

Possum

There you go, fast in a long swagger,
cool cat on a hot night,
impenitent and gleaming.

You, your siblings, grandes dames of the band,
slick as spit on brown limbs,
mount, rear, are flung

with aplomb against the surly clouds, printing
claw and brawn on dome and mind,
your plunge all defiance.

'I can', your name says in Latin. You do,
leaving a reek, year by year,
in my stone tent's pitch,

hooking your way by stubs of wire, fleering
back at a ruckle of twigs, launched
to bypass rhyme or reason.

Small clown, prince of the raw, moron
with blazing eyes, keep watching:
you are not alone.

Mending Gloves at Anglesea

Uphill from Demon's Bluff and the long blue haul
 To pack-ice and white night,
The curtains drawn, slow bubbling at the stove
For company, a year and a day near done,
 I'm needling the soft leather, with all
 A male's half-lost, half-won
Belief in patience, pleasure at putting right
Something gone wrong, and an eye to the next move.

Without the prospect of North American snows,
 They'd have stayed, dark and unstrung,
Stashed in a drawer. As it is, they'll be heading, hand
Over hand, for another country, another world —
 That zone where anything goes that goes,
 Precariously unfurled
From the heart's perpetual tundras, smoothed and hung
Up there for admiration, Narcissus Land.

Come to think of it, all that flourish and dash
 Should suit them down to the ground:
The stonemoss brown mittens of Gotland, the sleek
And finger-kissing gloves of Moretto's lord,
 The jewelled, brodered, macing flash
 On the hilt of England's sword
When Elizabeth came to town, the gage to found
Promise or menace — speechless, all of them speak



Of themselves, and ourselves, the pelted in the pelt,
 Born and bred for display.
Pricking a thumb-ball, I think of Burgkmair's storm
Of spears and crossbows, banners and furbelows,
 Whose eye's right at the knight's belt,
 Where mailed fists dispose
The Landsknechten's ferocious swagger, and play
The hand of beauty in its lethal form.

Our puppets, stuffed with gold, or shielding the bearer
 From brute unbidable things —
Ropeburn, frostbite, talons — they've bodied us out:
And this time round the stitchwork will proclaim
 The amateur status of its wearer,
 Ferric and stoney by name,
But understrapper among overlings,
A lightweight in the contest for chief lout.

The soup's looked after itself, and the sun's gone
 Some distance alone in the dark:
The wind's come up with a sprig of cold to speak
Of more salt for the pot. It's time to pause,
 Time to allow the truth come home,
 With or without applause,
That needle, brainpan or ladle sends an arc
From pole to pole when hunger meets technique.

Cave

God knows what deeds the 'mind' is up to in its cave. Paul Valéry

It was not always like this. At a palmy time
I was there, unseen, in Calypso's cavern,
nostrils taking the scent of thyme and cedar
from a hearth blazing for strangers, cooling
only to license a fervour in darkness. The cypress
called as it could to the horned owls,
to falcon and cormorant, long-tongued riders of air:
the crooked vine at the entrance wreathed
berries as pungent as ocean streaming inside us.
The channelling springs, lavish at parsley,
said for the sailor all that he might have tried.

I waited, I waited. And then came the brutal party,
the lord of proficiency trying his luck —
in with the veteran few, with a goatskin of brandy,
some hubris, a tongue as forked as himself,
and a killer's taste. In the shadowy vault of a giant
I watched as the olive-wood spar glowed red,
the lanced eye boiled in its socket, and the walls
rocked to hear the roaring. It was
a kind of command, even a consolation,
to know so dab a hand in its wield,
the Eyeless One dogging us all as he does.



Is patience a good? At least it showed me the grotto
to which, asleep as the dead, and ferried,
Odysseus came home. The old singer was right:
winebowls were hollowed in the rock,
immortal girls wove fabric dyed like the sea,
and bees hived to a sweet hull.
And there I was, glad at something shapely,
after the butchering, the lies,
the sorcery, the venery, the havoc.
I watched Athena saunter up the beach,
in masquerade, with lance. And fell asleep.

And now, as it might be for ever, or no time at all,
I am here in a cave of my own making
but not of my commanding. In the dimmed light,
beings go by, it seems at random:
a parade of the airy, wheeling their starry way —
lion bereft of his pride, fish leaching
the fluent salt from their gills, the bearer of water
tilting his cargo but never spilling,
a bull from the mob sacred to Helios, and,
stalking the darkness, Odysseus' patron,
the one with the arrows, who never dreams of pity.

Praying with Christopher Smart

I'd as lief pray with Kit Smart as any one else. Samuel Johnson

Your knees hitting the cobbles the way a goldsmith
 pounced his metal, you still alarm us,
for all that your yard-and-a-bit of bones are buried.

I remember a student calling your 'Song to David'
 a berserk thing, and though he was wrong
the fling of a raw, unkenneled heart had caught him,

as it could many. You found the trace of its music
 when stashed and barred for exhibition
in your century's nightmare, the foetid warren of Bedlam,
and rejoiced, though God knows how, at seeing the Lamb,
 all radiant victim and focal creature,
where knave and fool and we the bewildered are welcomed.

So I too would be glad to pray, if you came
 to this other world, where the mettlesome stars
patch the darkness after a different fashion

of the thing we call the cosmos, meaning always
 something beautiful, something entire:
glad to be taught by someone unguarded, the lilt

of jubilation practised at every hour,
 and the coarse roads conceived as channels
of grace, that naked investment of love. So come,



for a season at least, to a country of goshawk and ibis,
 where the diamondbird flickers in tilted leaves
and the needletail swift feeds and drinks on the wing,

where reindeer moss, and sea tassel, and fireweed
 come out with archaic flair, and leopard
and tiger and waxlip are so many orchids, and heal-all

and hound's-tongue and bulrush and running postman
 are out for show with the black swans,
the crimson rosellas, the wedge-tailed eagles, and the swallows:

come down, little man, in your dirty linen, and your need
 for help back from the alehouse, and your love
of the one whose beauty sent you to sea for pearls.



A Gloss

A paranoid is a man who knows a little of what's going on.

William Burroughs

Assuming that you do consult
The best authority,
We'll come to terms that meet the case:
You'll come to terms with me.

The fevered brow, the foibled heart,
The fractures of the will —
Bring me your huddled mass, and I
Will talk you till we're still.

Anxiety, abulia,
Apology for being,
Are versions of ascopia:
It's not me that you're seeing.

Under the hills and far too near
The dwarfish realists mine:
They rob me of the word I love,
They drill me into line.

Let them come on and do their worst,
They're bluffers, all and each:
I'll ward us both from war's alarms,
Here on Dover Beach.

Love and Death at Papa Gino's

for Chris Wallace-Crabbe

Telling the years as the chroniclers do — as, ‘the Vikings
arrived again,’ or ‘a bumper crop
of cumquats has left us delirious,’ or alas,
‘desire is crowned in our cherished Leader’ —
may be, after a fashion, *comme il faut*,
but sells short the personal fervours.

And for them, braced like beasts invited by Noah,
you could swan into Papa Gino's, aglow
not yet with ebullient red but the sheer prospect
of high talk, of low esteem
for those wizened in dignity, of the laughter
that warrants oddly the human estate.

True, it's a break. Even austere Augustine
could deem the *patria* ‘endless vacation’:
and a world, to improve on amateur nights in Dixie,
needs a dash of the festive, as surely
as Adam needs Eve or the feathery angels a lift.
Which is why, although in the mounting decades

we've been commensals we've been attended by ghosts
and seen a dear one leave our table
for the long silence, back we come with pleasure
to this cabin for comrades, arush with its aprons,
with lofted dough and glasses, where the bright posters
hale water from Italian marble.



from A Mass for Anglesea

Prologue

As ever, these are enough, the few makings
 on a plain cloth, squared away
for a voyage of sorts. Below, the Southern Ocean,
 languid this morning, could play the whaleroad
to berg and crevasse, but here on the whited table
 in all simplicity are flagged
the heart's currents, the ways of flesh and blood
 from sarsen-time to now.

'What, must I hold a candle to my shames?'
 True, in darkness they seep and clot,
but the little column budding into fire
 is not for them — it stands as badge
of a reared Lord. An hour ago, the bay
 mirrored the sun in sheeted flame,
and now, the local cockerel done with crowing,
 it's time to find the light.

By the candle, water — as it might be, our living selves,
 private and planetary, both.
Denied it, we know the face of hatred: indulged,
 are given up to relishment. Today,
a thimbleful or two will meet the need,
 fingers to be rinsed, wine to be mingled,
the world in its thirsts to be met with no begrudging,
 lip and vein a blessing.

And so to wine, the stuff of celebration.

The Antony who said he'd force
the wine peep through the scars of his captains was
the fool of love and death at once,
but knew the way to happiness for a while:
and we whose follies, coral-branching,
darken counsel, still may hear the word
of wine in a realm to come.

And what should we bless if not bread, the name
a basket for good upon good — ciabatta,
pumpernickel, damper, sourdough, bannock, tortilla —
and the thing itself a byword for life?
So here in little's the round we keep on making,
for better, for worse, in the mortal way,
hungry by turns for the great crumb of the world
and for all it cannot be.

In the end, as at the beginning, here's the Word,
boxed away in its book, and light
as breath itself, but no wraith, and rising
to eye and ear and mouth. Its tale
of good having the last word is a quaint one,
given the plague and the camps, but I'll read it,
heart a crosspatch often as not, and mind
losing and finding the way.



Word

Hand on hilt was the way to listen once,
smoke from the burning spice around you,
the Good News brushing mail, and you its minder.

Later, a placeman, chic in SS black,
could lodge for an hour in the high Dom,
denying Christ the star his mother gave him.

‘By the words of the Gospel blot out all our sins’—
the book kissed, an old yearning
up like crocus out of the blank of snow;

or, as it might be, a curlicue of tendril,
greening its inches across a branch
of mother-vine, a partisan of life.

Outside, a bronzewing’s foraging in the shrubs,
chestnut and cinnamon feather-deep,
and a flame skipper’s backing and filling in air,

printed again and again on the ocean’s page.
As John tells it, Christ is word
and vine both, meaning and fruit displayed

on the world’s lattice, if only the light will hold.
The rumouring leaf is frail with use,
but the tale’s there, as once black on papyrus,



or lit by gold and lapis on the clipped skins;
so, blind at best to much about me,
I try once more for a touch of the word's Braille.



Credo

Easy to picture them, shaven and crimped in linen,
 bowing to Ra, to Aten, to Horus,
the flaming disk branded above them: and easy,
 God help us all, to remember the jaguar,
humming-bird, eagle, and all the obsidian knives
 to keep the sun from dying of hunger.

Urbanity or deviltry, they're gone,
 and a star's furnace plays the candle
to the likes of us as though they'd never been.
 Still for once, I think of our coursing,
fire for tether, around a galactic hub.
 The mind pulses as though a heart.

Not to have been at all . . . the flesh grass,
 the grass dust, the dust a void,
the Master of Starcraft all there ever was —
 it might have been, and would now,
for all that blaze and the bright water, without
 maker, donor, keeper of being.

The rocky spine of Point Roadknight glints like mica
 across the bay; on the little river,
a parade of two, cob and pen are cruising
 a world of their own; on the Shell forecourt,
all tats and brawn, a haulier grips the wheel
 and swings clear for the spooled miles.

He'll take the rig by mountain ash and blackwood,
by manna gum and melaleuca,
messmate, and ironbark, and stand on stand of blue-gum:
on the hot road, by the tall files,
be born again for a while as a man of the trees,
as once it was for all our band.

I think of the other traveller, working his passage
from boy to man, country to city,
sawyer's horse to the bloody work on a pole —
'et incarnatus est' with a vengeance —
the trees of myth and time growing inside him
as water's column rises in wood:

those fatal branches once cajoling Eve
with glowing fruit, the oaks of Mamre
where God gave Abraham a future, the rustle
of mulberry leaves for David's battle,
almond and olive, sycamore and willow,
and pomegranate for a last drink.

Never to be done with a tree, by the look of things:
wrists marked as though with bracts,
the braced feet a wounded dancer's, and the flag
sap-red on a white field.
Up from the earth, agreed, and drinking the light,
but grounded still, and gripping hard,

the soil more native than the others know,
the flesh embraced without resentment,
and all the greening hours retrieved from darkness.
So now, scentbark fringing wattle,
I'm back at school for love of the quick and the dead,
touching their dish, and fingering their cup.



Offerings

Blessed are you who called the mammoth-hunters,
Russia to Mexico, their hearths
trig or askew like our own, awl and bodkin
tamped deep where they fell: and blessed
in the bistre horse with his black mane at Lascaux,
a thing received and given: blessed
in the grubbing mattock of antler, the flint blade
lusted from harvesting grain, the querns
of Khirokitia, the tall tumblers of Susa,
necklace of boars' teeth, ibex in glaze,
horse-bells, trunnions, faience.

Blessed are you in the sprawling tracts of loess,
the oracle bones of oxen and turtle,
dragon-mask bronzed on a coffin-handle, the brine
drilled in Szechuan for salt-panning:
blessed in the terraces bearing the rice of Luzon,
in a Shan harmonica toning the air,
in shippers of camphor and parrots, of copper and pearls:
in the golden panther and crouching stags
of Scythia lost and gone: in the bronze mirrors
of the Britons: and in the hefted spears
of those who walked the Dreaming.



And blessed are you who fit us all for naming —
telling the arrow's nock, the gladdie's
corm, the Bellarmine jug, the Milky Way,
spinnaker, follicle, Nome, Alaska:
catfish, deckchairs, the age to fall in love,
gaspers and megrims and the Taj Mahal,
derricks, and El Dorado, and peach Melba.
Blessed are you: the years toll,
and yet I chance my arm enough to say,
(the brute tide swayed by the moon)
I bless the wine and the bread.



Full Moon, Good Friday

*after Colour Image of the Moon taken by the Galileo Spacecraft,
1990: photograph*

Once more a bomber's moon, and the planners know it,
 coffee to hand in the green-lit bunkers.
Up there, a spider's web spun in a cavern
 could hang untouched for millions of years,
the dust mounting in craters we've made our own —
 Autolycus, Lichtenberg, Sheepshanks, Hell.

The magma floods are still now, their basalt
 good for a world of tombs: the Bay
of Dew, the Marsh of Sleep, the Sea of Nectar.
 And little enough to drink at the Place
of the Skull, apart from the Legions' vinegar swig,
 a man's ration for the long march.

They have put him away in his own darkness as though
 to dream hard of all the losings
found again on the moon's shining meadows:
 tears grown fruitful, wrecked desire
come into port, time a dancing measure,
 and the worst night a cradle for dawn.

Dreaming the Bridge

*after Claude Oscar Monet, Bridge Over a Pool of Water Lilies,
1899: oil on canvas*

This way the light is all gone and a velvet abyss
 opens, you hope, for solace. Darkness
teems with darkness. Something has bundled place
 for time to hold, and sent it away.
 You cannot remember your name.

A voice confides that we live in a rainbow of chaos,
 its arc a wave in a lost sea:
and you think that you think of words on a warrior's gate —
 'The world is a bridge: pass over it,
 but never build a house.'

There was a time when mammoths crossed the Seine
 as though to pace by Notre Dame
and take the Rue Saint-Jacques: a time for Xerxes
 to clog the Hellespont with ships
 and span a way to death:

time for the Roman engineers to fling
 arch over arch in the Pont du Gard,
holding a cup to the lips of thirsty Nimes:
 time for 'When your enemy flees,
 build him a silver bridge.'

None of them lingers now. Only Monet's
 Japanese bridge, itself the match
of liliated water, air in green array,
 earth's rondure, and for gift
 the mind's dark fire.

Cat on a Balustrade: Summer

*after Théophile A. Steinlen, Cat on a Balustrade, Summer, 1896:
lithograph*

‘Summer,’ his maker said, and the burnt orange
 suns itself, as he suns himself —
the golden eyes, a starlight hunter’s, flaming,
 the coat aswirl from back to belly,
his chosen beam a snug by the fired bush.

Far back, Smilodon offers his terrible gape
 and white sabers to lost creatures:
that poor man’s lion, the cat in Egypt, strolls
 for all the world like a god, in bronze.
And Steinlen’s beast of eighteen ninety-six,

insouciant as damn-your-eyes, and good
 for a thousand years or so, is here
as though to leap, and lodge on my balustrade
 in Anglesea, a living brand
where the honeyeaters cruise to pause, if they dare.

The Handing Over

*after Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, The Taking of Christ,
1602: oil on canvas*

Darkness has taken the pikes, and rust is eating
 a shaggy old-sweat's helmet. Soon
the urgent brush will have nothing to show but void.

When all is done, in the butcher's bill a trio
 will hang in the wind, out on a scarp:
for now, as we see, part of the task is in hand.

They are doing their best, every man jack of them — John
 bolting with horror, the splayed fingers
another mouth grown big with grief: a trooper

crimped, red-eyed, to rasp-out noises off:
 the captain, pillar and fire and gauntlet,
a black lobster above the peach-clad haunch:

and the lamp-dangler himself, come on the scene
 in hopes of making sense of it all,
though his light in the end is going nowhere fast.

The other two, coupled by cloth and metal
 and the clench of a pleading arm, remain,
each of them shocked at the kiss, their first and last.



Black Sun

after Inge King, Black Sun, 1974: enamel paint on steel

At the beginning, for each of us it was so:
 in the little mere, swathed in darkness,
we found its rods tingling whatever we knew —
 trouble perhaps, a test for sure.

And then, send forth, witted and puzzled, we thought
 the bright thing nothing but answer, until
brightness itself rebuked us, making us children
 and less than children, eyeless again.

Each day, the rehearsal begins, the vast star
 quenching hubris, inciting hunger,
a slit of emptiness opened into the power,
 its narrow path the only way.



The Less Rare

A white night for me is as rare as a fat postman.

Raymond Chandler

Someone's been working on the postman question:
They are not as they were. In the old days,
Each had a bicycle called Rosinante,
And was made by Giacometti. Lean as a myth,
He made his way down mean or splendid streets,
Daydreaming Gary Cooper, thinking Cassius
The best thing Shakespeare and Gielgud ever did.
Tempora mutantur: now you see them shambling,
Each like Sancho the Belly, after the ghost
Of his dead, desiccate self. Bar-and-grills
Call to them like Sirens, jumbo-burgers
Tilt like so many missiles, hot fudge sundaes
Bubble inside their brains. And however it's done —
Cloning, mitosis, the Demiurge at play —
They're everywhere these days. Look down a lane,
And there's a phalanx of Falstaffian men,
Pawing at parcels; across an intersection,
Fats Wallers pad with big-foot jubilation,
Snowing out envelopes. And down on the bridge,
Remembering to break step as they go,
They're Lou Costello in a hall of mirrors,
A platoon on a paper-chase. With nothing against you,
Each unfolds his missive, showing your name.
It is big enough for a tent, and you step inside,
Wide-eyed in whiteness, night after night after night.



Hats

‘Hats off in the Mess!’ was the cry of the drill-
instructor, when he’d brought our bunch
of air-cadets to a ragged halt. And where
are you, now, Sergeant Retallack —
eighty-something or out of time? For years
I’ve tried to keep on taking my hat
off in the mess, less from deference than
in a kind of defiant celebration;
the hats wear out, the mess goes on, my arm’s
less dexterous in salute. We never
knew what brought your tanned and seamy face,
your chopped form and chesty bellow
to put the fear of God and the Air Force into
our balky ways. Perhaps you were born
where we found you daily, stamping the red dirt
of the Bullring out at Pearce Station,
profiled against the black Neptune bombers,
their million-candlepower spotlights
hooded, their radar pods dozing. I thought
of you this morning, Sergeant, seeing
in *The New York Times* a shot of a man in a field
in Sarajevo. He was bowed
in a way you probably wouldn’t approve, the spine
gone out of him as he prayed by the grave
of one of his bunch dug in at the stadium.
His hat alas is still on, with
a bulked jacket, castoff snow, dozens
of plank markers, and as you
would say, Sergeant, from force of habit, the mess.



Felicity

Squirreled away in the dark of Pandora's box
was hope, which still diffuses itself
like a half-forgotten scent. Its wraith drifts
about the Potomac's bluffs today,
the last of winter. The chirr of birds, so often
brutalized by the idiot thunder
of planes zeroing in on National, sounds
by now as if it isn't raw
fact, or rank insentience, but a signal
that spring will arrive, damn our eyes,
after their warison.

In this, the company town of power with all
its aphrodisiac derangement,
its blow-dried hearts and virginal limousines,
time's up for those who won't fall in
with young-eyed, unillusioned Primavera,
who's had possession of these slopes
aeon by aeon, though winter did its worst,
longer by far than any Eve
(a.k.a. Pandora) made a living:
whatever the ice-chastened river's
hedging, life is on.



Back from the altar, and from swapping yarns
with a friend of greener years, I think
of that sovereign survivor, Henry the Fifth,
crowned this Sunday, the one of the Passion,
it being ‘a sore, ruggie and tempestuous
day, with wind, snow and sleet.’
It made good narrative, good theatre, like
the one I’ve just played through, with Christ
as jettisoned as any out-foxed Falstaff,
a young comer, an old player,
dumped alike for disposal.

Boxed in, and somewhat withered, one may still,
for all the golden militant bands,
Godzillagrams and machoflops, stand fast
for Esperanza and Nadezhda,
the sweethearts of our salad days. If Hobbes,
describing happiness, thought it simply
‘restless desire of power after power,
that ceaseth only in death’, Traherne
was engulfed by desire that ‘the sea itself floweth
in your veins’, and called it ‘felicity’,
a thing he supposed as free as it is brave.

Singers

All music is folk music. I ain't never heard no horse sing a song.

Louis Armstrong

The truth of it is, Louis, they've been singing,
Every last one of them, since first Adam
Took with Eve that solitary way.
Under the earth at Altamira, hewn
Whitely against the English green, done
At three-times life-size in intaglio
Among arroyos on a desert pavement,
Their long throats have been reaching for the pitch,
Too much their own for our hearing, where
The song pours out of them, and they are solaced

For being mortal after all. Subdued
Up to a point in Hittite cavalry,
Exulting among trumpets, cocked beneath
The raw will of Colleoni, provoked
By zany Napoleon at the Alps, they've had
A combination in their chests, like the note
That sleeps in double basses and comes out
When the apt listener's to hand. By night,
Not just the night we know, but the braided darkness
From which, we can't tell why, the world emerges,



They're foaling melodies for Gabriel
And you yourself to blow descants upon,
Louis, with your exalted horns. They say
That Gypsy gold does not chink and glitter,
But gleams in the sun and neighs in the dark:
And there they are, transmuting sweat to song,
Faking a silence for the workaday
Beings who load or spur them forward, while
The long mane of music rides the wind.



Praying

Sometimes it feels like Jimmy Durante calling
 goodnight to Mrs Calabash, whoever
she was or whether. Sometimes it's the tenth
 hour in the trans-Pacific plane,
all glamour gone and connections still to make.
 And it's been known to turn dirty,
as if a cutter, back from the peat-hag, found
 his ass's pannier loaded with nothing.

But whistling in the dark, as the poet said,
 is good practice for whistling, so
one goes on doing it and cognate things,
 knowing a little and holding out
for a touch of what shows in the eyes of the old
 hands at the business, their voices surrendered,
a better than Boeing winging their hopes, the laden
 flesh beginning to take fire.



Things

Things aren't so bad, though not as good as people,
the philosophers and the people say.
Things are all over the place, which itself
is another, larger kind of thing.
Things are said to go better with Coke,
though I don't see it myself, and the witness
is biased. Some are of the view that things
are going from bad to worse. In Iceland
they used, and perhaps do, have something called
'the Althing', which seems a lot
to ask of any society, and prone
to engender omnistrain. Lucretius,
who must have thought himself a devil of
a fellow, wrote at large upon
The Nature of Things, his little contribution
to the Public Thing, just as poets
should, unlike Virgil's blubbering at
the tears of things. It's believed
by historiographers that even
a Bad King may be a Good
Thing, which only goes to show you never
can tell, or something of the sort.
Reification brings out pedantic
airs and some confusing prattle
in those who find it simply one damn thing
after another. In The Book
of Sayings, Things occur, upheld by Thine
and Think, company good enough
for anything. Samuel Johnson thought
that words were fathered on earth, but things



in heaven, a strangely materialistic view
of almost everything in sight.
Personally, I'm inclined to agree with the view
that things are in the saddle, and
I've started the Party of Moderation in All
Things, your donation to which
may be left at the door, if you've nothing better to do.



Futility

That the sleep of kings is on an anthill, that
 the scarecrow may rest at night, but never
the watcher of men: that the heart is a glass castle,
 once shivered never rebuilt:
that when the cow falls down the daggers are many,
 and that pride reaches only as far
as you can spit, and that the oleander,
 for all its beauty is bitterer still —
these are our analects, passed from mouth to mouth;
 and once in a while, with fingers crossed,
'In time the mulberry leaf becomes satin.'

If the Interloper were still endowed with something
 resembling a heart, these jactations
would do it good — all but the last, which he
 identifies as self-deception.
Sometimes, with eyes like pebbles, he reads in *The Book
 of the Dead*, 'I have made no-one weep'
and goes to work as only he can. The relief maps
 unroll once more, nozzles dock
in freshly-released tanks, diplomats shrug,
 palms-outward, at their opposite numbers.
The Master of Sayings rules up a new page.

Dolphin

Arcing clear of the water's gleaming labyrinth,
a shock as he goes and a shock on return,
he wields his body's pulsing figure, the dyed
hourglass about his flank contracting
as he furls the flesh, expanding when he flings
the javelin of himself towards
the deadline of a green horizon, and plunges
back to the realm of torn ships.

He has been doing this for longer than
any blood-bolstered or immortal boy
has dreamed of being his rider, any lover
of Ocean's benedictions offered
bread to the nuzzling lips or a gaze entranced
by the swell of waves caught in his body.
Falling away from sunflash or moon's dousing,
he figures Earth's bewildered waifs.

Given our needs, he finds himself displayed
about the shank of an anchor, stamped
as colophon for long-dead princes, cut
clean through fumes at Delphi, where
a priestess sounds the arcane world. All this
is flotsam to him. Shark-killer,
tide-scanner, Bedouin of the green,
he mounts and falls, rejoicing and dying.



Playwright

Wrong about almost the whole damn thing except horror,
He got this right, that in memory everything seems
To happen to music. Offstage or on, the performers
Move as though swayed by another planet's trajectory,
The modes taking them out on the plains of Mars,
Or to where pitiless Venus winds her tourbillion.

Each of them — hind, aristo, the manic, the feckless —
Is attended and glozed by a species of cosmic murmur.
Shadowless all, none of them lacks a vestige,
An air in the air, the leavings of undulant sound
That used to sway like so much wheat in the breeze
Begun in the void by all that crystalline spinning.

And still we are matched with some of Orpheus' children,
Menaced by those who deflect his ways. The middle
Movement of the Moonlight Sonata, said Liszt,
Is 'a flower between two abysses': and Ovid,
'Songs have immunity from death': and Elizabeth,
Coldly, 'Hang the harpers wherever found.'

If the blithe gods in their blue country have music
Instead of memory, and if the tireless demons
Truffle for chaos, all of them walled in a now,
We have nothing to say to each other. A blessed fireball
Mounts from its chasm, making a gift of shadows,
Each of them singing to the lost years it carries.



Matins

Out there in darkest Parkville it's a kind
of animal country. Morning displays —
I thought it was the gardener — someone trotting
hale and compulsive, barely attached
to four maleficent greyhounds, sleek and dumb.
He's Bogart or Camus, a bigboned ghost
easing himself and his charges round the block;
they move as sweetly and as bloody-minded
as if their talent were for treachery,
not coursing and a would-be kill.
We've traded words on form in wetter days,
sodden together into comradeship,
but not this morning. I'm praying in his trail,
a sort of christian and a sort of man,
watching him get between us the police
the park the children's hospital
the bolted shelter for old derelicts
and the zoo, that other eden, where
some cruciform and prestidigious monkeys
hang in the sunlight, and the sombre bears
rove their concrete to sweat out the duration.



Crux

Seeing you go
Where the dead are bound, and having no resource
To twist those timbers out of their lethal course,
I want at least to know

What I can say
Now that the boasts have blown away and even
The cursing has grown faint, while the pall of heaven
Abolishes the day.

I was never wise
In word or silence, never understood
The killer in my members, thought of good
As what one might devise

From scraps of evil.
How can I learn a way for me or mine
To stand beside you? Vinegar, not wine,
Is all we give you still.

Among the dice
And the dirt, with more of shame than love to show,
All that will come to heart is 'Do not go
Alone to Paradise.'