

Inheritance

Perhaps an eagle
tracking evolution down to human,
aloof and subtle-
minded, building steeples
of empire hung on the famous opposable talon

Maybe a dolphin
navigating depth and tide to dominance,
thought grown in
the voice beside the brain
showering the innocent earth in a passion of science

But some ape
spun the tumblers into place first time and
history's grip
pulled you into shape
and (thanks grandad) left you to be woman

While she spirals
sliding her easy pride and golden feathers
astride the thermals

While deep eyes and slick tails
kick over the rollers calling and clapping together

Encounters with my mother's ghost

I met her
in the kitchen. She was shouting.
No man or child answered.
The floor was slippery with botched
cooking none of us had eaten which she had
thrown down of her power.
Power we had not noticed
when she walled a war out of her house
where every pastry rose to our clean fingers
and nothing was ever allowed to be broken.

I met her
in the church. She was shouting
her name not her nickname nor
the mouthful her parents gave her but
the name only God ever called her
when she was too given to know herself called.
And I could not hear what syllables
she shouted. Only
the truth of it plucking the strung rafters
to sound the hollow air vaulted in stone.

I met her in the street.
She was revving
the little red sports car she sometimes
joked about but never found the right to buy.
No neighbour frowned or tutted
but the hard desire of her anger shut
out their good-day smiles
and claimed the thundering scandal
her careful quiet was busy to deny
all her careful life.

Any room

Any room any life may be the place taken over.
While you still huddle wondering is it too late
for words like beauty and love, the dog is shot,
the door you trusted cracks open at first boot
and camouflaged men swagger into possession.
The writer's pen is driven through the writer's flesh.
Any powerpoint converts to simple coercion.
The place you played as a child, where your children play
the trigger and giggle of fantasy: From any ceiling
ambiguous shadows hang, splinters rise
from walls, and stained floors mutter unlikely tales.
It was always too late for words like honour and truth
which are always blindfold words spat at hooded faces
or scratched on familiar walls by shattered fingers.
Under the hood is it stranger or neighbour or twin?
Anywhere quiet and safe may become the place.
Any room any time now.

Looking for Andy

The police knocked early at my daughter's door
looking for Andy, just wanting to check.
Politely. Once inside suddenly more
like a drugbust. She and her husband took
deep breaths, sat still. There's nothing in that house,
no secrets and no drugs, not even coffee.
My deaf grandson watched a stranger browse
through his clean socks, and made the sign for crazy.
Later my daughter came to ask me where
Andy might be, what sort of trouble, how
they could help. I wish I had an answer.
There's only been a phone-voice: 'Listen, cow,
he ripped us off, your twisty little bastard –
we'll break his fucking legs.'

Andy, call home.

Andy? This is an urgent message whispered
into old dark space. With love from Mum.



Substance

Sometimes china she belongs on the secure span of
mantelpiece over solid brick and tile against the wall
or craves the shut glass of a cabinet, tucked back in
triangular dark unseen unless someone bends and
reaches.

Instead she is perched absurdly on the coffee table while
children and dog tumble and yell, hurting
themselves and each other in their rage to find out
muscle and light and strength and control and brain
and interaction and domination.

Hurts that no china figurine can prevent or mend, while
at a hundred near-misses she compacts her stillness to
its lowest centred balance
waiting for the next thoughtless nearness to miss missing
and become a casual hit;
for herself to become a crunch of fragments underfoot in
the own lives to which they are of course entitled.

Lattertimes stone she stands integral on the side of the
birdbath, an outstretched hand offering refreshment
to the thirsty and the dusty.

Equally unaffected by weather, wattlebirds dive and
shower and take nectar from the feeder above, striated
feathers clear striped by a linger of damp.

Higher yet a blackbird sings in an endless spring,
cockblack on the rooftop.

She knows his lyric and his busy wife; brown and black
sip here together at evening.

She knows where their nest is hidden each year among
the camellias.

She knows the neighbour's cat seeking and the soft
shaping of fur and claw through foliage.
She has learnt to make no judgement between them,
holding herself in her own familiarity, warmed by
sun, collecting and freed from debris according to
the wind.

Sometimes she is required instantly to be human,
a bright loving woman among her independent offspring
to fill a lull in their pre-occupations.

Certainty

He knows he is George.
A crusader maybe or
maybe a myth but he
knows he's Saint George.
She? Vacillates:
one day the maiden,
another the dragon.

A new and accvrat mapp

*Many of the deaf people I met had language that allowed thought
and perception of a kind not wholly imaginable by the hearing.*

Oliver Sacks

My jump vibrates the floor to warn
you silent boy
there's a freckled spider bulging at the crouch
on your white muscled sleeve. You encourage it
gently to the verandah rail,
finger-spell and pencil-sketch
to show me how it fangs
and why it's different from the small quick snake
that kissed you into hospital last year.
At 13 you know everything
or where to find it
and basketball pulls you out like playdough
till you look down an adult nose over my head.

I wake the floor, rattle the cups
to tell you there are dragons in your path.
You show me patiently finger-spell and pencil
the difficult mastering of line and paper
to wrap an always shifty world.
And now with inks and oils how
sunlight strikes a fire
off green lizard skin.



Notes from the planet's edge

Some meteoroids make it to the surface simply because they're so small that they literally float to the ground. There are thousands of these interplanetary particles in the room you're in now, stuck to your clothes, in your hair, everywhere.

Geoff McNamara

The last tadpoles
strangle
sun-pinned in mud.
Desiccate.
One night's rapid rain it's marsh again
open for business,
pobblebonk frogs plunk
their deep-belly mandolins
expound their name, advertise
one more try for spawn
to grow to legs
where primal ooze edges the planet
still testing its options
between life and vacuum.
Early nights clench cold
on lavish water.
The last tadpoles
stumped
drift down and rot.

*

Under the ceiling's blanket
under a wafer of slate
and thin air
I crouch naked

where the planet's particular edge
is nuzzled and pawed
in passing
by the expanding everything

*

Out here on the planet's rim we live
between earth and sunfire, between wind and water.

Onto our beach the weekend visitors
crawl out of their glass
protective husk where no-one hears
a fricative cosmos scraping the huddled Earth.
They thrash the margin of water or bake
on sand's edge, tide's edge like tadpoles out of luck;
or insect over the surface with oars and rods.

We who inhabit the weekdays see enough,
too little water, too much. Wind fills the sails
and crumbles the cliff.
In the freshening pond pobblebonks yell for the brief
comfort of procreation, the myth of escape. All
over the planet's knobbly rind
the frogs are dwindling
but their mud our mud
is starred with the invisible sift of space.



Winter journey

I heard you singing
before we came out through the city
Sitting at your window singing over streets and roofs
child of the treetops

We turn west and sunset sharpens
a quick blade between capbrim and horizon
Under the arch of dusk
one last hawk hangs the riding-lights of its wingtips
over our highway

Let your head lean on my heavy darkness
and doze there
I'll wind you on the reel of track and trees
Behind your left ear then my right
the moon is steady as we swing
Full of its own importance
it has no need of hope

And we turn at last eastward around bellying water
under the unruffled progress that tides it

I heard you singing asleep on my shoulder
carried to bed Over dawn's inlet
you wake at your window among the treetops

Two great gulls rise and turn over the bay
across the first full light their breasts
pink as galahs

Older woman dreams

This year for the Older Woman, dreams
of computers and washers that always need repairs,
train journeys with two sisters, heavy
handfuls of compliant clay. Less expected,
of agile young hips in boxer shorts,
or crowds of elbowing voices.
Strangely, never of children.

Often now in Cripple-Woman dreams
she walks the beach barefoot scuffing sand
into water, water across dry sand.
She stretches towards the sunset through blood seas
the muscles that concoct mass into energy
and straighten out your back.

Migraine-Woman dreams still give such trips
as the Street sells for half a human brain.
The buzz that saws the world in jagged pieces,
the cobbled tread jolting the head aside.
She reads more clearly now
the ancient shaman threshold signs
embossed on the eye-cave's wall.
Smoke and the Weird Sisters' wailing
obscure and ease her passage
through raw rock out to the shadowed
rainforest pregnant with fruits and tubers.
She scrabbles them, drags them out,
back through the quaking rock and into her room.



And through some bewildered nights
Oldest-Woman dreams chew the newspaper:
marriage and birth, portrait of dolphin or parrot,
faces marked money or lost, the skyward trunks
pushed down for this printing,
the clank and flaking rust of old machines,
the quiet keyboards fingered into headlines,
soldiers and painters, the softening flesh,
stripped bones. She chews them back to mash
of which may come trinkets, funerary boxes,
naif crib-sets, new paper, new mornings.
Waking, cannot remember
what she made them,
where she has hidden them.

The whirlpool

Bones within my fingers grip
the cold compass-head and wrench
it round. The pole-pulled iron
reads south on its card but still asserts
entrenched within its body
an unarguable north in which
sometime out of County Cork
my father's father made port in
Southampton, my father sailed the wars
of his youth and found Winchester and I
walked St Cross and Selbourne building
my mind's map and then slapped myself
down on the backside of earth, where the inner
compass spins across its own backwards shadow
and each new tree or wall harbours strange birds.
In no-light at 3 a.m. the pedestrian memory
sketches all these journeys black on ghostwhite
and the map finds a new starting point,
an arrow labelled You
Are Not Here.

The tic of ear and eye-corner on pillow
locate the head, the head locates the body.
By such clues one continues
to navigate the physical, touching
finger to the other wrist, finding
the hard tender mound between itch and clot and scar
where a mosquito spiked under a bruise,
plucking the spine's tension, tracing length
by the hip cramped with long lying.

Thus one maps the body
of treacherous islands and cyclone waters
without reference to compass.

Turning slowly to the right there is
comfort giving oneself to the turn
and this whirlpool becomes the easiest
of navigations, where the water
has its own purpose.

Then magpie and butcherbird
bring too much dawn for black and white
and the morning is rosellas.



Back of Byzantium

*Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing*

W.B.Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium'

Laying yourself out straight on the ledge of long discipline
you draw out your Om and drag a last blade of cold air
into acid lungs and throat grabbed hard
by oxygen-short muscles.

The third eye
removes itself to watch: up your still sides begin
the eager moulds and fungi, action stations
for family reunion with their cousins
who've lurked your life in scalp and eyelashes.
Lapsed, unbreathing, your meat no longer knows
it's a friendly takeover: a crochet of green over the rock
walks fernwise up the ladder of your limbs
feeling for your quiet cells to flesh its cells, puffing
generations of spores into your gaped pores.
And where the blowflies gather, there will the spiders be.

The watching lens tracks endless time-laps round the vault
chittering softly among the bats, recording
a bodily form being recomposed
entirely of Nature.

The lads

When she says 'our lads'
it's the boys she hoisted out of sleep
packed with breakfast
and bunted off to learn for their long good.
Not only. It's the boys
her sons father and cosset.

Not only. It's the vanished great-uncles
three stringy brothers that her grandmother
saw lost to English work or war and prayed
in Mass and manners they might still be Irish.
The how-many-greats grand-cousins
who sailed surly from Cork or Carrickfergus.
The shot, the hanged. The crop-haired crop-eared
scrappers, the brains turned curdle
that should have been scholar or priest.
The quick-eyed old-faced youths hauled out
from skin-shed hulks to pick the rock
and starve in Botany Bay.

And no, with a pause with a headshake
but yes, most lost of someone's sons
crunched out of shape by noise
how could they ever grow human?
those blunt young heads baptised in old black bile
that only know the strength of bomb and kneecap,
bewildered by a new silence, stupid from it:
every friend gone soft, the doors shut hard,
cold in the street that leads to hell through Omagh.

When she says 'our lads'
it's a blade to cut through boggy fibre,
tangled layers of generation
heavy for stacking. To build or burn.

Stolen

for NM, my student

Don't leave that cuff unbuttoned.

I sidle eyes

not to see the nib lines on your arm
where blood has followed blade across your surface
welling words that clot before they say.

The family mirror shifted you
off-colour. You wrote it for me
stolen from the stories you don't know,
spilt away with the waters of your birth.
There must be somewhere another name
from a different part of the throat,
elders and siblings of your skin.

I could teach nothing
to your grim grip of research.
Enrolling in the history of yourself
you reached beyond due time
the hidden blade of your mother's death
waiting for your own hand
all these scratched years.
You reached
another family of other strangers
who could not place you.

And I sit coward, sidling thought
from arm and thigh and belly wall
where you have scarred down
your tangled practised signature
trying to name your skin

where speechless metal drives your point
home and home and home.

They flee from me

A copper copter after midnight
coarse-grinds shreds of what-who fear
into the chamber between thought and paper
where I was silent not to spook
whatever life on naked foot
might edge towards the familiar scent of crumble
to take bread any moment now
from my stilled hand.

Less than a thought-fox, merely
a laicised churchmouse – some small wildness
unafraid as that first-flight thornbill,
nest-fluff still tangled on his head
beside my window poised to watch me,
openmouthed for food not shock,
till his father came to fluster innocence
and drive him second flight
to a further tree.

One inhumane propeller
skeins out from my childhood
the sky full of a wounded bomber
and us wide-eyed beneath.
The kids next door know only in dream or game
the need for bulletproofed sharp-seers
boldly going
roughly getting somewhere
over our mundane city open to view.

On task.
Grinding away beyond my suburb.

Mood / Tense

She's camped well out in the subjunctives.
Were she to stay in this thin scenario
(jerrybuilt frames, splash of distemper,
in a slight breeze the uneasy paperbarks
rustling, lamenting *Had one but thought...*)
despite conditional character make-up
and a camouflage mosquito net
lest anyone come – the last syntax purist? –

imperatives would heavy her sleep:
Come home. Listen, act normal. Don't be a fool.

She juggles her billy and bed-roll.
Sighs. Treks towards some indicative suburb.
And perhaps she can settle between
concrete floors and walls, the oil-painted people.
Within some future she will concede
though her tense balance has never been perfect
her civil heart beats: *present, present.*

Incarnation

for Michael Elligate

God sideways
slides into the secular shyly
at first, testing out the feel of selection
instead of all-at-once: the fit of one skull,
one culture; choosing to focus female or male.
In this singular human he fetches up
nose to nose against secular bewilderment.
Pushed under the mechanical hammer
of *socio-political reality my*
friend, are you stupid or something?
(One more bug in the system ironed out.)
A couple of days gradually resurrects
the clarity of singular being to enter
headlong into whole God.

This practical experience registered,
God sideways
slides confidently always
into any secular. From the outset
the Big Bang like the essence of sex
or a fist right through the drumskin.
Boiling out of craters, ashes flying.
Word into words into speech: anger and love,
engrossed study under a hidden lamp,
names of the disappeared clutched in silence.
The gossip of rain on bushes, chit-chat of runnels,
streams spreading subordinate clauses
across the landscape as shoot and nectar and nut;
rainbow feathers fluttered and scattered,



lying around where we happen (not even
paying attention) to find
God sideways
sliding to be found.

The Passion paintings

Honouring the word
each illumination opens

black bruised space
suffused with the garbage of old blood
vague drafts of shade

where all surmises coalesce in texture
without fugue or colourstroke.

It drags the eye so close
fine canvas bulks its threads to hessian
and roughs your lashes

to flick lids into shield
and lose the train of sight.

The panels lean
heavily
framed square on brickbuilt plaster

intent to mean
what absents itself for purpose.

If the body has courage
to open womb-space in the skull
it sits only with its own blood-sounds



and the crack away of time-discarded braincells
revealing cautiously

the *yes so be it* space
where work-scuffed *amens* whisper and fall
into promising ground.

The third sister

To the far end of outside
or the far deep of inside
the youngest sister treks

through the worn-ragged maze:
nests to rescue, crones to cosset,
hunky swains to riddle away.

Her feet follow the map of her palm
the lines of her face are gathering
significant years.

The gates hinge heavy on rust
the windows are blind
the frogs in the fountain pucker up.

The porter's eyebrow condemns her backpack.
Her name-card is absent from every door.
But that's another story.