

MY LOVER MEETS THE BOWER BIRD

He nods at the silence then tries out his love song;
a sound like your callused palms rubbing in the cold.
To end he drops bottle top onto bottle shard: a *chink*
that stills him with wonder at the beauty of human excess.
You are formally welcomed with a flash of pink topnotch

and a bow to admire his masterpiece in the making; sublime
with the melancholy of fetish-love, unconsummation.
He guides your eye through his lovelorn mosaic, constellations
of plastic and foil, soft rings of back bones orbiting round
Monopoly pieces, jewel-bits of shattered windshield

for making sunlight his own. He dismisses you with a sudden
cry at a composition of seeds loosened by the breeze.
He nudges them back into a pattern divined
then at the bower's exact centre he stations himself:
still as mortal sculpture, mad with symmetry.



TWO WOMEN

will never seem so strange as in this light's
benign haunting, alive in a paddock of bones.
We are the two in the bush not the hand,

that allowance of bush crouched along the creek,
redgums slowly falling in, pulling a tablecloth
of paddock, fruitless boulders, down with them;

the bones laid out true to life and death,
some still in leather sacks and lucky with hooves.
Here women bagged and buried the mewling litters

beside planted machinery that sours and browns.
We could unbag and scatter the mix of tiny milk-bones,
even pull up the dead tractors and pumps before dark.

We pass without stopping a little dinosaur of bull skull,
disowned by a spine corded with roots, rushes;
his mad teeth sprouting like hearsay from the earth's

fresh gum. He is Dürer's precisian; sockets for eyes,
witness to our endurance, precocious blood-flow,
our ruddy length of stride. And if he is the still-life

hidden on the canvas-back of our portrait, rattling
with *memento!* and *mori!* and *the slow amaze of grief*,
shadows and unhung lips, *beyond belief, beyond belief*,

and a pomegranate bittersweetly beside?



THE BOTANIST

Fiddling with his radio dial to escape a certain song—*what song* she later asked—the driver knocked her off her pushbike. She flew headfirst—flight always being headfirst, and first to be forgotten—her helmet split open like an apricot. Her brain showed its new colours in the scan, a stout bouquet of red, green and yellow, the blooms' colours no longer evolutionary but *acquired*, like the lurid erroneous blue of an orchid dyed in a cheap florist. *Blue China*. The name of the wild cyan one found in heathlands, Spring-flowering. *But what is its real name?* Gone was the species *gemmata*, the genus *cyanicula*, even the family *Orchidaceae* on her bad days. Her colleagues came for tea and talked of a fungus re-found after a century; she could remember nothing about it afterwards—no name, nor its workings, biological imperatives nor its haunting—except for its place in a story of a gentleman-botanist who covered the phallic-shaped specimen in his handkerchief. The science she once knew she had unlearned, every sprig cut for knowledge grafted back where it came from. Left to her was the eye's pure feeling for shape and colour; flora shaped in her watercolours until *Blue China* was its only name.



THE HEAD

She sits at the head of the table; she is the head not the heart.
Her dead husband's heart was a boat, his lungs so deep
she did not believe when they told her he did not float.
For a year she dreamt he was governed by the laws

of driftwood; his boat-heart will wash up on a strange
shore, polished and calling for his whole, and her.
For a year it was a pathetic note she duly ignored.
The loneliness of a sailor's wife is strictly professional.

She looks after her whole; her soul overlaps no other.
Her sons clung to motherland and did not understand:
the loneliness of a sailor's widow is strictly pre-prepared.
Her sons married late, which is hardly better than never:

clinging to her bather-skirt, they never learnt to swim.
Each grandchild is a little more blurred than their father,
her sons fathering dilutions of her late husband's face.
She drinks to the gilt-framed faces: lineage is an art.

Each generation is more blurred down the table,
receding through time from her original dreams of what.
She raises her drink to the compassion of dreams,
the way they do not linger when unfulfilled,

receding like ship-songs. She squints into the fresh
angles of a grandson: an economy of more jaw, less cheek.
Beauty never lingers when no longer used. She keeps still:
his soft child face is sharpened and held to her throat.



She lives on a cruel economy of less memory, more past.
She was a blind woman building a ship in a bottle,
trying to grow these children up: to be sharpened
to the matters of human convention that out-live us.

Her past is built in a bottle. With each drink she calls
to the table another wet ghost. They sit down on the laps
of those on chairs, impervious to conventional human matter.
There are fewer manners in the warm living, her sons

using cee-yew-en-tee at the table imperviously.
It was a word that once trailed out of port towns
from the warm real, lingering on ill-mannered mouths
then thrown back to sea like a fish reeled in dead.

It was once a word that did not make it home.
My darling son, please do not say cunt in front
of the cee-aych-i-el-dee ar-ee-en—from the dead
she must be speaking, the living all silently staring.

Her sons must be drowning in front of her, she will act,
the far-away children are now giggling, the wet ghosts
are silently staring. She will save her flailing sons
from the things that once never made it home.

Her sons are so young, on the porch they smoke and laugh;
strange children clear the table around her. Her husband
always made it home smelling of nothing; clean bone.
At the grand head she sits: she is the head, she is his sweetheart.



IN THE INTENSIVE CARE UNIT, ON THE SILENT TV

is a *fado* singer all in black, the occult liquesced
in the red of her mouth, her hands blind-deaf
clutching a shawl at her breast, a ladder ten-stepped
to her cloven petal mouth that is so much a *thing*.

The nurses are all in white, the patients all men,
I was born to die with you tonight all night she might sing
but for the sound of the bedridden being turned
in their beds to sleep with posthumous expression.

The camera closes in till she is all, mere, head:
no lovely body hung from it, as a garland to appease.
There is no religion left that will keep this gorgoneion
out of a man's last dream that life apportions him.



THE CHILDREN AND THE WORLD

The children go to school and they come back
they walk as a procession of little monarchies
their daily orbits inscape the world
The children go to school and they come back
the world bites them at their shiny heels
the morning sun chooses every girl
The children go to school and they come back
there's much audience for the animal feats of boys
proficient in front of the fathers of the world
The children go to school and they come back
pondering the logical invalidity of siblings
the impossibility of shared matter and toys
The children go to school and they come back
they thread through bus-stop crowds ducking
away from the swing of hands deadly-jewelled
The children go to school and they come back
thrown loose on the world like homing pigeons
and returning in miracles modest and midafternoon



NOON SWIM

for n & t

At the river's swollen joint
we dive in, suddenly light
and jointless as our six feet
mix the warmed crust
of water with the icy below.

The frangipani behind my ear
is presumed drowned
until it resurfaces between us
as a beautiful relic.
Matchstick-sized skinks

dart at our every scream
as if powered by sound.
Bumblebees hover to drink
from our hair and crown us
with their impossible flight.

Unserious Sirens, we swirl
like blood drops in water
then float, flush against sky,
meniscus breasts bobbing
with pelvises, roses-of-bone.

GRANDMOTH

On the wall the moth has fashioned itself
two-dimensionally, self as self-portrait.

Its eye-forgeries see everything in the room:
where I see memories it sees a great feast.

They are always fleeing, like thieves, like bits of dusk
left behind, at the opening of drawer or door, their stomachs

freshly full of coat or jewel-box lining; tweed and velvet
are left a demented lace of their hungry design.

From the box where I keep her necklace
(in non-existent photos I see her neck laced

with it, I see how it hangs consolingly beside
her one lonely breast) out stole a moth

and I thought it was her: my grandmother
returning as something hungry for time not lived.



LONG SONNETS OF LEOCADIA

And if we die, let us be buried. Francisco Goya y Lucientes

The Black Paintings

There the black cipher of a He-goat with mantle;
goat-shaped door open to coax the to-be-witches;
pock-wound in the good. Their faces dappled
on wallplaster, skull-portions of sorrow, itching

to be real. It looks like our house has burnt down
and these pitch figures the flames' firstfruits.
There's no telling fire from a master housebound,
the careful debris of brushstrokes on four mute

sides with your furious head in the room's middle,
a quincunx steadied only by your chronic saneness.
You paint a purposeful silence, mouths chasmal
to consume all sound, small complete eclipses.

To live with you, deaf dauber, one is left to converse
with your Saturn, muffled through his mouthfuls
of son. And you are holding our child by her little girth,
barely knowing what to do next. There are myths for

such moments, monumental forms to hold her for you.
Her dirty feet make black work of your shirt.



Self Portrait

After his first near-miss death he drew himself;
reduced by one sense, his useless ears hidden behind
a black halo. One eye looks at himself, a taut unfelt
line from body to thought. The other eye is misaligned,

lowered by the weight of being watched, fearfully
re-alive. On a badge above his heart he signed
his name upside-down, the savant's reminder pinned
to the idiot. The second time the nearness was finer,

Fate-crones near enough to hold the backcloth for
a self-portrait with doctor as a still-life prop,
propping him up gently in the bed I made not for
death but to approximate married life. You cannot

see me standing at the foot of the bed; a visitation
made see-through with exhaustion. I saw my father
dying behind the Señor's death-mask face; Señor
saw in me all the women he formed with the fewest

possible strokes, each lovely face the same worded prayer
but with a different want. I just wanted him spared.



Capricho 1

We watched the sweet *maja* and her red castanets
(what pluck to dance to one's own loose measure!)
your two enskulled little eardrums, hopeless duet,
parroting her beat for no-one to hear. The colour

of her dress gave you a method to her movement
you drafted later by candle. But you abandoned the red
and the brush, found your black chalk with its mordant
blunt end and drew. In a certain dim you rendered

an imbecile in institution-white, his porpoise head
bobbing between castanets. Beauty strikes your soul
but never wins your sight, beauty too steadfastly
beauty to fascinate. But every horror a new eyehole

for you to focus: an idiot dancing to his own world's
measure, the inborn self-containment of pleasure
children are made to forget. We teach them then
the reasoned consensus of passion shared; *a fair*

exchange good mothers pretend. While the artist, mind
in hand-eye, is too engrossed to argue otherwise.



Capricho 2

Señor showed me a sketch of his web-footed dog.
All-purpose; steadfast; his quarter-hearted *capricho*
of this greying housemaid with her maiden love.
Once he painted me as a feigning widow,

leaning on his funeral mound come-hitherly,
as if he was not dead but there by the window
painting me as I leant on the mantelpiece.
He really cared not to see me raising the cross

of a mourning face: eye-eye, silent brow down
to the wailing contusion. But oh! For the deceased
to see his woman in the black veil and gown
without ever having known her in the conceit

of white. Grief should make any woman honest
if not honourable. But that he did not grant me.
I hope it's through the pinprick of love, the slightest
scope, that he made me the caprice of used beauty.

To be a widower's mistress, keep the house in order
like a wife, do not grow old let alone die out of order.



Bordeaux Miniatures (Exile in France)

Señor blackens the ivory with carbon, lets fall
a single drop of water which spreads like light
itself, random roses of white that deform
into faces: a monk planting a sprig of fright

in the peasant's ear, her teeth mostly gone,
nostrils mare-flared and made palpable as holes.
Always he makes absence prolific, his old useless son
made useful in his store of countenances.

A Man Looking for Fleas in his Shirt.
Woman with Clothes Blowing in the Wind.
We are but these things, the likeness of dirt
fashioned with costly pigments, thinned

with water we could instead wash in.
Even *ilustrados* are unenlightened in France.
Dark-hided, all-iris, we live in sin
like it's a country-house, far from our raving

king riding sidesaddle on his ass Inquisition.
Señor laughs, returns to his two inches by two inches.



Last Communion

I must be content to find him through the cramped
foramens of his work, or learn to love the sight
of his dense back made inhuman in a cape, hunched
over a half-done vision as if over a fire half-out

and ungiving. I fear to find him in old St Joseph
dying with his son not wholly present; his tongue,
the most unceremonious human part, strange rosette
stuck out for the Host. There is nothing holy

about feeding the dying. It is food almost wasted
if not for the motion, the exchange consuming
the object even as it spills down the chin. This artist
will not accept such a belittling of the thing,

in love and painting the verb must service the noun
like a nurse enchanted. He paints saint and raper
each as real as the other, their power to astound
made relative in colour's drama. Behind his cape

I find the man I love has been replaced by a madman
swallowing his tongue, his eyes rolled back in black crayon.



Visions

España is the carcass of a goose standing up.
Still our king tells her to fend for herself,
to peck at gravel to fill her leathered gut.
You tell me *bury my skull away from my self*.

To save art from science. Does Señor know
it won't be as easy as twisting off a fruit
all sunned and clean? Only I know
how little you know the body, your *pinturas*

just realistic dreams. *I saw it*, you say.
But you see anything on the black side
of the eyelid. For instance, your duchess:
Only Goya you forged in her toe's cursive

in the dirt. But she would never stand
in the dirt for you, my deaf old bull,
as you could not do for España.
Yet you won't rest in France. An armful

of bones (sans skull) I'll throw over
the border, I, Leocadia. *Only Goya*.



El Otro

Remember no one spoke of the blooming of wolves;
even in your *desastres* of war you saw not carrion
but ready piles to be buried. We are made sad fools
when we insist upon what matter should be married

with the dead. I'm scared of the dirt. You, of the wolf
who does not flee but stands and stares like a man
with faculties higher than justice and symmetry.
I cannot help you; only one of us at a time can

hold his clear eye. You'll approach on tired feet,
naked but for a cape of wolf-fur, bare arse curled
in on itself with chagrin (you drew it not I), entreating,
entreating; *el otro* meets you standing on his hind

paws in a cape of human labour, hiding something
underneath. You stick out a beggar's hat as if it could hold
the visions you covet. Yet when our time comes
we want nothing but to stay wanting; to be consoled

looks a lot like the end. I'm scared of the dirt.
You, of the wolf who does not flee but, slowly, turns.

