

Aquarius

One of those sovereign days that might seem never intended for the dark: the sea's breath deepens from oyster-shell to inky, blue upon blue, heaped water, crowded sky. This is the day, we tell ourselves, that will not end, and stroll enchanted through its moods as if we shared its gift and were immortal, till something in us snaps, a spring, a nerve. There is more to darkness than nightfall. Caught reversed in a mirror's lens, we're struck by the prospect of a counterworld to so much stir, such colour; loved animal forms, shy otherlings our bodies turn to when we turn towards sleep; like us the backward children of a green original anti-Eden from which we've never been expelled.

Radiance

Not all come to it
but some do, and serenely.

No saying
what party they are of

or what totem
animal walks with them.

Tobias the street-smart
teen has his screwball dog.

For some it is stillness,
or within the orders

of humdrum
the nudge, not so gentle,

of circumstance. For some
the fall across their path

at noon of a shadow
where none should be,

for some their own
shadow seen as not.

For some a wound, some
a gift; and for some

the wound is the gift.
When they

too become one
of the Grateful Dead, it is

the silence they leave,
in a bowl, in a book,

that speaks and may join us;
its presence,

waist high at our side,
a commotion, a companionable

cloud with the shape and smell of
an unknown familiar, call it

an angel. At his nod,
the weather we move in

shifts, the wind changes.
Catching

the mutinous struck infant
in us on the off-chance

smiling.

Retrospect

A day at the end of winter. Two young men,
hooded against the silvery thin rain

that lights the forest boughs, are making towards
a town that at this distance never gets closer.

One of them, not me, as he turns, impatient
for the other to catch up, wears even now when I meet his
face

in dreams, the look of one already gone, already gone
too far into the forest; as when, last night

in sleep, I looked behind me out of the queue for an old
movie and you
were there, hood thrown back, your stack

of dirty-blond hair misted with sky-wrack, and when
my heart leapt to greet you, No, your glance

in the old conspiratorial way insisted,
Don't speak, don't recognise me. So I did not

turn again but followed down the track,
to where, all those years back, you turned

and waited; and we went on
together at the bare end of winter, breath from our mouths

still clouding the damp air, our footsteps loud
on the rainlit cobbled street, down into Sèvres.

Toccata

Out of such and such and so much bric-a-brac.

Cut-glass atomisers, An Evening in Paris
stain, circa '53, on taffeta.

Four napkin-rings, initialled. Playing cards, one pack
with views of Venice, the other the Greek key pattern
that unlocked the attic door our house
in strict truth did not run to. A wrist
arched above early Chopin: bridge across water
to a lawn where finch and cricket take what's given
as gospel, and even the domino I lost
in the long grass by the passion-vine
fits white to white, four voices in close canon.

Where in all this are the small, hot, free
-associating selves, a constellation
of shoes, sweat, teacups, charms, magnetic debris?

In the ghost of a fingerprint all
that touched us, all that we touched, still glowing actual.

Dot Poem, the Connections

Before I had words
at hand to call the world up
in happenings on a page, there were the dots, a buckshot scatter
of stars, black in a white sky. Behind them, teasingly hidden,
the company of creatures.

What I'd set
my heart on, spellbound, snowbound
in a wood, was a unicorn, shyly invisible but yearning, even
at the risk of being taken,
to be seen and recognised.

What I got
was the dwarfs, Grumpy and Doc;
Spitfires, tanks, a drunken jalopy. I'm still waiting, as star-dots click
and connect, to look up and find myself, with nothing I need say
or do, in its magic presence,

as from the far
far off of our separate realms, two rare
imaginary beasts approach and meet. On the breath that streams
from
our mouths, a wordless out-of-the-body singing. On the same
note. From the same sheet.

Footloose, a Senior Moment

for Chris Wallace-Crabbe approaching eighty

An after-dinner sleep
Not
a bad place to arrive at
The big enticements may be
a matter of memory but isn't
memory the dearest
and cheapest of luxuries
and of its kind one of our rarest
gifts
The footloose present
Not to be going
anywhere soon
The being still
from toe
and fingertip to wherever
at home in our own
skin
makes the afternoon
as it tempers
its flame and the salt sea-air
its touch to diminuendo
as the man says
dreamlike
As of a body for the first
time as I recall it

Entreaty

After the Age of Innocence, golden brawlers
in the arms of demigods,
we arrive at the Age of Reason, credulous poor
monsters led by a dream-team
in a mad dance down loud streets into quicksand.

After that it's the Age
of the Seven Pills daily. Small mercies
restore us. Bayside air
salt-sweet in our mouths again, we set out for
the corner shop, and by some happy chance

it is still there, the same old woman keeps it.
When the doorbell shakes her
from sleep, through wisps of grey
smoke from her asthma-papers, 'What's it to be, what's your poison
this time, love?' she wheezes.

Is it a riddle? If it is
I'm lost. The ancient
grins, abides the answer. I clench my fist on the hot penny
I've brought; only now, a lifetime
later, find my tongue:

If luck is with me
today, on my long walk home, may no
black cat cross my path, no sweet-talking stranger,
no thief, no mischief-maker,
no trafficker in last words waylay me.

Whistling in the Dark

Seeking a mind in the machine, and in constellations, however
distant, a waft of breath. Re-reading space

shrapnel as chromosome bee-swarms, hauling infinity
in so that its silence, a stately contre-dance to numbers,

hums, and flashy glow-stones bare of wild-flower
or shrub, scent, bird-song, hoof-print, heartbeat,

or bones (ah, bones!) are no longer alien or lonely
out there in the airless cold as we prepare

to lie out beneath them. Even as children we know
what cold is, and aloneness, absence of touch. We seed

the night sky with stories like our own: snub-breasted
blond topless Lolas laying out samples

of their charms beside dimpled ponds, barefoot un-bearded
striplings ready with bow and badinage, pursued

and lost and grieved over by inconsolable immortals
and set eternally adrift, a slow cascade

of luminary dust above the earth, with the companionable
creatures, bear, lion, swan, who share with us the upland

fells and meadow-flats of a rogue planet tossed
into space and by wild haphazard or amazing

grace sent spinning. Old consolations, only half
believed in, though like children we hold them dear, as if
their names

on our tongue could bring them close and make,
like theirs, the bitter sweet-stuff of our story

to someone, somewhere out there,
remembered, and fondly, when we are gone.

Ladybird

Childhood visitors,
the surprise of
their presence a kind of grace.

Kindest of all the ladybird,
neither lady
(unless like so much else

in those days disguised
in a witch's spell) nor
bird but an amber-beadlike

jewel that pinned itself
to our breast; a reward for
some good deed we did not

know we'd done, or earnest
of a good world's good will
towards us. Ladybird, ladybird,

fly away home, we sang,
our full hearts lifted
by all that was best

in us, pity for what
like us was small (but why
was her house on fire?), and sped her

on her way with the same breath
we used to snuff out birthdays
on a cake, the break and flare

of her wings the flame that leapt
from the match, snug
in its box, snug in our fist under the house

that out of hand went sprinting
up stairwells, and stamped and roared
about us. Ladybird,

mother, quick, fly
home! The house, our hair, everything close
and dear, even the air,

is burning! In our hands
(we had no warning
of this) the world is alive and dangerous.

Garden Poems

Touching the Earth

The season when all is scrabble,
and surge and disintegration: worms
in their black café a pinchgut Versailles rabble

remaking the earth, processing tea-bags, vegetable scraps, and hot
from the press news of the underworld, the fast lane,
to slow food for the planet.

Plum-blossom, briar rose,
commingling. Overhead pure flow, a commodious blue fine-brushed
with cirrus.

In our part of the world we call this

Spring. Elsewhere it happens other
-wise and in other words, or with no words
at all under fin-shaped palm-frond and fern in greenhouse weather.

But here we call it Spring, when a young man's fancy turns,
fitfully, lightly, to idling in the sun,
to touching in the dark. And the old man's?

To worms in their garden box; stepping aside
a moment in a poem that will remember,
fitfully, who made it and the discord

and stammer, and change of heart and catch of breath
it sprang from. A bending down
lightly to touch the earth.

The Spell

Needlepoints of light
rain pick out a web and I am caught. The garden,
its double iron-barred gate

and the prunus pushing out
on its own path under paving-stones, floats free
and trembles. It might be gravity suspended,

or an odd angle
of time that a slight glance sideways
catches so that the whole

enterprise unsteadies, no longer instant
underfoot. What centres it,
when all has been riddled through

and questioned, is the spider, dark
death's head paramour and spell
-binder. Ablaze

in solar isolation,
it dwindles at the end of its span, its spittle-thread
of inner fire unravelled

in a riot of marigolds, and the spell so light
on the senses yet so strong,
and still unbroken.

After

I bend to it willingly, this patch
of earth and its green things, in their own world
(though I hold the title to it) hungry for life

and tenure. Here they are weeds to be uprooted:
a limited easy task, the damp and crumble
I've lived with since my first

mouthful of it, the peck
of dirt I'm still working through. All round, a suntrap,
the garden-glitter of webs. Tree

-spiders that like the weeds, our late-spring sunlight
colluding, would choke
the lot to keep their hold. Live and let live? Not yet, not

here. Inside, the phone
intrudes. Another world calls and I scurry
in, struck by the coolness of a place that is all surface

polish and appliance. Too late! The message,
if there is one, hangs
in the silence, in the air

of abeyance that attends
on hasty departure: the breathless hush, lightly expectant,
of After.

Inner City

A picture-book street with pop-up gardens, asphalt
bleached to take us down a degree or two

when summer strips and swelters. All things green,
wood sorrel, dandelion, in this urban village

salad not weeds, and food for everyone, including
rats and the phantom night-thieves who with barrow

and spade tip-toe in under the windchimes to cart off virtual
orchards of kaffir limes. Good citizens all

of Chippendale and a planet sore of body
and soul that needs saving, and by more

than faith-healing or grace — good works and elbow
grease, a back set to it, compost bins,

the soy of human kindness. In the late splendour
of early daylight saving, stars regroup

for breakthrough, mynah and honey-eater tuck
their head under a wing, ants at shiftwork

in their gulag conurbations soldier on; and hunters, clean
of hand and clear of conscience, down

tools, troop home to pork-chop plastic packs, and gatherers
gather for hugs and mugs of steaming chai.

The planet, saved for another day, stokes up
its slow-burning gases and toxic dust, gold rift and scarlet

gash that take our breath away; a world at its interminable
show of holy dying. And we go with it, the old

gatherer and hunter. To its gaudy-day, though the contribution
is small, adding our handsel of warm clay.

An Aside on the Sublime

A Ground Thrush,
the latest of many such
occasional companions,

is scribbling the dusk
with its signature
tune, a high five

sol-fa-sol-fa-doh, at each
da capo plainly astonished
by its own sufficiency.

I stand and listen,
happy to yield
the day, the scene, the privilege of being

the one here who will embellish
the hour with all it needs, beyond
silence, of manifesto. Which

the land, as it breathes out warm night
odours and settles,
takes as an usher's

aside on the sublime.
A footnote, Eine Kleine Background Music,
to its blindfold, trancelike

descent into the dark
to bring back
tomorrow.

Sky News

A listening post
in an open field,
a green message tower,

each filament and pad precision
-designed to pick up
what the four

winds and their attendant
weathers pour in,
on the senses, on the skin.

We catch
at a remove what passes
between packed leaves and Heaven's

breath as the big sky
story blows through
the gaps in conversations,

caught without
shelter like Poor Tom
under the wet lick and whiplash

of the metaphysical dark.
Hunkered down
in the raw, a-shiver between

on the one side a mad
king who weeps and blusters,
on the other his Fool

who wisecracks and mocks,
he grits his teeth,
hugs himself

to keep warm, and privy to all,
illustrious nosebleeds, the heigh-ho
Dobbin and full cry

of the great world's
hiccups and fuck-ups, says
nowt, sits out the storm.