

# 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 accurat mappe

*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.