

LEARNING TO SWIM

Every time we touched each other, we left a fingerprint of sweat,
the grass died back, the hens stopped laying.
and on the fig tree outside my bedroom the figs ripened.
That summer we read girlie magazines spilling beer
on my white sheets and over the pages of Penthouse.
His big body was as pale as parsnip, black hairs sprouted
in unlikely places but his hands were like talc and
I loved his unhappiness, his migraines.

I'd always had boys before, stumbling through their paces
lights off and everything, even their knees, strange in the dark.
This was so different, like learning to swim
after years of walking your hands in the shallows
fooling nobody.
Look, now I can backstroke and butterfly,
I can dive from the high tower.

He opened me like an oyster,
like an artichoke. I was brine and undertow when he broke
over me, his hands full of music, each finger
singing a note purer than sainthood.

I swaggered into the year wearing that song
never again so unknowing,
never again so electric.

THE HORSES

Other families pulled cars apart
put jigsaws together, played cards or just didn't talk.
We collected horses.
If you slept on the verandah, they'd clop over,
jostle for the best position and stay like sentries all night.
In the dusk they'd herd around my mother, pressing like children
searching in her pockets for apples or carrots.
She'd come back into the kitchen
her hands dusty from their flanks.
Outside the horses stood guard.

Did she walk in their dreams,
her breath remembered in their nostrils,
her voice shifting their standing sleep?
One day they will come for her,
their glad hooves louder than war.
She will cast off her apron and pale skin,
her patient bones will grow swift and long,
and her eyes will know only the breaking ground under her
only the leap into sky.

INSTRUCTIONS ON STONE

Give away the smallest things:
pond fish, the signed books.
Stop looking at the garden.
Stop letting the animals touch you.
Disallow the possibility of lovers.
The children are the most difficult;
their clinging fingers too tender for your secateurs –
but, clip! clip! and they fall away.

Now take the pieces of yourself out, stone
by stone, the basalt liver the petrified lungs
the pebbled kidneys
and lay them on the swept sand.

Bury your skin like a jam jar of cash.
Fold your ears one into the other
so they hear nothing between them.
Burn your mouth and fingerprints
you can't afford them.
Limbo dance your bones into a midden.
Cast your eyes like rune stones.
Does your voice still keen?
Swallow it.

Hear the world turn
for the first time
everything
nothing.

AN ANSWERING MUSIC

We knock upon silence for an answering music Li Po

John's Testimony

The church is blighted, cankerous.
Lies sicken it like the pox.
Where does the Bible tell me to doff my hat,
obey my betters, worship position and pounds?
Within us all burns the spirit.
No priest, professor or noble
can steal this truth or tax it.
Yes, I went to a meeting.
Out of the stillness a voice from within, baptized me:
'That which is weary must die.'
And I stood up, a youth again,
green as a spring shoot
all the winter's weight cast off.
Truly I can say, in darkness I laid down to sleep.
And he stooped over me.
He lifted me high as the moon.
His fingers stroked my eyes open,
wiped my mouth clean.
His love unstopped my ears
that I could hear my own heart
pulsing with the world's pulse

Anne's Reply

John walks out of church, discards his manners
wants me to follow but I will not.
My feet are stone and these hands he grips,
they lie in his still as vegetables.
Dull, I can hear him thinking, my dear dull,
my dull, stupid wife.

Poor John, his harsh thoughts curbed by that love
which springs him forth each day, eager as a rabbit.
I'm slug-a-bed, feeding the baby while he kneels
his eyes lifted to our rafters as though angels swarmed there.
No wood on the fire, no water.
'How long will you be there, John?'
'As long as the Good Lord allows,' he says, not shifting,
his eyes steady on those angels.
The Good Lord didn't have to feed four children
or set John off to work with more than a belly full of prayers.
And I listen to myself screech like a barn owl
filling up the room with my discontent like soot.
I like my prayers safely on Sunday with the minister.
There shouldn't be this leaking over,
filling up our days with God
as if we haven't all enough to do.

I look at John now, caught by the scruff of his neck, hauled
heavenwards by George Fox and his Followers.

John, I would say, regard thyself –
he grabs me, his fingers hot.

His voice shudders.

I hear the wind. I pull my shawl closer.

John, ablaze with love

stands in his shirt

waiting.

I say no.

Martyrdom of Friend James

Arrested in Cochester, 1656
confined to a rat's hole in the wall
a rope between him
and the ground.

One day numbed with cold,
he slipped.
They pushed him,
bleeding and broken,
into another hole, the size of a baker's oven
and this time he rose,
oh he rose like sweet bread
like blessed, obstinate bread.
They could not stop him
though they buried his warped bones
barely twenty years old
curled like an unborn baby.

Did you fly into death singing, boy,
the cramped, stinking months shucked off
as though they had belonged to another?
Hallelujah. Hallelujah.

Tell me, how I can take off my anger
abandon it like an ill-fitting boot.
How I can open my fists, lay them naked
palms up, waiting for the blow, the nail.
And these tears –
will I ever learn to thirst for salt?

Easter Friday

Easter is no time for mothers.
I've placed my ear at the children's dreams
a dozen times tonight
sat with their calm breathing but still the dreads
lope at the heels of my thoughts
hounds running down foxes.

Easter is no time for mothers.
You remember the difficult birth
how you loved the squint-eyed lame child
and all the other small deaths knuckling into your heart
denting it like an old pot.

Half the children sleeping in this room
are those of gaoled Quakers.
John trusts our inexhaustible larders to feed them all.
It's not porridge or soup they're looking for.
They want the floury smell of their own mothers.
Half my children lie in the churchyard
crocuses blooming over them.
I'd not leave the rest for some babbling vision.
I keep dishing out food, what kindness I can manage.
I keep a civil tongue, it's just my thoughts that ride devilish
disturbing the sweet spring air with the muck kicked up
by each sharp hoofed shrewish curse.

Tomorrow we shall go to church.
I shall sit in my row of children
praying to the mother
whose lap sags with the Son she holds
His ribs under her ministering hands
sprung out like broken embroidery hoops
his head lolled back into her shoulder
as helpless as a baby's.
Easter is no time for mothers.
Harder to bear death when new life
sprouts alongside it, green and mocking.

Inside the Wordless Sermon

Inside the wordless sermon of my heart,
such love beating
until I rock on my knees
rooted in love but swaying as though God blows
through me, a benign breeze
apples on His breath and the sun.
I want for nothing in these green fields.
I grow like a tree, branching out
my calloused fingers twigged and budding
bird-perches, tiny hearts pulse in each one.
Between branching shoulders my head is the moon
or a great stilled bell.
If I open my eyes, I see stars
and closed,
stars again
and light
breaks
I'm washed in radiance
all my green leaves, all my bird wings

Salvation

The days nag and crab me
each demand, each care
a thistle in my skin:
the baby's cough,
the price of bread.
I don't want your God, John,
there's no room in my crowded heart
no time in my day.
And I don't want the other God
seated in Heaven's throne room
proudly dispensing judgements.
If I see God – oh, the blasphemy –
she's a woman, harried by the children around her legs
trying to watch them all,
her eyes rimmed red from lack of sleep.
She's a fat lap and a cool hand,
a calm voice and a hard slap.
She's the mid-wife and the last breath,
the milk and the ash.
My prayers could be dust motes,
a baby's hiccups, acorns on the ground.
I keep such thoughts shuttered.
One day she'll come to my house
sit at my table, her great laugh bellying out
while her hands knead me like dough
pinching wings from my shoulder blades
smoothing a dress to my ankles
patting my face into serenity.

My heart will creak open into many rooms
all of them windowed, clean
light spilling
and she'll sing me
as if I'm the sweetest answered prayer,
the birth groan of the world,
or everyone's private death.
She'll sing me sinner.
She'll sing me saved.

SAILING ON THE GREY

Sky in grey rags
hoarse dogs sullen in their kennels
next-door's chainsaw splitting the silence –
some days fold themselves up,
others buckle in the middle.
This day's shoved down the back of the sofa
with pencil smears and five cent coins.
Nothing I do can coax it right again –
not scrubbing the kitchen floor
or making soup.
I miss everyone I ever loved
all the dead or near dead.
Some days are like this.
Give in to it.
Buckle at the knees.
Say your prayers.
Cast them adrift – small boats –
knowing only those sails –
so hopeful on the horizon.

FOR MY DAUGHTER IN HER FIFTEENTH YEAR

Rewrite the old stories – why should the mermaid
swap her flash sequinned tail
for boring legs? Build her a swimming pool,
resort style, and all her daughters
(chlorine blue polish on their webbed toes)
can swim laps until their hair turns green
as glass but the boys still buy them sushi
and sit so close dizzy with daring.

Red Riding Hood? Think it over –
let's pity the wolf, colour-blind to the danger,
trapped by her patty cakes and pretty please
cursing old granny wits sharp as scissors
awake in her bed.

Cinderella dropped that shoe, oops
– like a text message
on his mobile – Call Me!
Sleeping Beauty peeked –
and so should you.

In even the best gingerbread houses
a clean kitchen is only ever
a clean kitchen.
Finish the chapter instead.
A dress – black slink or tiers of froth –
is never only a dress but
a brief benediction, a candle you light
against hard times. Oh daughter
love yourself fiercely –
the changing pigments in your eyes
the knobbed spine holding you straight
all the small bones, the lace
of capillaries under your skin each cell
patiently replacing itself
as I do.

As I do.

HIGHWAYS

What gets lost along with the KFC and Maccas wrappers,
the abandoned kittens, lace panties
and a spent arsenal of JD cans?
Virginity, fidelity on the smaller routes.
Friendships: that cramped drive up the Hume, two days
Total Fire Ban
and an argument over petrol money.
I lost a marriage on the Goulburn
the children's tears like water
dripping on granite
as we folded our arms against each other.

More rarely, you load up
full tank, fist full of maps
new sunglasses make you feel like a movie extra
you strap the dog in.
Halfway to wherever
you let that photo from your wallet
flutter away in ten easy pieces.

Someone walking back for a lost boogie board
will find *his* eyes stuck in thistles
and the mouth you kissed
caught in spider web.
You'll be long gone
across the border
off the highway in a truck stop
the dog whingeing
at the way the clouds eat up the moon.

COVENANT

On my dark tongue, on my honeycomb bones
my brittle hair and these eyes the clouds pass by
un-named. On your nervous stutter, on your runner's legs
your scarred arm and the contraband you can't
declare. On the poem I put on replay,
my lost bankbooks, my first husband's advice.
On your cellared wine, your forms
in triplicate, your ex girlfriend's intervention order.

A word like salt or troth
a word that can't add up
lawyers fees
access weekends
child support payments.
Like blood on the tongue.

On my dark honeycomb
my brittle and the clouds that pass by.
On your nervous running
your scars and undeclared contraband.
On our thirst, on our hunger.