

Me and the Dead

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*for Mom & Dad,
Mary & Tom,*

and for Em, Nat & Daisy

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The Only Reader

As the book can only fall into temporary hands,
Its spine cracked where one page or another's been favoured
By a boy in love with love or a homesick old man
Till its glue dries up and its stitches disintegrate,
Its leaves falling brown and acidic on someone's floor,
Lines scattered randomly and perhaps thrown on a fire ;

As the Canada goose honks serenely, unaware
Of foreign towns below him—as only the sky
Has meanings and tones—where foreign people gaze
Through open doors at his leaf-and-cloud-coloured flight,
And the Amherst woods carried with him as he goes,
And the air momentarily clearer where he was ;

As the curator loves the careful strokes of the scribe
But can know nothing of the man himself who lived
A thousand years back, knowing only that he was a man
Temporal like us and who lived for the oblique,
Giving the gold-leaf ascender everything he had
Because there was no other place to offer it ;

So we keep dim faith with our craft ; so the reader
Pulls in illumination, and I send out my letter :
Dear Being, which art the Emperor of the Empirical,
And hope some electrical current will pick it up
To fly on a lightning-bolt like a rag on a kite-tail
So high on the hill that not even time can reach it,
And there's only the poem itself, and a goose going by.

The Bog of Despair

for Liane Strauss

We'd lunched on Greek salad and coffee
in a place with white walls and a skylight,
and when the guy in the corner's phone
went off in a polyphonic can-can
we laughed without even trying to hide it.

We'd looked in a shop where a scarf
of silk sat waiting for me to buy it,
and walked past a dog in a puddle
of mud, who shook his coat,
but missed us—and we laughed.

The Heath was lovely that day—
the air was full of spring.
We'd walked up a foresty path,
past a rubber hung like a thief on a tree,
full of swag, and we'd laughed and laughed.

We'd walked past the swimming pond
and up the mound of Parliament Hill,
talking about John Keats,
and other people we know, and the dog,
looking for somewhere to sit, and laughing.

But every bench we came to
was engraved in memory of someone
loved and regretted, young, a child,
and I imagined them sitting there
on the slope, or invisibly playing.

The benches sat on the fat slope
facing the concert that is us:
the blink of Canary Wharf,
the London Eye's diamond necklace.
We read them, and flinched, and laughed.

We turned and started down:
you had to get your kids from school,
and I had a shiny scarf to buy,
and the jeweller's-window view
of London had ceased to be amusing.

Your new shoes from Paris stuck
in the mud, and we laughed: *the Bog
of Despair!* We laughed because
we could feel, behind us, up the hill,
the children watching us.

Life (a Dream)

Scene: the Forest

The room was small and the window was big.
The trees outside brushed green and yellow
on the clear panes and, but for the leaves, no sound
except for a little spaniel.
Bark! Bark! Bark! he remarked, into the glass-silence.

The air blowing in the window was also green.
Then Goldilocks had a dream in which she woke
and saw three bears
standing round her little bed,
gazing down at her with their eyes full of love.

And then an aeroplane pattered over the forest,
round and plump as a picknicking family
with a bag of cakes.

Mama Bear sighed and reached for Baby Bear.
Baby Bear was swelled with joy and Goldilocks
stirred a little but slept on
in the snug bed.
One hand curled round the edge of the counterpane
which was like a leaf.

Fondly the bears watched the sleeping pink child
and her curls, the colour of sunshine, fanned out
neatly on the pillow.
Baby Bear's pillow.

The people in the areoplane looked out
and saw the bears and saw the sleeping girl
and saw her wake and smile
and say to Baby Bear, *what's small is big,*
and heard her say, *your room's a window.*

The Metropolitan Opera

Sometimes, like on a 3D ruler where the disciples
eat, look around, eat, it's there
the way it always has been, its drab red-&-olive plaid
laid out with the perspective of a medievalist,
along the wall. On it the father lies
with head to double-doorway and stocking feet
to window, elongated like the couch,
his arms folded in saintly repose.

The room looks paler in retrospect
than in fact it was, as if it were a fresco
on crumbling plaster,
while the voices echo even now
of those whose names are spoken
with reverence, but not till after: Sills, Callas
(tragic non-sequitur in this age of faith),
Fischer-Dieskau. It's a play of light
that brings it up, the wintry glow
of 3 p.m. on couchback, on the rough
upholstery's red-&-gold check, thin curtains hanging sheer
against the assaulted glass and outside's
secular grey-&-white; or else a strain of Verdi;
Puccini, who cried like a child in his room
when Mimi died by his own pen;
Bizet, where the honest peasant choir
leads us along till suddenly the beloved
breaks free and soars like a bird above the others,
her voice swirling tempestuously around the house,
and romance smashes in and becomes
the cathedral and everything it touches turns to gold.

As the Sun Sends the Sequins on my Handbag Scattering

a train clacks over a stone bridge.
Inside it, my head's on your chest.
You look, and your hand stops moving;
you look up, your eyes bright, and say:
ah, the lovely Calder! See its currents.
beneath its grey water the fish swim out, uncaught,
their blue-green resplendence
in curious hidden turns.
As you talk of carboniferous limestone beds
you're dotted with gold specks thrown
by the sun, by my bag.
The bridge flashes past behind us;
banks of azalea wink and are tossed aside.
There was a stab, hard to see
if you so much as blinked, light on water,
perhaps a fin. Who knows what we're beginning.
I feel your muscles flex, and you lean
towards me again.

Here

I hold on tight to the knee-length grass, lowering one foot and then the other down the chalky path behind you in my split-toed Japanese-style city trainers. You're in desert boots, talking. You pull all the seeds from a stalk with one rapid pull, laughing, and throw them over your shoulder. The path cuts through the downs like a jet trail dropped from an enormous mineral sky.

You tell me: *there's even a kind of beetle that only lives here, a species of its own—the Whitehawk Variant* something-or-other. When I ask: how do they know there isn't a family the same somewhere in Nepal? You say *there just isn't, this place is unique*. You ask if I'm okay there, and I am. Anyway, you're used to rolling rat-arsed down this hill, then waking next morning bruised, bed-full of pollen, picking straw from your clothes after too many pints of cider. Far down a girl in the playground runs like a droplet.

A giant wood-louse, two snails, a narrow miss, me slip-footed on the twisty surface. *They're lucky*, you say, *I'd have had them for bait another day!* But they're sedate as a WI lady and her husband. I move aside and there another Mr and Mrs emerge from the grass, northwards, their necks craning gracefully out under neatly-packed shells, pulsing lightly with each quarter-inch they cover. Brave little snails, slightly speckled, like no others anywhere.

My Dish

My dish, you're serenely white
except for your picture, and scalloped
round the edge. Your pearlescence has mostly
been rubbed (or scrubbed) away

though scattered patches remain,
oily-rainbow-coloured: were you moulded
on a bubble? Was your mother a conch?
If I listen to you what will I hear?

Dish, you're my talisman,
my lucky charm, my incantation, my potion,
my memento mori — that is, of the death of my heart —
you're my past, my future, my darling Valentine.

You arrived as a surprise,
a kind of benediction, given away
impulsively by my friend Helen. What I love
is the medallion image at your bottom,

scratched as it is (by the philistine
fork of the pearlescence-scrubbing person).
While I like to think of some thirties librarian
smoothing her hands over your cool

sides, running a varnished fingertip
over your rim as she pushes up her tortoise-shell
glasses, fidgets, and sighs,
admiring your adherence to the romantic,

it was probably some housewife who did it,
over years of Sunday trifles, scraping
all your sea-gloss with a spoon.
You were her reminder, my dish, my pot,

my little ramekin, of how it was with her
when she was young and loved her husband.
Your picture made me have to have you:
Dante Alighieri's Armageddon, his first

glimpse of Beatrice. I recognised him
instantly by the crashing of his heart
against his body's wall and the thunderstruck
look on his face; Beatrice cool as the foaming brine.

Around them a wisp of lustre curls
like smoke trailing from a campfire,
or something more centrifugal, and past that
the devotional nun's-white of old porcelain.

Dante knew he was smitten,
smote, smattered, smut, smited—
oh my bowl, I'll ignore the obvious rhyme for that
last word—we all know he never got over it.

On you, he leans against a wall, by a canal,
his last moment of casual living
just over; in the clear mediaeval light he looks
like a pillar, a shiny column, a poem.

To My Next Lover

All weekend I kept thinking about you:
as I cleaned the kitchen, changed my bed,
lay in the bath with a book, eyed up a waiter,
tried new perfume on, I thought about you—
bought new underwear—yes, especially then,
about you, looking into the mirror
in the changing room and again at home,
running my hands over lace, undoing clasps
(but only to put on the old ones and wash the windows).

I thought about your eyes across a crowd,
hooking into mine, unclasping mine,
as you come closer, breathing my perfume;
I thought about you while kneeling on the carpet
to reach a fork that was lying under the table;
I thought about you when Sharon on *Eastenders*
got into it with her adopted brother—
smashing all the vases where they fell—
I thought aboutcha then, lover, an' all.

Too long I've had no lover—just the last,
and that's no lover to speak of. I've been loveless,
claspéd and virtuous, dreamless, skinless, tongueless:
but now I have you, Next, a leap to the future
tense: I'm thinking about your hips, your weight,
your possibilities, your previous lovers;
and even if it never happens, the kissing
of places beneath new lace, you'll still have been
my next lover, now. Thanks for the weekend.

East Ten

after Catullus X

You can't get more than five feet in this gaff
without running into some bleedin' tosser
Trevor used to do the rounds with.
Today it was this bloke, who just came
back from LA, with a ropy accent
and too much bleach in his hair. I swear
he never stopped looking. Up, down, up,
down: all eyes and no trousers, 'e was.
So Trev, you know what I mean, he's jealous.
You eyein' my bird? Starts winding him up.
Hey Alfie, make much dosh, didja?
But the geezer goes—you what? *I'm loaded,*
even my skinflint guv'nor 'ad us
rakin' it in like bleedin' Christmas!
He's on about a Cadillac.
He says they paid to get it shipped
to a garage in Leyton, he says it's red.
Oh yeah. I'm sick of those randy gits
who think they're flippin' gangsters or summat.
I stare at 'is gold and he stares at my tits,
and Trev can see I'm none too 'appy
so he winks—*all right there, Rod, ya sexy!*
But I've 'ad enough for once, an' I go,
so! you gonna give us a ride?
I push myself right in the guy's face,
smiling sweet. I can feel his breath.
Take us to Walthamstow dogs tonight?
Trev's stressing out but I tug his shirt
and whine like a kid for an ice lolly.
C'mon, be fun, you'll see—ask yer mate!
So Mr LA goes red like his car,
the car 'e don't have, and 'e sputters something
about the garage and payin' 'is tax.
Taxis, more like! I was fit to burst!
The friend stutters something, I don't remember,

walks off swearing, and Trev goes ballistic—
I thought he thought it was funny, like,
but 'e's effin' and blindin' and gives me a slap
right there in the pub! and calls me a useless
cunt! No way am I takin' that crap.
So I slap 'im back, and I guess me ring
caught his earring, you know, it's a real diamond,
and the blood went all over—but it's just a scratch,
and officer, 'e fucking deserved it.

Dinosaur Opera

'There will be a dinosaur opera one day—I'm sure of it!'
— ROISIN TIERNEY

There *will* be a dinosaur opera one day;
leaf-eaters will roam the stage
and carnivores lift their diaphragms in song.
Good old Pachycephalasauros will sound
his hollow baritone in hunger
for beauty only, and the pterosaur will soar
for the feeling, not because he has to.

The Museum of Natural History
will lie unopened as its former citizens take up
where the others left off, writing poems,
making TV documentaries and electric cars.
When the great tenor Tyrannosaurus
complains of the smallness of his damask waistcoat
while a small two-leg from costume hovers,
pins in mouth, taking his measure,
the whole notion of extinction will have become *infra dig*.

The stage at the Opera House will be hung with vines;
mysterious blue-green pools will gleam
in hazy light which will filter through gauzes.
Thunder will rumble, *basso profundo*.
The woodwinds and strings will warm up slowly
below the ethereal herbivore chorus
polishing up their scales in the wings,
while the audience chitters in its seats,
waiting for the premier of something big.

The Escape Artists

Houdini never told. You asked and asked,
convinced there was some secret. And yet
when he came dripping out of that glass box,
a pile of broken chains on the floor by his feet,
was it not death he'd bit his thumb at?
How you all cheered. You were reborn en masse
in the power-surge of what he'd demonstrated.

But hadn't you spent whole afternoons
helping your children tie up handkerchiefs,
remove jokers, hammer false bottoms—
later looking down, or sideways rather
than at their familiar baby hands only half-concealing
full-sized coins? Ignoring rabbits
poking out of hats, and visible strings?
And what about the tin of sardines
brought from behind an ear? Wasn't that you,
mendacious conjurer? Wasn't that magic?

You don't need a tour of the whale,
its pink sitting rooms and corridors drizzling with damp,
to show you someone lived there
and what they made of it. You've seen the sword
furled in the umbrella stand.
And that metallic plate hanging over your fireplace:
wasn't that once a dragon's scale?