

## The Missing

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# The Missing

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CAMBRIDGE

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## Acknowledgements

'Secret Lives' won the 1996 *TLS* / Poems on the Underground competition. 'Cartoon', 'Bear Awareness and Self-Defence Classes' and 'Noises Off' first appeared in *London Magazine*, then in *Saltpetre* (Smith/Doorstop, Huddersfield) along with 'Sleepwalker' and 'Cursing the Holy Ghost'. 'Catalogue', 'The Sacking Offence' and 'Country Compilation' appeared in the *TLS*. 'Easy' was commissioned by the *TES*. 'Propaganda' and 'Electricity' appeared in *The Gift: New Writing for the NHS*, and 'Results' was commissioned by Poems in the Waiting Room. 'The Double at Highbury', 'The Girl Upstairs' and 'Fidelity' appeared in *Anvil New Poets III*. 'Sleep Training' was published by *MsLexia*. 'Aitken Drum' appeared in *The Spectator*. 'The Send-Off' won the Arvon Poetry Competition in 2006 and was published in the competition anthology.

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## The Double at Highbury

The day Arsenal won the double you stayed out of town  
while I went looking for a houseboat for one.  
It was moored under the tropical aviary at the Zoo  
and, having no engine of any kind, was staying there.

The toilet arrangement was a bucket and hose  
and relied on the cover of darkness. This was June,  
but the owner made light of the way the tin roof  
turned it into a floating methane-fuelled oven.

There was a washing-machine, with a patched out-let pipe  
and a generator wired to an illegal stand on the tow path.  
The owner waved his cigarette in the vague direction  
of the single bunk bed and told me to look round.

On the way home I struck lucky in the local hospice shop  
with exactly the right kind of shirt for £4. It's amazing  
what people throw out. I was home before the whistle,  
when shouting and horn-blowing filled the street,

went on until the sirens joined in at eleven. All night  
heat held the sounds in close-up. The air would not move.  
I waited for you to call so I could hold the receiver  
up to the open window and let you into my world.

## Catalogue

Your desk faces north, mine faces the wall:  
over each of them you hang a picture  
of your wife, in case we forget who we are  
or what we are doing here. 'After I'm dead,'  
you say, 'she'll come back for the library.'

The staircase separates fiction from drafts,  
pornography fills the loft. The landing  
with a leaking roof (biography, misc.)  
is ordered on a private system (by friends,  
of friends, for sale, the rest.)

If I take the basement, (romance, plays) you're left  
with everything you like to think might be true:  
poetry, newspapers, letters, Fine Art, those volumes  
in dark covers under the sink, her memoirs, bath books,  
city guides, dictionaries, and all the stuff in the attic.

## Secret Lives

Sometimes your dressing gown unhooks  
and slides out under the garden door  
with three aces up his sleeve.

He flies in the face of next door's dog,  
back flips down the middle of the street,  
opening himself to the breeze.

Something in pink nylon flutters a cuff  
from an upstairs window. He twirls his cord  
to beckon her outside.

They're heading for a club they know  
where the dress code is relaxed midweek,  
and the music is strictly soul.

## The Girl Upstairs

The girl upstairs wears white lycra shorts  
even in winter. 'They're comfy'  
she says, 'What's the problem?'  
From the back door you can hear  
the steady scratch of her electric meter.

The corner shop sends messenger boys  
up the road with her grocery boxes.  
Cling peaches in syrup, carnation milk,  
baby carrots, peas. Her freckles  
are pale orange under a homemade tan.

The landlord says 'She could make it nice.  
Homely. But she's not the type.'  
Her boyfriend laughs. 'When I come home  
I don't want gardening and all that crap.  
Fornication. That's what a man needs.'

## Taxi

In the taxi you say 'I know this part of town,  
or I used to, years ago, when I had a tart.  
That is the right word for it, isn't it? Tart?'  
'Not really,' I say, and unbutton my coat.

'She had a terrible yappy dog, but I didn't care.  
She was nice and fat. I liked that. Fat.'  
I lift my dress over the tops of my stockings.  
'Fat,' you say again. 'Lovely and fat.'

## The Greedy Man

The Greedy Man counts boiled eggs  
back into their box, eleven,  
ten; his tongue plays out

over cooking instructions.  
Steam rises. He sighs  
as the microwave tray revolves.

He freckles the skin  
on a bowl of blancmange  
with hundreds and thousands.

'Hundreds and thousands'  
he murmurs, delighted  
one dish can contain so many.

## Easy

The same air we collected  
in our hair and clothes  
from a view of the river

is flowing out of hedgerows  
up the garden wall  
through the open window

to and from between our mouths;  
thoughtless, nocturnal,  
with no sense of occasion,

nothing we said or didn't say  
stops it short. It seems content  
lifting our ribs, and then letting go.

## Noises Off

There's something in my eye,  
a smudge over everything  
to the left of the television.  
I can ignore it if I choose.  
A door opens and closes  
your side of a long-distance call.

Turn my face to the light.  
Tell me there's nothing there.

## The Sacking Offence

Like the outline of a paperclip  
left on the windowsill two summers ago  
or fingerprints, dusted over, but still intact  
along the edge of the franking desk,  
something like cigarette smoke  
might, even this far into the week,  
uncurl from the corner of a table,  
to print last Friday, ten p.m.  
as a row of inverted chimneys  
across the calendar on the back wall.

## Sleepwalker

At intervals in the night his footsteps  
climb the stairs, then change direction.  
The cistern empties, pauses and refills.

Before breakfast he turns back the quilt  
on her aeroplane pyjamas, biscuit crumbs,  
a paperback copy of *The Bald Prima Donna*.

She's taken his favourite pillow next door.  
He helps himself to her vanishing cream,  
draws the curtains for a morning's sleep.

## Saltpetre

You taught me how to roll cigarettes  
without saltpetre, the slightest draft blows them out.

I count your visitors in empty bottles, a steady drip  
of something collecting under your chair.

There are slates in the guttering, dead leaves  
and newspapers behind the door.

I'm preoccupied with the state of your collars,  
worn through to the webbing, lost buttons,

the damp under the window, the problem of storage,  
the way your shoe heels wear down on a diagonal,

a shadow that falls across your eyes  
as if you were watching me undress.

## Fidelity

According to the magazine I picked up at the airport  
that caramel-brown mongrel who followed you the length of the beach  
is the perfect colour for your star sign, one you should wear every day.  
He suited you, it's true, his long snout lifted to your waist  
as he kept time with your feet, pointer-fashion.  
In the evening light the high-stepping ripples of his shadow  
as it crossed the tide-marked sand suggested something pedigree.

Today I saw him tack out from behind the windsurf place  
and slip into a pack of Germans on their way to the port, his smooth coat  
an effortless match for their close-cropped heads and tans.  
Long before they loaded the last rucksack onto the pilot boat  
he was shedding gold flecks of blond light from his fur,  
ducking into the shade behind a stack of blue plastic crates,  
his eye on the slow swinging gait of a passing American.

## The Stairs

It's one of those parties where the children have taken the seats in the living room, and no one eats the sandwiches. On the stairs ex-lovers compete for who looks down on whom. No one consoles the woman in a low-cut dress sitting outside the bathroom waiting for her lover to take his wife home.

Her lover's son keeps bringing her cake—she's usually more fun on their trips to the zoo. The boy wants to play monkeys. Gorillas. Anything in cages. Her hand is white on the banister. 'Go carefully down the stairs,' she says. 'Hold on tight.'

## Shikseh

scrubber, slattern, slag, doxey,  
white trash, bit-on-the-side,  
—not to be taken home, taken  
in your mouth, not to be  
taken to heart

a pick-up, practice-run,  
on-off-on, part-time,  
day-time, texts-only, token gesture:  
someone you're sort-of seeing—  
but only with one eye.

## Propaganda

This is the place where they ask  
'Can the doctors write to you  
using this name and address?'  
before they tick the standard form  
and stack it, face down, behind the desk:  
where you sit very still on smooth chairs  
and reread the horoscopes  
in back issues of *Company*:  
where someone looks you in the eye  
and says 'You do know what I mean  
when I say markers in the blood?'  
Where you promise to be good  
next time, forever, play it safe,  
for a string of negatives, a new life.