes a phrase from 'Life' written by Sylvester Stewart, recording as Sly Stone. 'Dark Looks' has an italicised borrowing from the script of Bertrand Blier's *Les Valseuses*, spoken by Jeanne Moreau.

In 'Seven Strangely Exciting Lies', the sub-title 'Take two of these tablets tonight and in the morning go on living' follows Terence Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea* and 'Lucille's tune' draws on the refrain in the Penniman/Collins song 'Lucille', covered by The Everly Brothers. 'Seven Strangely Exciting Lies' takes its title from W. H. Auden's 'The Question'

'Only remembering the method of remembering
Remembering only in another way
Only the strangely exciting lie'

In 'Affections of the Ear', all details of the story of Narcissus and Echo here are taken straight from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book III. Robert Graves' first volume of *The Greek Myths* claims that narcissus oil was used as a cure for 'affections of the ears'. Here the word 'affection' is an archaism for 'disease' (an example from the OED – 'an affection of the heart' was, in 1853, a heart disease.) The poem has resurrected Ovid's anti-hero who *did* realise his mistake of falling in love with his own reflection; so it offers the first Narcissus, well before the concept of narcissism. Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* contains the line 'In the field of the unconscious the ears are the only orifice that cannot be closed' while 'Making oneself seen comes back to the subject, but making oneself heard goes out towards the other' repeats his extension of Freud there. The poem wonders about these assertions, as it suggests that Echo may be a figure or a trope for the troubled nature of lyric poetry, driven by rhyme, condemned to repetition of the cadences and sound-associations of others' utterances.

The title of 'Outside from the Start' is from Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*: 'Nothing determines me from outside, not because nothing acts upon me, but on the contrary because I am from the start outside myself and open to the world.'

In 'Goethe On His Holidays', some phrases translated from Goethe's *Theory of Colour* and from Brusatin's *History of Colour* have been adapted and incorporated.

‘The Castalian Spring’ and ‘Affections of the Ear’ also appeared in my *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford University Press, USA, 2000).

In addition to the collections already cited, some of these poems appeared in *A Calendar of Modern Letters*, *Active in Airtime*, *Angel Exhaust*, *Angle*, *Comparative Criticism 19*, *Conductors of Chaos*, *Critical Quarterly*, *Equofinality*, *Exact Change Yearbook*, *Four Falling*, *Five Fingers Review*, *fragmente*, *Garuda*, *Grille*, *Infolio*, *Metre*, *New American Writing 8 & 9*, *The New British Poetry*, *New Orleans Review*, *Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970*, *Out of Everywhere*, *PN Review*, *Parataxis*, *The Penguin Book of Poetry From Britain and Ireland Since 1945*, *Poetical Histories 26*, *Raddle Moon*, *Scarlet*, *Stair Spirit*, *Stand*. I am very grateful to the editors of these journals, collections, or anthologies.

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