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Nietzsche went mad and the clincher
was when he took pity
for a beaten horse: the vast pixelated world

collapsed and was unmade
in its suffering eye
and he ran and embraced it and wept

in the street and was seen.
We prised him off and took him to be cured,
though he wasn't and the horse's suffering stayed the same.

In Perth, a kitten with two faces
is born beneath a star. Later, three boys
torch it at a train station. Two faces

of unreason: too much pity/not enough.
From the first tiny gripping
hand we're filled with a sensuous power:

to stand, to walk, to throw a kitten at the ground.
Young girls, to never eat.
Adrift on the radical

ocean of any moment, heads above, limbs treading below:
mewing out of both mouths
Love me. Leave me alone.

i

Snake-man comes once a year; bare-foot
stamps and shouts, decanting snake after slow snake,
'A snake's near blind! He can't hear!'
Kids murmur and hush, knees touching
on the floor. 'You're rocks and plants to him!'

Inside their bursting stillness, empty
to soundless looping snake, who sees
only motion, each child – quiet Eurydice
and Orpheus of the loud mouth –
makes private truce with snake-fear: fear beyond myth,

beyond snakes' silent innocence of symbol,
far beyond venom and cure, as if the fang-hole
itself, or the naked waiting ankle were portal
to the death-world, the death-life:
where we live within fear of death as in a room.

World of the foal on his first day, who could not pass
the tarry plug in his gut; whom we held
hours in the scorching grass plunging and squealing,
and saved.

Heat and fear
were all his first knowledge, and our arms
the incomprehensible curb against
his earthly instinct to leap clear – . This earth

doesn't love you: earth
that would extinguish you in rock-fall fast
as air crushes the breath of the hooked fish
on its bed of sister-deaths. The same air that you gasp

when the liftshaft unlatches and throws you back
to the surface, air that is one giant breathing
mouth, a child's one example of abstraction
(unseen, untouchable): wind that tries to help you free

over every cliff to the ocean below: birth-waters, first
element, that started you, most of the world, most of your body,
the thousand-handed that would slide your lungs on
like a glove, then open its fingers, ending you.

iii the diving bell

Coming out of the cinema after the film about the
man trapped
in a paralysed body, I realised
that while he described, through a laborious system
of eyeblinks and interpreters, his unspeakable grief
at being unable to move or speak, I
was distracted by the pain in my leg.

Half my mind was his, and half continued the endless
shoot through my own eyes: the me-film, in which I arrive
with cartoonish energy: bomb

speaking into every scene, a self-shaped hole
in each wall built on my thought: never stopping the words
that swamp the world with explanation.

Racing, immune to real surprise
until the snake-strike of bodily disaster, like this man
zooming in his new car until a freak

brain-burst suspended him heavy under his unfair sea.
Am I my accidents? or a core unbroached
by broken tailbone, ankle, knee (extremities,

slipways into world)? These curled fingers
were deep-severed nerves – my hand through the pane
of a stiff window in Lit class, bald red springing to the edges

of my cupped palms, pulsing like a held bird.
The white face of the boy I loved, following as I stumbled
dripping down the hall to sickbay. Or I fall

from my horse again and hear my knee give in,
the thighbone striking a quick chip off the flinthead of the shin
while I tell the story: 'there are no accidents':

only penitential motive, cause-and-effect:
I claw the glass, throw myself from the horse, act out my fault.
Or someone writes my name in the book

of the afflicted – the road or blade
clicks in place to hurt me – a sin catches my eye
in the understory and I am fallen off

into the lurid dimension of disaster: rabbit-hole to real being,
broken. My knee swims up in the ultrasound, a watcher
whose latent mercy I never yet knew to thank.

But why should brokenness be truth?
this man-metaphor before me on the screen, who sees
the world as we are told only the sick and broken see:

in pieces, clear, up close and slow.
Diminished to be magnified, pure mind
locked in pure body, he dies in the final scene.

Last to leave the cinema, credits over blue
glaciers cracking and collapsing, I eased my crutches past
plush seats, gold walls, pearly mirrors, lights:

mezzanine, lift, foyer: this series of interiors,
whole, fearful enclosures of the mind, while outside dark
had fallen round the city while the film played.

*pleasant is the Elfin land
and I would fain there dwell
but at the end of seven years
we pay a tiend to hell*

Tam Lin

What is ignorance? Where is the world
when you don't know it
and then you do?
Don't know yourself

until the scorpion jumps out of your mouth
onto your friend's face
or your brain leaps out of its bone-box,
floors you.

Where did it live, that death-wheel,
hamster-mill, perpetual falling-fear, falling-wish?
*I am sae fair an fu' o' flesh
I'm feared it be mysel'*

v brain

in here, the lurking flaw,
the tax, the glip, the twin, the mirror,
that fainted you away

from the party and further – two drags
on a joint and you drop and twitch and jerk
like a fish on the dry wharf and come up, six hours lost,

kidnapped, transported to the Old World
(History too, origin, is your fate, your grimacing Real)
to the red-and-gilt casino

the black-dressed war widow hunching over you
promising safety (now you know for certain
you are mad forever and never going home: you are home).

But really you're only out
ten seconds of mortal time and then the vision lurches
back to open-air and friends, cutting the music

/Thank god/ bending to you.

/did I wet myself?/throw up?/break my teeth?/

Quick warning, then continuance – you are
the dumb death-drive planted like a skull
in a Dutch portrait to ruin the party –

another night you drop in the back yard, thresh
ten seconds in a puddle, ruin your dress, falling
through your body, centre-of-earth,

to some mad kind of China – open your eyes
at the carnival in thrashed grass behind the tents,
all the shunting rides and lights flung up above

your splayed body, generator thumping
like the heart-and-dagger tattoos, roaring cock-rock
from the looming ferris-wheel, your fortune

locked in its topmost cage, plummeting,
until passing beanies with pitbulls stop and humble you
with common stranger-kindness (there's nothing they can do)

and suddenly are your scared friends and you –
snatched back from that up-ended finished you –
sit up, tremble apology, sip obediently

the proffered lukewarm cup. Who will believe
the lesson my grey brain taught, the intimate
wet ground, family with dogs?

vi envoi

'Don't be afraid! He's more afraid of you!' Snake Man
hangs them round his neck, explains
the shape of their heads, how to tell them
by yellow belly or velvet finish and what to do,
strokes his favourite, 'the brown snake, the pilgrim,'

and scares them by striking the floor with his stick, then
hooks them back into their boxes.

The children unfold legs
and stand into their futures, folding their fear away –
for ever, for later. I lead them back to class.

NEW YEAR'S

for Juliet

We swim and race and toast ourselves as waves
chop up, the light goes strange and halfway out
a triangle of sail glows like the white of an eye –
cloud slides a lid, closing the bay.
Perhaps this is how to trade with joy – to notice it
and think, now – I am happy! and sit in it,
a point specific as these elegant markers,
up to their waists in the sea – we've no idea
what they mean, but here they stand
quiet, at the end of a year when joy
was avarice – the self snatching ahead – .
Joy was inquisitor. Joy wanted change.
Let this lightning be the soul's
wriggle of sudden conscious happiness –
hair leaping boldly up
the ionised pathway that earth hearts out to sky:
one light among those that dot-to-dot
the improbable wilful constellation called
The Good Life, that is traced on other star-maps
as The Balance, The Empty Ship, The Maze.
In the end, we were rained off the beach before
the ecstatic moment of the year's turning, racing
to gird up all our stuff and reach the car: three women
you'll never remember young – but this day
when we were happy, and you were born,
we loved the weather and tried to learn.

5 A MON SEUL DESIR

canso: toucher

I step off the round blue island
into the red sea and break a leg.
So you tend me

and I watch your face for clues
to what you stare into
so tenderly binding my leg:

what is this person

who loves you?

mon seul desir

Love's heraldry:
the lion is body, the unicorn soul,
but they are also man and woman.

Ashy heron, fallen magpie
face off, and both are hunted by the falcon.
Myth we reject

turns inward – the selfless lover
loves no self in his other, loves only love, ends
folding on himself, ceremonial:

love's mind loves
its own luminous terminology:
you, only, I, we, two: my sole desire . . .

canso: vue

Love loves calamity

as when you saw me
stand too fast from a crouch
and go dim a moment
without speaking

forehead faint against the wall:

how I desire you

should love me

gout

Was this the only way
to love the earth: to love
you in it?

Thing you choose
as lens: lover, child,
horse, you see the world through:

we outsource our souls to the animal
or instrument that seems
to translate them better than ourselves. And this is love.

She plucks the delirious flower, feeds
the choice berry to her half-tame bird,
plunks on the organ,

tends her life like that red horizonless garden.

serventes: the hunt of the unicorn

When she rode on her horse through the town
they chased her in a car.

When she sat in the woods, the unicorn curled in her lap
they imagined the horn in her like a sword.

When the unicorn was alone
they checked all around for virgins.

When the virgins were found
raped and dismembered

they came with arrows and saddles and guns
to hunt the unicorn.

planh: mon seul desir

I chose a lover who loved death
and feared it and found it in me. His self

was never very large – he put it
aside and died and knelt before me.

There was little hatred in his love –
quietly, monastically, head in my lap,

he refused to live – in the end
he gave up meat and drink and me –

put me gently away with all the other
death-loving things of the world,

for the life I offered carried death:
death in each finite

brick of our house, death in the newly dying
body of our newborn child.

He was afraid to die.
He needed to be free to die.

He'll be free a long time. I left him to it.

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In my dream, by my desire alone,
the unicorn performs great pageants
of love complete,

in hieratic shapes that don't work, waking.
Old mysteries: that look
on the lady's face, you've seen it before:

a joyful submission: the heart lit
with timeless purpose –
her mind hunts above the red cloth of the body.

Her love is perfect, perfected by loving
the beloved's flaw:
the horn's piercing twist

of desire and horror: superabundance
and constraint
spun together, pearly and bone-raw.

Poor lion, naked
on his hind legs, wagging love's standard,
hangs out his tongue, cries *Lady! Lady!*

The subtle unicorn
gazes off who-knowsto-
what: that look on the lady's face:

a flat-eyed surprise –
the wonder is that these ancient dyes
could last so long and very bright.