

THE ABSENT FRIEND

Somewhere among the grapevines I found
the androgynous, absent friend. It was
a sort of brother who would turn up
dressed in a dinner-suit made of photos
catching anxious views from the early hours.
It was a kind of sister with heavy furniture
who made her house from old branches,
casuarina needles and bits of vine.
It made its own paths through the tangled
vegetation of memory, through roots
tense as wrestling arms. Even now
when it's here for a while, it's still
an absent friend. 'If I were with you all the time,'
it says, 'you'd die of me.'

NIGHT BREATHING

I used to try to breathe in time
with my gran. Hers was slow as tide
and mine small and quick as a cat's.
She gave it up so young,
as I only knew when her stone told me
among its roses.

I match my breath now
to my son's, while there's nothing
in the world but breathing and darkness
and I sound less brave, less young.

SEEING THE EXPERT

In the theatre with crooked stairs
and stairs that end nowhere
African masks from a play no one remembers
fade through décor to invisible.
Over scuffed red carpets,
through in-between places with concrete steps
brutal as secret prisons
you come to see the expert
whose room and desk
are at the back of things
near the closing bar,
behind the disused stage.

ISIS AND OSIRIS

They wheel in the box at the party
to find who fits.
He never wins raffles but just knows
that he and it will match like Cinderella
and her shoe. They do
then someone has slammed on the lid
carried the box to the water
and thrown it in. Floating in salt-smell
he numbs from his feet
to his everything, but still feels horny
and wants to write something down,
or draw, to fill the self-shaped dark.
Somehow his body breaks up
through whole countries. Fingers
worm their way into soil and deserts.
Toes curl up under their nails
like snails. Limbs turn tree,
hair pales to dry grass,
head falls into a whirlpool
trying to say just one more thing
as the water snores it down into silence.
Eyes roll away to live as sensitive
reef creatures. Only his cock is lost,
maybe in the belly of a fish.

She looks everywhere, sails upriver
and down past eyes of crocodiles.
She finds his waiting in their waiting,
finds worms and desert snakes,
shy sea anemones. She puts together
her golem husband like a memory.
Each piece remembers its separate life,
but still his body grows full as a flood,
his blood finds its old canals and new valves
and washers in his heart. His smile
is a miracle of engineering. He is strong enough
to become pregnant by, though in bed at night
he creaks where he's mended.

JUST HAVE FUN

i.m. S.F.

We were crouching youths in the sand hills
and parks and scrub, domestic cats returning
wide-eyed by night.
My parents called you the Russian spy
with your trenchcoat and mirrored glasses. Your bag
that was always a thing discarded

by nature more than human beings, is unattended,
maybe still with a *Mad* comic, your music
and your drugs.
The last time we spoke I don't know
if you said 'just have fun' as always,
my friend of poisonous joy.

I mostly remember you outside and at night.
Your dilated pupils were night things,
your worn clothes
all warm against night. You always seemed
in-between places, in a park in a suburb
or a tattered square of bush

waiting for the rows of houses to come.
Around you there was only going,
never getting. Now
you're outside for good, and the last car
you held together can be left to its decay.
I don't know

how you died except, as they say,
'by your own hand'. The details don't matter,
you chose this for years.
I write with the insulated tenderness you can turn
on ones who can't answer. You'd not have said
much about all this.

CV

The phone rang in the house I lived in with my parents when I was seventeen. My father answered and someone asked for my sister or if she wasn't there for me. It was an almost English voice speaking slowly, ignoring my questions about who it was, who it represented. 'We have some things to ask you about your CV.' And so on relentlessly, through hangups, remissions of its calls for weeks at a time, but always back to the same few words, just the facts of my curriculum, my little run.

TALKING GLASS

I went to find pasta for the wary
to prepare their pianos. I tried to speak,
knowing that I'd spoken pasta
in the past, but now there was broken glass
between my teeth. Got it out
and tried to apologise
but there was more glass in my apology.
I bailed out shards for hours
and put together whole new glass sets.
When I went to find flowers
to apologise for my apology
they were all painted arterial red
and made of razor blades. I stumbled
and knocked them over the floor
so that each sharp petal went its own way.
I needed a job to pay for all the broken flowers
and couldn't make enough just talking glass
and selling it off. They set me up
as an insect executioner, with my own leather hood
and a box of tissues to crush cockroaches with.
I couldn't bear it and had to lift up
my mask to smile apologetically. As soon
as I said sorry I was talking glass all over again.

LIBATIONS

Water milk wine fall into the ground
like reunion. The offering is unconscious
when tipping out dregs after a party
or when a wine-glass breaks on the edge of the bath
and glass and wine blend in water
sharp-edged as natural selection.

Milk and honey slip down subtle,
a family secret, past stone and sand which say
that the only way to go on forever
is to become as small as nothing at all.
Water milk wine fall into the ground
like smoke rises thinning.

TWO GUESSES AT IMMORTALITY

The match has always just been lit,
smell of phosphorous is heavy with old birthdays
which are all today.
Everything is here and everyone.
You're home once and for all
at the moment when it's all new again.
And it's absolutely still.
There's nowhere else to go,
everything is sated and even the moan
of the frogs doesn't sound needy.
The room sits in the music, the music
in the room. Whatever fine hairs
your inner ear has shed
have been returned to you
and there's no forever
for this to last through.

Or the one day repeats itself
with its long night to be slept through
while the world returns to how it was.
A loop long enough to hold
all the old lusts and violence
while the island is washed clean
by a flood each night.
It all returns like a song to the chorus
like a waltz to the heavy beat
at the start of the bar.

CAUSES

I *Grudging*

At the beginning of a book of causes
Grudging sits with its one evil eye,
its list of impossibilities, its certainties,
magic fly-swats
to chase out mystery, and feathers to take
little flights of harrassment, to stop
you jumping more than a few feet from
the metaphoric ground,

its echoing voice that says ‘another’s, another’s’,
its withered genitals, one of each set.
Its heart beats small so you can
outrun it for a while,
though it always comes wheezing up the stairs,
trying to bloody its yellow teeth in your heels.
It brings its own chorus of balding gnomes
male and female, some

made from nervous twitches, some grown
from old reviews. At the start of a long poem
they sing ‘he doesn’t do these
superlatively well.’

Without an arrogant young god to kick
aside the Grudging and its doubtful chorus
you just keep running, keep ahead
a block, a flight of stairs.

2 *The Problem of Other Minds*

They dug that grave so deep it was hard
to see the bottom. All fourteen shades of black
and the grey mud cohered. They left me to it.
All the toys I could find
didn't fill it up. My thin books just lined the bottom.
Put in my friends and they were small
down there, craning their necks up
to see what I'd done to them.

Put in all the houses I'd lived in, so I wouldn't
have to see them again, then left my grave
with a last house-load of furniture. Forgetting,
I visited other graves,
met people who carried little images
of theirs, life-like ones they had to feed.
A lot of those holes ate booze. Far off
heard my own one

slurp as something else fell in. I went
back to it and the mud was gleaming with bits of sun
hanging there like cartoon coyotes before a fall,
or bits of silt when sun
hits them sideways in shallow sea. Those flecks
were spelling the words, 'What's it like
to be you?' And when you looked closer,
'Is it like anything?'

3 *Those Apes*

The band was unrehearsed and there were
apes outside. Those creatures were our pets
years ago, forgotten somehow, evolved
to clear-eyed malice.

They knew how to mean us harm.
Their uncleaned bowls were blasts of mould,
a green as deep as the skewed tint of their eyes.
Inside we were playing

the old tunes, pretending to be
our teenage selves. No one had anger enough
for those songs anymore, shouting in a car-park
in a forgettable suburb.

And afterwards there was a touching humanity
to our dirty feet, walked out of shape and yellowed
like feet in a morgue.

Strings narrowed to vanishing, finer and finer
on crooked guitars. F-holes curved
on their shapely sides.

We felt our way around
the warm, dark end of their range.
And still those apes, those damned apes
were howling outside.

4 *Forgetting to Laugh*

When you've drunk the water to remember,
and the water to forget, they slide you down
into a dug-out cave. Thoughts fall apart
so easily like
the last thought on falling asleep that grows
soft and unimportant as the hand of your mind
that turns it weakens and disappears.
In the luminous cave

you take a still journey. It isn't that anyone
speaks down there and there's no one to see.
Your skull is painlessly absent, and through tenderest skin
and a grapey bunch of nerves
you feel another mind thinking. Its thoughts
are slow and underground with a length of dank
to think through, long night hidden
away down there.

You forget to laugh for a while when you're returned
to the reassuring air. Or it looks that way
from outside while priests nurse you back.
The laugh is lost somewhere
down corridors where its sound fades out
before it can reach you. So you look at daylight
look at the sun as memory comes back
from all the hiding places of the world.

5 *Machine*

A house made of feathers. A circular house
of feathers that are warm to touch as though
it were alive. The spines of the feathers protrude
to quill your touching hand.

Inside is an egg and a telescope that points
through the open roof at Mars, where giant birds,
metallic birds, fly down to us
on armoured feathers

all that way through space
to find a patch of soft earth, some soft
feathers and to point nostalgic lenses home.

The altar is made of antlers
shot by a goddess on the day she was born. That
was her second act, when she'd delivered her brother,
crouching at her mother's thighs. That moon of thigh
was a first intimation

and the arrow-head of hair. When they were born
and the irresistible machine of their worship was in place,
the island that had always shifted if a fish slid
its squamous tail, stopped.

Killer whales sang their killing song
in hunt of seals, or a great seal, a sigil,
to seal a final document, full
of the unlikeliness of things.

6 *The Curious Sadness of Automata*

Wind-up diver kicks his legs slower
and fins slow on wind-up fish. There's a curious
sadness of automata, something to do with friction
or else with the old dream
of perpetual motion. Long fingers whose every
sinew and cuticle tenses with physical laws
wind them down. No unmoved mover
gives an eternal shove.

It's those same fingers hold you still
when you wake, and the half-seen house
is impossible around you, its adult solidity
the surest proof that it
will fall away, while you, a thing too light
for ownership, float off, counting
possessions: nails and fingertips to leave
smudges, ruts and dents

on the bright glass where bright things appear;
eyes to flick their little flashlight beams,
skittling shadows. Beyond those
ownership is contested.
It helps to find a machine of words that runs
in loops, turns back on itself as if
it could go around forever, no friction built into
the stumbling jig of it.